**El Principio ~ Misericordia (The Mercy Principle)**

To bring down from the cross crucified men and peoples

In the first place I would like to say that the title of this paper is taken from the book of a well-known Jesuit, J. Sobrino, from the University of El Salvador, one of the most active and notable theologians of the Theology of Liberation.

He shares that the true sign of the times is the tragedy of these peoples who are dying of hunger, they are victims of injustice, inequality and lack of freedom; and he makes us see that the only human and Christian posture is to take them down from the cross.

In order to do that, there are three important things:

First, we must work toward stopping living in ignorance, to stop falling asleep in the face of this reality of the end of the century: the crucified peoples.

Second, to show the most urgent need on planet earth, the need for mercy toward these crucified men and women, in the presence of a desolate and mistreated earth. Because it is the only way to be human and to be Christians. The only way to be human is to live from the principle of Mercy.

In his book, El Principio-Misericordia *(The Mercy Principle)*, Sobrino unquestionably wants to provoke a reaction that will lead us to see face to face to the people who die of hunger; the impoverished in our countries.

**The Mercy Principle**

The first thing, in my opinion, is to understand well what is meant by that terminology that J. Sobrino has precisely set in motion.

The language of mercy can be ambiguous, even dangerous, because in the first place, it is a word that is not fashionable and that can also suggest, as on more than one occasion has happened, the feeling of compassion; the person who has a sensitive, compassionate heart is a merciful person, but we could leave it at the strength of feeling only; perhaps without affecting the behavior, the commitment, etc.

It can also be reduced to "doing works of mercy," which we learned by heart as the catechism said, but without addressing the causes of people's suffering.

Mercy can also be understood as relieving people in need, but without thinking about transforming the causes, what is at the root of their suffering.

  For all these reasons, J. Sobrino, with great wisdom and to avoid misunderstandings, tells us not to speak of mercy, but rather of the "Mercy Principle." It is very important, then, to understand well what this principle is about; what its structure is.

   In J. Sobrino's approach, living in an attitude of mercy, moved by this principle, involves three moments.

- First: **To interiorize the suffering of others. That is to say, let the suffering of people enter our hearts, our lives, our innermost depths, interiorize the suffering of others, the suffering of the impoverished.**

- Second: **This interiorization must provoke a reaction in us, an active behavior, committed to the transformation of these unjust realities and structures.**

- Third: **This reaction has only one purpose, to eradicate this suffering, to eliminate it and, at least as far as possible, to alleviate it.**

    In other words: To interiorize suffering, so that this suffering leads us to a reaction, and that reaction is totally oriented to eliminate the suffering.

It is called Principle because it is a way of acting, a way of being. In this case it is not about having mercy on the other, but it is a way of living in which the suffering of others becomes, once internalized, a principle of action that will configure and give a style to all our doing and all our being.

J. Sobrino will say that the Mercy Principle has to affect all dimensions of the person, our way of seeing the world, our way of judging, our way of living faith, our way of celebrating, our way of living hope… **EVERYTHING.**

In short, it is a matter of grasping with the heart, of letting the suffering of others enter our innermost depths and of making that suffering the guiding principle of a way of being, of a way of acting, totally oriented towards suppressing that type of suffering in the world.

    God is only mercy

To understand God, and to understand Jesus, we have to discover that God is always revealed as the one who acts moved only by the Mercy principle. Christ, the incarnate Son of God, acts only moved by the Mercy Principle. To be human, and of course to be a believer, is to live moved by the Mercy Principle. This is decisive.

Mercy is nothing more than a specific way of living love, of living it before those who suffer. Let's look at it in two points:

       - God’s Mercy: In the biblical tradition there is a central, fundamental text that clarifies the entire history of Israel. In the Book of Exodus, Yahweh introduces himself to Moses and says these words to him:

   “I have witnessed the oppression of my people in Egypt, I have heard their cry, I know well what they are suffering, and I have come down to rescue them.”

The structure of this action of God is that of the one who acts moved by mercy. God listens to the cries of that people who suffer; he looks, sees the suffering, and decides to intervene to save them. Here, we see how God interiorizes human suffering, and that suffering, captured by God himself, becomes the principle of saving reaction.

What you see in this text is always present throughout the biblical history, throughout the whole history of salvation. God always intervenes demanding justice, asking for love, always liberating.

    - The Mercy Principle in Jesus: If this is how God is, it is normal that in Jesus, the incarnate son of God, the Mercy principle be revealed to us in a supreme way.

