

## Chapter 2

# The Ecclesial and Social Setting of Christology

The new image and the new faith have not appeared everywhere, but in particular places. Liberation christology, too, has not appeared everywhere, but, as a matter of fact, in the places where the new image and the new faith have developed. This shows that there is a correlation between christology and actual faith, but also shows that not all places are the same for the development of christology, but that there is something in the place where it is done that points it, or can point it, in a particular direction. This is what I want to consider in this chapter.

### 1. The Issue of the “Setting” of Christology

In dealing with its object, Jesus Christ, christology has to take account of two fundamental things. The first and more obvious is the data the *past* has given us about Christ, that is, *texts* in which revelation has been expressed. The second, which receives less attention, is the *reality* of Christ in the *present*, that is, his presence now in history, which is the correlative of real faith in Christ.

On this view, the ideal setting for doing christology would be the one where the sources for the past can best be understood and where the presence of Christ and the reality of faith in him can best be grasped.

#### (a) *The Setting of Theology and the Sources of Revelation*

Christology's specific sources are God's revelation, embodied in texts from the past, the New Testament in particular and its authoritative interpretation by the magisterium. It might seem, therefore, that the “setting,” or *locus*, of christology was not very important, since there are sources for christology that predate any settings, or that the setting would not be crucial and would function at the most as a pastoral demand to apply to a particular situation the universal truth already expressed for all time in the deposit of faith. From this point of view, an analysis of the setting of theology, in the sense of a real place here and now, would not seem to be something crucial.

But things are not that simple. We might ask why "freedom" has been rediscovered in progressive christologies as essential to the gospel, while these christologies have not rediscovered "liberation." And we might ask why Latin American christology has discovered "liberation," which was more or less absent from christologies for centuries,<sup>1</sup> if, according to the two Vatican Instructions, liberation too is "essential" to the gospel message.

The basic reason is not that Latin America has better technical resources for analyzing the "sources" of revelation, but lies in the situation of Latin America. The first Instruction itself implies this, noting that the aspiration for liberation appears strongly "above all in peoples who know the burden of poverty and among the deprived social strata" (I, 1). In Ignacio Ellacuría's words, "The typical place where it appears is among the poor and dispossessed, and not among the rich who dispossess, who tend not to see and even to obscure justice and the need for liberation."<sup>2</sup>

This may seem obvious, but it is crucial: people begin to talk about liberation where oppression is blatant. Not only this: it is in this setting and not in any other that liberation becomes a theological *datum* in the strict sense and as such is rediscovered in revelation. "A sign of the times," in the strict sense—which I shall explain later—was what Ellacuría called it.<sup>3</sup>

To this important example we could add other fundamental theological rediscoveries made in the context of the Latin American situation: the partiality of God and Christ, the reality of the anti-Kingdom against which the Kingdom must be preached, or revaluations of elements included in christology but not taken very seriously: the following of Jesus, the beatitudes, the presence of Christ in the poor. What I want to stress now, however, is the fact that there are "settings" in which important elements in the "sources" of revelation, which had been buried, are rediscovered. If this is true, it is impossible to make an adequate distinction between the "setting" and "source" of revelation, or to accept the need for a "setting" for pastoral reasons only. That is why Ellacuría said:

The distinction is not strict, still less exclusive, since in a way the setting is the source inasmuch as it enables the source to yield one thing or another, so that, thanks to the setting and by virtue of it, particular contents become relevant and really present. If this distinction is accepted, it would be a mistake to think that direct contact (even if in faith and lived in prayer) with the sources would suffice to enable one to see in them and extract from them what is most adequate for what theological reflection has to construct.<sup>4</sup>

The conclusion as it affects christology is that one setting is not the same as another for grasping what the New Testament writings in general and the Gospels in particular say about Jesus. Both the image of Christ the liberator and the alienating images analyzed previously have been based on readings of the texts of revelation, and the fundamental reason for the different readings was the place from which they were made.

*(b) The Setting of Theology and the Signs of the Times*

If the setting of christology is important to enable it to read its sources, it is even more important, by definition, if we take seriously the (possible) presence of Christ in current events. I want to say in advance that it is a fundamental truth for *faith* that Christ is Lord of history and, more specifically, that he makes himself present in it through a body. This, a fundamental truth for *faith*, ought to be fundamental also, in principle, for christology, although I do not think it has been. The result is that christology has to repeat, in accordance with its sources, *that* Christ is present in history today, but does not feel obliged to ask *what element* of Christ is present and *in what*, or to incorporate this present Christ into its procedure.