    If you read the Gospel from this perspective, you will see that mercy is always at the root, at the origin of all that Jesus lives; his way of speaking, his way of acting, even his anger, are moved by his love for those who suffer.

When Jesus is asked to prove his messianic condition as God's anointed, when John's disciples come to him and ask: "Who are you? Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another? Jesus does not explain, does not put forward arguments, does not give a theology class, but says: "Go and tell John what you heard and see," that is, the healing gestures, that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed... What he tells them is that he is approaching the people who are suffering and that he is trying to free them from that suffering.

**What is Jesus' motivation? Why does Jesus react in this way to suffering? The evangelists underline that Jesus acts only moved by mercy. In the Gospel there is a Greek verb, used especially in Mark, which literally means that Jesus' innermost depths** **were trembling. When Jesus saw someone suffering, his inmost being trembled, he was moved, he was unable to pass by a person who was suffering.**

   If you follow Jesus closely throughout the Gospels you will see that He sees the suffering of the poor in the world, of those who are most neglected, the lost masses, the weak, those deprived of their dignity, the little ones... this is what moves Him; this suffering of the people, grasped by his inner self, that is what always makes Him act in a saving, healing way....

Jesus is not a man who has only feelings or does only works of mercy, but he is a man who is moved by the Mercy Principle.

There is one thing that is important for us to see: the world tolerates, even applauds gestures of mercy; if we are good and we do works of mercy to those who suffer, nobody will persecute us, they will only applaud us, it is easy even to be given medals. The problem comes when one, like Jesus, not only does works of mercy, but puts mercy as the fundamental principle and puts it before everything else.

    You will see that Jesus, by suppressing suffering, breaks everything, breaks the Sabbath, breaks taboos, and breaks the rules of purification... There is a very significant moment in Mark, 3: Jesus enters the Synagogue of Capernaum, sees that there is a man with a paralyzed hand; there are more people, but Jesus looks at him and reacts, he wants to heal this disabled man, even if it is apparently not a serious disability, and he asks the people if he should break the Sabbath and heal him, or if he should leave him as he is and keep the Sabbath. And people don't know what to answer, on the one hand they have a heart, but on the other hand there was the law of the Sabbath... Jesus, who is moved by the principle of mercy, on seeing the silence of all those people in the Synagogue, looks at them saddened by the hardness of their heart, He is the only one who does not have a hardened heart and heals him.

And the Gospel says that when they left the synagogue, the Pharisees conspired with the Herodians against him to see how to eliminate him. They want to eliminate him because, by doing something good, by preventing suffering, Jesus breaks the law of the Sabbath.

The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:27-37)

It is a truly revolutionary parable, that is not preached and, perhaps we do not want to understand because we may lose sleep, but it is the one that will allow us to delve much more deeply into the Mercy Principle. It will reveal to us, all too clearly, where our personal conversion should go. Start thinking now about the Jubilee and see where the radical change of our parishes and Christian communities must go.

    - First we come across the question asked by a scribe, which will lead us to the account of the parable. It is formulated from a legalistic conception of love, a conception that is far from the Mercy Principle.

    The scribe knows the law very well, he has read Leviticus and has seen that in chapter 19 it says: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. And he asks Jesus a very normal question: Who is my neighbor? That is, how far does my obligation to love, go?

According to the Jewish conception, love is a law, so it is a logical question. Love is the first law, no doubt, but as such, it can have exceptions and it can gradually lose its obligatory force as that neighbor moves away, and is less and less neighbor, less and less close. And the Jews had it very clear: First you had to love the family, then the clan, then the tribe itself, then the people of Israel... exegetes say that it is a conception of love that goes through concentric circles: first you love those close to you, but as people move away from you, as they are not so close, they are not the neighbor, the obligation to love them diminishes. In Israel they said that it may even be the case that the pagans, who are so far away, are such enemies of the people of Yahweh that one no longer has the obligation to love them, but to hate them.

   Do you think we believe something different from this? What the scribe describes is our way of life; we have not overcome judaism... we can see it with these common phrases among us. "Charity well understood begins with oneself..." Of course, we will have to understand it well. "One has enough problems at home, to begin solving those of others..." Today we have to worry about Europe, the Euro, the state of well-being, our homeland, our people and, if we have time, maybe we will start thinking about Rwanda. At the moment we have enough thinking about ourselves, about our autonomy...