This presence, undoubtedly, can only take the form of signs, but christology should admit at least the possibility that in these signs Christ becomes present. If this possibility were not accepted in advance, and the reality of these signs, if they really exist, were not incorporated into christological method, christology would turn into mere reinterpretation, updated certainly, but working on the past, into an exposition, in terms of the present, of the New Testament christologies or into a commentary on later reinterpretations of it. This means, in my view, that it would fall into a sort of "christological deism," as though Christ had been present and active at the origin of the faith, but had later lost interest in history or his presence could not be detected.

The very fact of seeing the importance of the presence here and now of Christ and, in general, of God is in itself a great novelty. Vatican II, moreover, made it central by mentioning the "signs of the times." In the council, recognizing these signs was declared to be essential for determining the mission of the church, but in my opinion it ought to be central for christology also. Let us therefore see what the signs of the times mean, and explain it, since there are different understandings of them.

At the council the expression "signs of the times" had two meanings. On the one hand, it had a *historical-pastoral* meaning: the signs of the times are "events which characterize a period" (GS 4), and which are something new as compared with other signs in the past. They are, then, particular historical phenomena, and the purpose of recognizing them, examining them, is directly pastoral: the church needs to identify them if its mission—"to rescue and not to sit in judgment, to serve and not to be served," as it is defined in the closing lines of GS 3—is to be carried out in a relevant way.

On the other hand, "signs of the times" had a *historical-theological* meaning. The signs are "happenings, needs and desires . . . authentic signs of God's presence and purpose" (GS 11).<sup>3</sup> This statement, like the previous one, mentions historical phenomena, but adds—and this is its crucial importance—that God's presence or purpose has to be discerned in them. History is seen here, not just in its changing and dense novelty, but in its sacramental dimension, in its ability to manifest God in the present.

Doctrinally, the (possible) existence of the signs of the times is now clear, and

in general christologies accept it as doctrine. However, the problem is whether they really identify these signs of the times not only in their historical-pastoral sense, which they usually do, but primarily in the historical-theological sense, which is infrequent, and whether, having identified them, they integrate them into their approach. In my opinion this does not often happen,<sup>6</sup> but it does occur in Latin American theology,<sup>7</sup> following the procedure of Medellín and Puebla.

The identification of the signs of the times in Latin America is also carried out in christology, which is what I am most concerned to stress here. We are told that Christ is present in history and where and how he is present. To concentrate on a supremely important example, the presence of Christ now in the oppressed majorities is affirmed and proclaimed, and in the process the insight of Guamán Poma and Bartolomé de las Casas is retrieved, and weight is given—unusually—to the principle that christology is also the christology of the “body” of Christ. In Ignacio Ellacuría’s theological words, “This crucified people is the historical continuation of the suffering servant of Yahweh.”<sup>8</sup> In the pastoral words of Archbishop Romero to peasants terrified after a massacre, “You are the image of the pierced God.”<sup>9</sup> These statements can be discussed theoretically,<sup>10</sup> but what I want to emphasize here is that Latin American christology does mention the presence of Christ in the present situation, discovers it in the signs of the times, which it understands in the historical-theological sense:

Among the many signs always appearing, some striking, some barely perceptible, at any moment there is always one which is primary, in the light of which the others have to be identified and interpreted. This sign is always the people crucified in history.<sup>11</sup>

To raise the situation of the Latin American poor to that of “Yahweh’s suffering servant” or the “pierced God” is to understand them as historical-theological signs of the times.

This understanding of the signs of the times as historical-theological is of course a delicate matter. Because of this Latin American christology checks them against and discerns them in the light of revelation. However, discernment itself is a creative act that does not derive mechanically from a pure reading of revelation. If the question is asked once more why Latin American christology feels the urgency and has the audacity to identify these signs of the times and is not content with a doctrine about them, the ultimate—unprovable—reason is that it is in the place from where they can be discerned.

### *(c) The Setting of Theology and Actual Faith*

If, *per impossibile*, there was, in fact, no real faith in Christ in history, Christ would cease to be Christ. This formal statement, which some may find audacious, means that it is important for christology not only to analyze the texts about Christ and take account of his presence now in history, but also to discern and analyze real faith in Christ. The theoretical premise is the correlation between *fides quae*, the content

of what is believed, that is, the reality of Jesus Christ, and *fides qua*, the act of believing in this content. It is not that faith creates its object, which is why we always have to go back to the New Testament in order to see if the act of faith corresponds to the reality of Christ, but it is nevertheless true that there is a correlation between the act of believing and what is believed,<sup>12</sup> in such a way that the one refers to the other and therefore "it is perfectly legitimate for a christology to start from our relationship with Jesus Christ."<sup>13</sup>

Analysis of actual faith in Christ is thus important a priori for christology, but I want to insist now that this is also the lesson of Latin American experience. Not only believers' "image" of Christ, but their act of faith, their response to and correspondence in the reality of their lives with this image, helps christology to penetrate the reality of Christ and understand the texts about him.

If this faith is ultimate in character, this means that it is responding to an ultimate reality and so, whether or not the divinity of Christ is mentioned, the radical quality of the act of faith is a statement that Christ is really an ultimate. And the lived content of the act of faith also throws light on aspects of Christ. For example, discipleship in practice is an introduction to the Jesus we follow, real martyrdom is an introduction to Jesus the martyr. Consequently, in analyzing the reality of Christ, Latin American christology has put emphasis on one Jesus and not another, with specific features different from those of other christologies (partiality for the poor, his practice of denouncing and unmasking idols, a person merciful and faithful to the last . . .).

And if we ask why Latin American christology, unlike others, takes seriously the correlation between *fides quae* and *fides qua*, why it does as a matter of fact what Rahner describes as possible and legitimate, the reason again is the place where it is done.

#### (d) *The Setting of Theology as a Real Situation*

We have seen that the setting of christology is important in enabling it to make adequate use of its sources, past and present. Nonetheless I have not yet offered a formal definition of this setting or said what its material reality is. In my view, this is where the fundamental option must come. For some christologies the setting of theology is basically texts,<sup>14</sup> although they have to be read in a physical place and take into account the new demands of the situation, the signs of the times in the historical-pastoral sense. For Latin American christology the setting of theology is first and foremost something real, a particular historical situation in which God and Christ are believed to be continuing to make themselves present; this is therefore a theological setting rather than a theological setting, a setting from which the texts of the past can be re-read more adequately.

The "setting" of christology is not, therefore, a direct categorial *ubi*, a particular place in geographical or spatial terms (universities, seminaries, base communities, bishops' offices . . .) although it has to be in one or several of them, and each of them offers advantages and disadvantages,<sup>15</sup> and ideally the specific positive character-

istic of each should be present in all of them. But "setting" here means first and foremost a *quid*, a substantial situation in which christology offers itself, allows itself to be affected, questioned and enlightened.

To decide what this real place is, let us apply to christology the graphic words of José Miranda: "The question is not whether someone is seeking God or not, but whether he is seeking him where God himself said that he is."<sup>16</sup> The setting does not invent the content, but away from this setting it will be difficult to find him and to read adequately the texts about him. Going to this setting, remaining in it and allowing oneself to be affected by it, is essential to christology.

Latin American christology—and specifically as christology—identifies its setting, in the sense of a real situation, as the poor of this world, and this situation is what must be present in and permeate any particular setting in which christology is done. In order to justify this choice, christology can invoke *a priori* the correlation between Jesus and the poor and his presence in them, as it appears in the New Testament, but it also has the *a posteriori* conviction that it obtains a wider and sharper view of everything from the perspective of the situation of the poor. It believes that the "entry of the poor on to the stage of history" is the most important fact (Gustavo Gutiérrez), a "sign of the times," the presence of God and his Christ.

In the last resort it is impossible to give a conclusive proof for this conviction, and the hermeneutical circle is always in operation: we see the choice of this setting as demanded by revelation, but this demand is felt only once one is in the setting.<sup>17</sup> The type of justification is the same as in the justification of faith in revelation, the honest conviction that from this setting Christ "makes a difference" for faith and christology,<sup>18</sup> becomes relevant and at the same time discloses his identity.

Identifying a setting is, then, essential for christology. Throughout history there have been various settings, but today in Latin America this setting is identified as the world of the poor because they "constitute the supreme, scandalous prophetic and apocalyptic presence of the Christian God."<sup>19</sup> And if this is the case, christology faces, to put it very simply, the question asked by the oppressed negroes in the United States, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Latin American christology has a very dialectical *Sitz im Leben* or life-context. It is a *Sitz im Leben und im Tode*, a place of life, certainly, as we shall see later, but also a place of death, the crucified people.