- What does Jesus think? To the question of the scribe, Jesus answers with a parable and places a man who has no name or surname in the center of the story, he could be of any race, of any town, of any religion ... It doesn't matter, he is simply a human being, but a human being who suffers, who is by the side of the road, assaulted, robbed, beaten, abandoned, half dead...

The first thing Jesus does is to present a human being who suffers, and he tells us that a priest and a Levite pass by him, and He literally says the same thing about both of them: "The priest comes, he sees him, he sees that he is suffering, and he goes around..." "A Levite comes, he sees him and turns around..." They do not come close, they do not become neighbors, they are not moved by the suffering of that man, but they follow their own path.

   And a Samaritan arrives. He is the third character. (In the parables, one must always pay attention to the third...) And this was a good man, who when he saw the wounded man, "he saw him and had compassion, he was moved." He drew near. The Samaritan sees that man who suffers, makes that suffering his own, approaches him, becomes close, reacts and does everything he can for him, heals and bandages his wounds, mounts him on his animal, takes him to an inn, pays the dinars, tells the innkeeper to continue taking care of him that he will return....

And Jesus, after this simple, and clear parable, asks a question very different from the one the scribe had asked and says to him: "And to you, which of these three seems to have become a neighbor, who was neighbor to the one who fell into the hands of the robbers?

You will notice that Jesus' approach is very different from that of the scribe; he had adopted a legalistic position: Who is my neighbor, whom should I love, how far do my obligations go?

Jesus' approach is different: Who has become the neighbor of that wounded man, who has allowed himself to be moved, who has reacted by doing for him all that is in his hands?

And the scribe’s response sums it all up: "He who had mercy on him." And Jesus says to him something that is so simple, something that I say to all of you, and to myself: "Go and do likewise."

It is the only thing to do, the only thing. In the end, what I have to do in life is to live like this, with my eyes wide open, like the Good Samaritan, seeing wounded people, letting myself be moved, draw near, approaching and doing what I can.

The Jewish question is: Whom should I love? When you're wondering that, you're still Jewish.

The Christian question is: Who is suffering and needs me to draw near, and do for him as much as I can?

   I can't ask myself how far my obligation goes, but where are there people who suffer, and what needs me to be nearby.

For Jesus to be human is to know how to react with mercy to the suffering of others.

Without mercy a man is less human; in the parable the priest and the Levite are dehumanized, because they live going around suffering, they follow their way, they come from the liturgy of the temple, they go to their obligations... they are men who are not moved by the Principle of Mercy. They will spend their whole life this way, going around and avoiding the suffering people. This way of living, turning a blind eye to the suffering of others, is very normal.

The Samaritan is the only human, because mercy is the only thing that humanizes a person. There may be very intelligent men, very hard workers, very good organizers, great investigators... whatever you want, but to the extent that in their real life they are not moved by mercy, to that same extent they are not human; they may have values of one kind or another, but they lack the main one, that of living moved by the Mercy Principle.

Towards a Samaritan Church

No doubt, it is evident that at the end of this century and of this second millennium, the Church, and each one of us within it, because without us there is no Church, have to reread and very slowly, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and draw consequences.

        - The place of the Church. We often say that the Church does not have to live inward looking, closed in on its own problems, but that its mission is in the world, and therefore that is where she has to be; and we all know that this was one of the emphasis that Vatican II tried to push forward. The Church has to be the servant of the world, she has to be in the middle of the world, without being of the world but serving the world. Vatican II formulates it and promotes it with all clarity, but we have to make it more concrete.

If the Church allows itself to be energized by the Principle of Mercy, if it is a Church that wants to be faithful to Jesus, it has to be in the world, but in that world, it has to be, more concretely, where suffering occurs, where the cries and clamor of suffering people are heard. The Church must be where the victims are, those mistreated by life or by the injustices of men. The Church must be close to those who have no place either in society or in people's hearts.

    J. Sobrino says that the place of the Church is to be by the wounded on the roadside. What the Church should never do is to turn a blind eye to the great sufferings of humanity. What the priests, neither the Levites, nor the laity, should never do is to make detours. If the Church has anything to do in the next millennium it is to try to be more Samaritan. Jesus would say to the whole Church today: "Go and do likewise," do you see how the Samaritan acted? Well, this is the first thing the Church of the third millennium has to do.

- What is the principle of Mercy in the Church? It is true that the Church, from its origins, has taken great care of mercy and if we ignored it, we would be unjust to the Church and, we would not know the true history of Christianity.