## 2. The Ecclesial Setting: the Church of the Poor

In Latin American christology the situation of the poor doubles as an ecclesial setting (something christologies in general take into account) and a social setting (taken into account much less). It is impossible to make a real distinction between the two, but I shall do so for ease of analysis.<sup>20</sup>

### (a) *The General Ecclesiality of Christology*

The church is a real setting for christology because the texts about Christ are preserved and transmitted in the church, and the church interprets them authori-

tatively to preserve their fundamental truth. This does not mean that the church is the only home of these texts since, by definition, Jesus Christ is not the exclusive property of the church, but that of humanity, and as a matter of fact there are non-Christians who draw inspiration from these texts and even say to us Christians, "Give us back Jesus." However, there can be no doubt that the church is the place, in practice and by right, where these texts are transmitted.

This, though fundamental, is not the most fundamental aspect of the church as a real setting for christology, since here we are still on the level of what we may call *secondary ecclesiality*, that is, of the church defined as an institution, in this case as guardian of the deposit of faith and ultimate guarantor of truth. All this, however, presupposes something prior, which I call *primary ecclesiality*: the community's act of faith in Christ and the presentation of Christ in history in his dimension as head of a body that is the church.

By "primary ecclesiality" I mean that the ecclesial substance is embodied in the church, that in it real faith, hope and charity are put into practice; in christological terms, discipleship of Christ is enacted. In doing and being this, the church becomes a sacrament in relation to Christ and ultimately becomes his body in history. "The historical bodiliness of the church implies that the reality and the action of Jesus Christ is 'fleshed out' in it so that the church may perform an 'incorporation' of Jesus Christ in the reality of history."<sup>21</sup> First and foremost, in this sense, the church is the setting of christology because it is the setting of faith in Christ and of the embodiment of Christ and, therefore—subsequently, from a logical point of view—it is also a setting because it guards and preserves the texts about Christ, but not vice versa.

Another aspect of primary ecclesiality is that the enactment of faith and the embodiment of Christ should be communal. Faith in Christ is essentially a community faith and not the sum of individual faiths, and this has been true since the resurrection of Christ, which did not simply produce individual faiths, but called into being a community and brought about a situation in which faith had communality as an essential dimension. This means primarily that we carry one another in the faith, give our own faith and receive it, so that, formally, it is the community that believes in Christ. Christology is ecclesial, therefore, not only because individuals believe *within* a community called the church, but because it is a feature of the act of believing that it depends on the faith of others.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, faith has to be communal because the church is a reality in process. It is essential to the church to be on pilgrimage, a description Vatican II legitimized in the term "people of God," and this pilgrimage includes the action of rethinking its faith throughout history, learning to learn. And this, as J. L. Segundo has shown, can only be done in community: "The very fact that God reveals something with meaning presupposes not only an individual searching, but a community, a people committed to this attempt to learn to learn, and thereby seeking the truth."<sup>23</sup> By this criterion christology is primarily ecclesial because it is carried out within a community with real faith, which makes Christ present, and within a community-

in-process, which is the primary agent in reformulating its faith, learning to express and formulate it so that it constantly reveals more of itself.

*(b) Particularized through the Church of the Poor*

This real community faith and this embodiment of Christ are the primary ecclesial realities, and in Latin American christology they are brought into relation with the poor. When church and poor are brought into an essential relationship, then we get the church of the poor,<sup>24</sup> and this church becomes the ecclesial setting for Latin American christology. Let us examine it.

First, the faith of the church of the poor takes the form first and foremost of liberating activity, discipleship of Jesus, which resembles Jesus in his option for the poor, in his condemnations and in his historical destiny. So the church of the poor has martyrs on a massive scale and, more importantly, they are murdered like Jesus and for the same reasons that brought about Jesus' death. The enactment of the faith of the church of the poor essentially includes, naturally, "confession," but in it faith more often takes the form of "invocation": by being of such a type and acting in such a way people confess the truth of the Christ in whom they believe.<sup>25</sup> This being and acting like Jesus that characterizes the church of the poor is what christology needs to pay attention to in order to get to know Jesus better.

Second, the church of the poor attaches importance to the communal nature of faith, but not merely or mainly for the obvious reasons Walter Kasper lists, following the "theory of institutionalization," to overcome the limitations of the individual in the cognitive domain, to protect fundamental truths from the whims of individual subjectivity or a particular generation of leaders.<sup>26</sup> In the church of the poor the need for a communal faith has different roots.

Just because they are poor, the poor make a difference to the faith of those who are not poor, so that in the church there cannot be mere addition of individual faiths, but complementarity—put more precisely, solidarity—a mutual carrying of one another in faith, allowing oneself to be given faith by the poor and offering them one's own faith. Then, and at the level of content, since the poor are those to whom Jesus' mission was primarily directed, they ask the fundamental questions of faith and do so with power to move and activate the whole community in the process of "learning to learn" what Christ is. Because they are God's preferred, and because of the difference between their faith and the faith of the non-poor, the poor, within the faith community, question christological faith and give it its fundamental direction.

In the church of the poor, finally, Christ becomes present, and this church is his body in history. It is not his body automatically, but insofar as it offers Christ the liberating hope and action and the suffering that can make him present as risen and as crucified. Christology isolates this central fact, not arbitrarily or through pure textual analysis, of Paul or Matthew 25, but because theologians find themselves confronted, like Bartolomé de las Casas, with an atrocious suffering that forces them back to Matthew 25 and, at a more abstract level, to the Pauline texts.



It is tragic that Christ's presence now on our continent should be so overwhelmingly in the mode of crucifixion, though he is present also in the mode of resurrection. This crucifixion, however, because it is impossible to hide, is also beneficial because it forces christology to recognize that a body of Christ really exists in history, and to take it into account in its own activity.

This church of the poor, then, is the ecclesial setting for christology because it is a world shaped by the poor. But I want to say that, even on the level of secondary ecclesiality, the church of the poor has brought forth new things from the "deposit" of faith, and at Medellín and Puebla it reformulated the reality of Christ from the point of view of the poor.

### 3. The Social-Theological Setting: the World of the Poor

The ecclesial setting is the real setting for christology within a wider social context, the world of the poor. This is its social-theological setting.<sup>27</sup> And it needs to be said that if the setting, in its ecclesial dimension, has an influence primarily on the *content* of christology—the question "Who is Jesus Christ?"—the setting in its social dimension has its main influence on the method of christology: "How do we approach Jesus Christ?"

First and foremost, the social setting is a reminder that "theologians do not live in the clouds. . . . No christology is or can be neutral. . . . Christology takes shape within the context of a particular moment in history; it is produced under certain specific modes of material, intellectual, cultural and ecclesial production, and is articulated in terms of certain concrete interests that are not always consciously adverted to."<sup>28</sup> The social setting shapes christology and does so by action or omission that is, consciously or unconsciously, partisan. Liberation christology is at least conscious of this, and has the honesty to recognize it: its thinking is done from the world of the poor and is done to liberate them.

This social world that shapes theologians' thought patterns also shapes them as believers, not just as intellectuals. And if this statement is surprising, let us remember that the social world is nothing other than God's creation—a fact which should not be forgotten by those who accuse theology of turning itself into, reducing itself to, sociology. And let us remember that trying to discover what this world is like is trying to discover what God's creation is like. This is why I talk of a *social-theological* setting. We should not forget that real faith carries on, is questioned or grows primarily in this real world. In simple terms, believing in Christ is something done, in the last resort, in the real world; its most difficult challenges come from the real world and it is accepted in confrontation with the real world. A particular church situation may encourage or discourage acceptance of Christ, but acceptance that Christ is the revelation of the divine and the human, or rejection of this claim, is something that takes place in the real world and is encouraged or discouraged by this. The social setting is thus the most crucial to faith, the most crucial in shaping the thought pattern of christology, and what requires and encourages the epistemological break.<sup>29</sup> Having said this, I want to analyze how the world of the

poor not only influences, but also positively makes possible and encourages this christological thinking.