Throughout these two millennia that now end, the Church has been close to the poor and to those who suffer, trying to alleviate pain and need when society did not have the resources or structures to help those most in need. And you know very well that, throughout these 20 centuries of Christianity, countless religious congregations, associations, charitable institutions, welfare centres, hospitals, places of welcome have been born... all the initiatives in favor of the needy. In the Church's concern were present the sick, the vagabonds, abandoned children, prostitutes, the afflicted, lepers, the mentally ill, pilgrims... We would be surprised to see the heroic history of so many Christians who have spent their lives dedicated to alleviating the suffering of humanity, first in Europe and then throughout the world....

   In general, however, and this is J. Sobrino's wake up call, this Church has been a Church that has practiced mercy, that has done works of mercy, but that perhaps has not finished assuming mercy as the structural principle of all its action. And the world not only tolerates the one who shows mercy, but recognizes him, applauds him, because the world praises compassion and mercy. What the Church finds difficult, says J. Sobrino, is to assume mercy until the end, that is, to assume mercy as the structuring principle of everything and to risk not only doing works of mercy, but also to fight, not only to cure the wounded on the roadside, but also to fight so that the robbers do not hurt anyone again.

When the Church only commits itself to do works of mercy, it does not suffer persecution. The Church is threatened, attacked, persecuted, when it makes mercy its structural principle. And it will always be so. I don't know if you remember that, when Mother Teresa of Calcutta died, we saw on TV how the armies paid homage to her; and yet you will also remember that Monsignor Romero was assassinated by the armies.

There is no doubt that everything is necessary: the total dedication of Mother Teresa of Calcutta to the dying of those neighborhoods, probably there is nothing you can do there and yet you have to do it; but it is also necessary the perilous denunciation as Monsignor Romero did.

   In life, everything will tell us where, how and what to do. The important thing will always be to not turn away in the face of human suffering, and to always maintain the supremacy of mercy. Take mercy seriously, as the most important thing, and listen to its demands, even when that same mercy becomes conflicting.

Bring the crucified down from the cross

The work of J. Sobrino, entitled "The Principle-Mercy, has this subtitle: Bring the crucified down from the cross."

- The reality of the crucified people. J. Sobrino says that he heard this terminology from Ignacio Ellacuría, who said that the true sign of the times is "the crucified people." Wherever they are; he said it like that, in singular, because it is not about "peoples," but "where there is a crucified people."

There are many kinds of sufferings, wounds, abuses, injustices...but because of its magnitude the greatest cruelty in the world is the misery that is leading entire peoples to an unworthy life and a premature death. They are the peoples we call the "Third World." Undoubtedly, that is the real problem at the end of the second millennium. In Medellín it was called "the injustice that cries out to heaven."

The situation of Africa, abandoned to its fate, devastated by AIDS which can destroy it, devastated by malnutrition, by the armed conflicts sustained by the First World, is even more tragic, and furthermore, at this moment of the end of the second millennium, these peoples are sinking even more because they are being excluded from technological and especially informational progress and at this time, the one who is left without information is left without a voice. People who have information and technological power have a future, others will sink more and more--the situation of migrants.

This fact, the cruelest at the beginning of the third millennium, is the most evident, and yet in reality we do not realize it; today we hear it here, but when we leave, we will continue with our lives. We usually talk about the world as if there were only one, when in reality there are two worlds. But the one that worries us, interests us, really matters to us is our own; and then there is the other, the world that is left over, all those peoples who struggle to survive from hunger and misery.

J. Sobrino says that there is a first-class humanity -like in trains- that has the right to live in waste, and there is a third-class humanity that has the duty to die of hunger.

That is all that human history has yielded so far; this is, at present, the final result of human progress on planet earth. This is what we men and women of the Enlightenment have achieved, and it seems that this is the path to follow... And if we see the actions of the International Monetary Fund, or the World Bank, or the Big Seven, that is the way to go....

As simple as that, we must continue to develop the well-being of the privileged peoples without any limit and we must continue to forget and exploit the weakest and most defenceless peoples.

And precisely there, in the midst of this world situation, at the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the third, the great religions continue talking of God, talking of the encounter with God... And the different Christian churches continue preaching Jesus Christ in many ways...

And there, we, Catholics are preparing to celebrate the great Jubilee, to celebrate 2,000 years of a supposedly living gospel... but certainly not strong enough to generate solidarity and more effective justice among peoples, because we continue to be involved in our own affairs.