(a) *The World of the Poor: a Situation that gives Food for Thought*

It is well known but needs repeating: the historical and social situation of Latin America is marked by unjust, cruel and overwhelming poverty. Medellín began its declaration as follows: "There are in existence many studies of the Latin American people. The poverty that marginalizes large masses of human beings is described in all of these studies. This poverty, as a collective fact, is an injustice which cries out to heaven" ("Justice," 1). Eleven years later Puebla used these words: "So we brand the situation of inhuman poverty in which millions of Latin Americans live as the most devastating and humiliating kind of scourge" (29). The same message is repeated by John Paul II's *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, and socio-economic studies still indicate a growth of poverty.<sup>30</sup>

This fundamental datum is what gives food for thought, what most gives food for thought and what must give a basic orientation to christological thinking. Twenty years ago Hugo Assmann put it like this:

If the state of domination and dependence in which two-thirds of humanity live, with an annual toll of thirty million dead from starvation and malnutrition, does not become the starting point for *any* Christian theology today, even in the affluent and powerful countries, then theology will be unable to give any historical context or content to its basic themes.<sup>31</sup>

If we do not take this fact of death seriously, theology will be accused of complicity and irrelevance: "Its questions will lack reality and not relate to real men and women."<sup>32</sup> However, the positive aspect is that it requires theology to do real thinking, not just to go through the motions, and to think from a particular point of view, one that promotes the lives of the poor and combats the death that turns them into victims. And if this brings charges of reductionism or dabbling in sociology, let us remember that we are talking about God's *creation*. Threatened life, "this little thing which is God's greatest gift," as Archbishop Romero used to say, is what we have to defend, is what sets our minds working and about which we cannot be neutral. The current European debate about modernity and post-modernity becomes at this point absolutely unintelligible and scandalous: we can opt out of many things, but we cannot opt out of the deaths of the poor.

This is also what stimulates christological thinking and gives it a basic direction: to think about Christ from the perspective of the fact of real life and death, to relate him to the basic needs of the poor,<sup>33</sup> to present Christ as the word of life in the presence of anti-life, as someone who came to bring life, life to the full. And this is what has happened. From this encounter with life and death christology has rescued what is essential about Jesus as the proclamation of a Kingdom of life for the poor which defies the anti-Kingdom of death. From the social position of the poor, this is no small gain. And this social position is also a theological position.

*(b) The World of the Poor: a Situation that gives Power for Thought*

The world of the poor is not just a summons to thought; it also offers thought an epistemological advantage: a light that illuminates its subject matter. We are now talking about the light rather than the subject matter, and saying that in the world of the poor there is a light that enables the intellect to see objects that are hard to see without this light. The light is not what we see, but what makes it possible to see. In technical language, the poor give us specific objects to see (*medium in quo*), but they act primarily as a *medium quo* "when they become light, which is not what our gaze directly falls on, but what enables us to see what we are looking for."<sup>34</sup>

To accept that there is light in the world of the poor, and a light that cannot be found in other places, is in the last resort a choice—although one can argue for this in advance on the basis of the transcendental relationship between God and the poor—which acts as a "pre-understanding" of christology.<sup>35</sup> What I want to emphasize, however, is that the so-called option for the poor is more than a pastoral option; it is an all-embracing option to grasp the whole view, but to see it consciously from one position. This does not mean reducing the whole to one of its parts, but we hope—and in this sense the option is also a "wager"—that from the point of view of the poor we will see more and see more clearly than from any other position.

For christology this means using the light of the poor to penetrate better the totality of Christ, and let us remember that christological thinking as such is also obliged to do this by virtue of its specific object. It is said of the Servant of Yahweh that God has set him up as the light of the nations. Pauline theology says that the crucified Christ is wisdom, and John's theology says that we must fix our eyes on this man who was crucified. If these expressions are not understood as purely rhetorical, they are saying that there is something in this crucified man that gives our intellect a light it does not obtain in other places. This is exactly what I am trying to say about the world of the poor, and I might add that this is why it is so surprising that "Christian" christologies, which are confronted of necessity with a crucified man and have to admit that in him there is a "revelation" of God, are not able to integrate into their method, or even to understand, the option for the poor.

*(c) The World of the Poor: a Situation that teaches Thought*

I want to say finally that the world of the poor makes the understanding function, or enables it to function, in a particular way that is important for christological thinking.