And that is where the cry of the last peoples of the earth comes in, channeled through J. Sobrino—the language of crucifixion.

We all know that there is a language used today in the First World to talk about this terrible reality: we speak of the Third World, of the South, of underdeveloped countries, of developing countries... but this language does not express or transmit all the depth and cruelty of this injustice. That is why another language is proposed to us. We are not going to talk about the Third World or underdeveloped peoples, but rather we are going to talk about crucified peoples. By this, for Christians, we are meaning three things.

- First: To speak about crucified peoples expresses, with realism and objectivity, the fact—because to speak of crucifixion is to speak of death and that is what is happening in those countries in which there are not only problems of justice, abuses, lack of social security, unemployment, pensions... which are in reality our problems, but what is happening there is death, slow but real, caused by misery.

   While we live here concerned about the society’s welfare, about the purchasing power of different wages, etc., there are people who are being led to premature death and living an undignified life. They are people who are being crucified.

    - Second: The language of the crucifixion also reminds us that the death of these peoples is not a natural death, but rather a death like that of Jesus, because Jesus did not die, Jesus was not allowed to reach retirement... Jesus was killed and that is different.

These people are not only dying, but that death is being unjustly inflicted on them. When there is crucifixion there are victims and also executioners. Who is crucifying these people? A great injustice that began in the past is being committed with these peoples; the problem of the colonization of America, the problem of the slavery of blacks in Africa where, for centuries, the educated men, the whites, went to hunt blacks to use them as slaves... What has been done in the past with these peoples and what is being done now, because it is we who impose our culture, our economic systems, and who exclude them from the common table, indicates that here there is not only death, but crucifixion, and someone is crucified.

- Third: This language is of great importance for Christians, because it reminds us, it evokes Christ crucified. Those men, those women, those children, those elderly, are the most visible sign of the presence of the crucified one in the world. We will enter the temples and stand before the tabernacle to meet Christ, and that is fine, but the most visible sign of the presence of Christ crucified in the world is always those who are suffering.

He says that these peoples have two traits that we must not forget: their innocence, because these peoples have done nothing to deserve death, only to be poor, and these peoples have not attacked anyone, not even the First World. And their helplessness, because these peoples cannot defend themselves, they cannot avoid that crucifixion.

   That is why J. Sobrino says that these peoples are today the suffering servant and are the crucified Christ, and if we love Christ, we have to go out of our way to take him down from the cross, that is, to suppress suffering.

Here we enter to the question of compassion in daily life. Obviously, when speaking of the Mercy Principle, the crucified peoples have to be first, and here in Europe we have to cry out that true progress does not consist in developing our well-being without limit, that of the privileged, and continue forgetting those peoples.

Day-to-day we meet the wounded on our way... Well, in the centre of our communities we must place misery, we have to place the poor, we have to place service to the poor... and that means perceiving well the suffering in that slum and promote gestures, initiatives, positions, denunciations, that sensitize us, that complicate our lives, that involve us in the problems.

   It is not a question of organizing cafés, assistance structures, but it is also a question of being close to people. At this moment many people need help, obviously, but they also need friendship, closeness... to be close to the people who suffer, to accompany them in their problems, to defend them from the abuses and injustices they suffer, to make more room for them in the parish... That is to say, we Christians and the parish have to be where people are suffering.

A Samaritan Church is made by denouncing injustices, it is made by being gratuitous, doing what you can do for the last ones, sometimes with a lot of simplicity, with poor means, but doing what we can.

In short, the great call that is made to us from these peoples is that we put the Mercy Principle in our lives, and that we put mercy at the center of our Christian communities. Next year the Jubilee will be celebrated, we will make pilgrimages, we will gain indulgences, many things will be done, but the first call made to the Church when entering a new period is that of being a Samaritan, and I think we should listen to the words of Jesus: "do likewise."

Mercy (*misericordia*) comes from *misere cor*, that the heart is with the miserable.

**How far can we be led today by the fact that the Principle of Mercy moves our dephts and awakens even more strongly our missionary zeal as a religious family? How can we motivate and welcome this commitment from our service of authority? From experience, I know that in this service we are co-opted by daily living, by community relations, by the ageing of our communities. How can we promote in the culture of Encounter, to which Pope Francis invites us, a stronger and more real commitment to the wretched, the impoverished, and to be moved toward mercy?**