In the first place, in the world of the poor it is easier for the understanding to transcend the *hybris* active in all human activity, including the primal act of learning the truth, something Paul complains of (Rom. 1:18). Christology also must seek out the place that, of its nature, though not automatically, makes it easier for it to come to know the truth without manipulating it and to hold fast to it. From this point of view, the most appropriate world in which to come to know the truth

and avoid manipulating it is the world of the poor. If the poor of this world do not lead us at least to suspect that even christological understanding can be under the influence of *hybris*, nothing will. To enable us to understand sinfulness itself acting within christology—and why shouldn't it be?—nothing more effective has been invented to this day, from Paul to Ignatius Loyola, than coming face to face with a real crucified person. And the same thing continues to happen today when we come face to face with the crucified people: they are the best safeguard against the danger that theology will become ideology. This truth has to be stressed, because the opposite claim is so often made: when theology takes the poor seriously it is usually branded as ideological, while when it ignores them it is usually regarded as a genuine exercise of theological thinking.

Second, the world of the poor is the place that requires and encourages a particular attitude necessary if thinking is to correspond to the object of christology: that it should be done with mercy toward the victims and as good news to those who live in difficult situations.<sup>36</sup> If the world of the poor has any message, by definition it is that effective mercy comes before all else, and must permeate all human and Christian activity, and so also theology. That is why the situation of the poor requires and enables theology to change its existing self-understanding and see itself first and foremost as an *intellectus amoris*, not in opposition to, but distinct from, *intellectus fidei*. More specifically, it has to see itself as *intellectus misericordiae, iustitiae, liberationis*.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, just as liberation theology defines itself as "the theory of an ecclesial and historical praxis,"<sup>38</sup> christology must understand itself primarily as a *Christopraxis*, not to cancel the *logos*, but so that the *logos* may illuminate the truth of Christ in terms of Christ's own desires that liberation should become a reality.

The world of the poor is, then, I believe, what makes theological understanding reflect on its own operation and ask not only if its *product* is liberating or oppressive, but also if its *mode of operation* favours liberation or oppression. When Ignacio Ellacuría offered a philosophical justification for the method of liberation theology, he said that the formal structure of understanding consists in facing real things, and that this act of facing things has a noetic, ethical and practical dimension:

This act of facing real things in their reality has a threefold dimension: *getting a grip on reality*, which implies being in the reality of things—and not merely facing the idea of things or in touch with their meaning—a "real" being in the reality of things, which in its active nature of being is the complete opposite of a thing-like, inert way of being and implies being among them through their material, active mediations; *taking on the burden of reality*, an expression that indicates the fundamentally ethical character of understanding which was not given to us so that we could evade our real commitments, but to take upon ourselves what things really are and what they demand; *taking responsibility for reality*, an expression that indicates the practical nature of understanding, which only fulfils its function, including that of knowing reality and understanding meaning, when it takes responsibility for real activity.<sup>39</sup>

One might well ask whether this way of envisaging the functioning of understanding could have been formulated in another place.<sup>40</sup> No doubt one influence here is Zubiri's philosophy, but in my view Ellacuría discovered it and definitely took it further from the standpoint of the world of the poor and in commitment to the poor.<sup>41</sup>

What this way of envisaging understanding means for christological thinking, for "knowing" Christ, is the following: it means "getting a grip on the reality of Christ," for which the most effective way is to go back to the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth; it means "taking on the burden of Christ's reality," that is, readiness to listen to and respond to his real moral demands and persist in that; it means "taking responsibility for Christ's reality," that is, making him productive in a real liberating praxis that makes its cause real.

#### **4. Conclusion: from the Poor to Jesus of Nazareth**

In this chapter I have tried to stress the importance of the setting in which christology is done and define it as adequately as possible. For Latin American christology, this place is the situation of the poor, which is ultimately an option whose justification is to be found only within the hermeneutical circle: from the standpoint of the poor we think we come to know Christ better, and it is this better-known Christ, we think, who points us to where the poor are.

The importance of this specific setting for christology is twofold. On the one hand, it performs an epistemological break in the method of approaching and coming to know Jesus Christ:<sup>42</sup> knowing Christ is, in the last resort, following Christ. On the other hand, from this setting and with this method of understanding, christology finds itself looking towards the Christ who is Jesus of Nazareth. "The liberation christology elaborated from the standpoint of Latin America stresses the historical Jesus over the Christ of faith," says Leonardo Boff after analyzing the social setting of christology.<sup>43</sup>

In the next chapter I shall analyze the precise significance of the historical Jesus in Latin American christology, but let me repeat that the ultimate reason for this—though there are others—and what distinguishes it from other christologies' reasons for going back to Jesus is the ecclesial and social setting of this christology: in the world of poverty the poor and Jesus of Nazareth converge and point to each other.