Christ Our Companion

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Proclaiming the Truth of Christ in the Twenty-First Century

The claim that Jesus Christ is the "Way, the Truth, and the Life" is today more incredible than ever. In a world rent by violence and division of every stripe, where the very possibility that life may indeed be worth living can so often seem illusory, the message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection appears as a pipe dream at best and a cruel hoax at worst. At the same time, an increased consciousness of the amazingly diverse, pluralistic world in which we all live raises important questions about the ethical and theological defensibility of any religious position—particularly when the rationale for so much of the violence we see around us is ostensibly grounded precisely in religious principles. In such a world, how can a Christian proclaim that message credibly and responsibly? How can one speak of Jesus Christ in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001?

My conviction is that the answer to this question can only be discovered as we, through our everyday actions, respond to Christ's claim to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life by embodying that claim in our actions. The truth of which Christ speaks and which he is, is a lived truth. This assertion is hardly new, since it has been at the heart of Christian belief from the beginning: ultimately, the credibility of Christ's claims rests on the evidence presented by those persons who have lived out those claims, the "cloud of witnesses" whose lives testify to the transformative power of the crucified and risen One. For the contemporary Christian struggling to find some way of remaining true to his or her experience of God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ

while remaining true to his or her experience of the universality of God's love, there is an alternative: the lived faith of those who are participants in Christ's ongoing work.

The most convincing testament to the truth of the Christian faith are the persons whose everyday lives have embodied that faith, from the time of Christ to the present—not just those saints officially recognized by the church through its canonization process, but the millions more who toil in the obscurity of their homes, neighborhoods, and communities. Each of us knows who these holy ones are, for they have touched our lives, befriended us, nurtured us, challenged us, inspired us. More than any abstract principle, dogma, or theological proposition, the concrete lives of these exemplary Christians are what have attracted us to Christ. Their lives and testimonies witness to the credibility of the Christian kerygma. Pope John Paul II often spoke of the central significance of these holy persons in the life and mission of the church:

> One fruit of the conversion brought about by the Gospel is the *holiness* of so many men and women in our time: not only those whom the Church has officially proclaimed saints, but all those who with simplicity and amid the circumstances of their daily lives testified to their fidelity to Christ. How can one not think of the countless sons and daughters of the Church who throughout . . . history have lived lives of generous and authentic holiness in the hiddenness of their family and their professional and social lives? . . . The Lord Jesus promised: "He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father" (*Jn* 14:12). The saints are living proof of the fulfillment of this promise, and they encourage the belief that this is possible in the most difficult hours of history.[1]

Drawing on the earliest Christian traditions, moreover, John Paul II repeatedly called on us to look to the long line of Christian martyrs for the paradigmatic examples of lived Christian faith and the most convincing argument for its credibility:

> The martyrs know that they have found the truth about life in the encounter with Jesus Christ, and nothing and no-one could ever take this certainty from them. Neither suffering nor violent death could ever lead them to abandon the truth which they have discovered in the encounter with Christ. This is why to this day the witness of the martyrs continues to arouse such interest, to draw agreement, to win such a hearing and to invite emulation. This is why their word inspires such confidence: from the moment they speak to us of what we perceive deep down as the truth we have sought for so long, the martyrs provide evidence of a love that has no need of lengthy arguments in order to convince. The martyrs stir in us a profound trust because they give voice to what we already feel and they declare what we would like to have the strength to express.[2]

If we are drawn to Christ, therefore, it will likely not be because we have been convinced by theological arguments, but because we have been inspired by the witness of his martyrs and saints. "From the hope of these people who have been touched by Christ," suggests Pope Benedict XVI, "hope has arisen for others who were living in darkness and without hope."[3] In the final analysis, it is not the rationality of theological arguments that will convince us of the truth of the Christian faith, but the beauty of those lives in which that faith is incarnated and made visible and palpable. As the Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo has argued, at the most fundamental level, human beings are attracted not to beliefs and values in the abstract but to particular persons, particular lives—and, because we are attracted to these particular persons, we are attracted to the beliefs and values they hold.[4]

My own life has been forever changed by the holy lives that Christ used to draw and attract me to him. As with so many Latinos and Latinas, for example, my *abuelita* (grandmother) was the spiritual heart of my family. What I remember most about her—even several years after her death—was her absolute confidence in God. One of her favorite sayings was, "*Me conformo.*" While there is no exact English translation of that phrase, and the closest translation would be "I adapt myself," the literal translation

is, of course, "I conform." "I conform" to whatever God has in store for me; I will allow myself to be formed by God's will. And she did—through the tumultuous years of exile from her native country, with all the personal, familial, and material upheaval that brought. Hers was by no means a passive adaptation, since it demanded constant struggle to hold together a family that had been devastated by the experience of revolution and exile to a foreign land. My admiration for her drew me to Christ by making me desire to conform to her God, a God in whom one could confide completely, come what may.

While the holy persons in our lives are often found in our families, sometimes we encounter them only in passing, as momentary blessings who nevertheless have a lasting impact on our own lives. I had one such encounter many years ago, while I was in college. The school's campus was in an urban setting, surrounded by very poor neighborhoods. The sight of homeless persons asking for spare change was a common one on the streets immediately surrounding the campus. Walking those streets at night in search of a sandwich at a local restaurant or a movie at a cinema, I would regularly come across a homeless man or woman, reach into my pocket, and place a couple of coins in his or her hand. It made me feel good. One particular evening, I happened upon a stocky, scruffy-looking, middle-aged homeless man standing on a street corner. As I approached him, he looked at me straight in the eye and asked for money. Perfunctorily, I reached into my pants pocket for loose change and placed the coins in his hand. After putting the money away, he came toward me with both arms outstretched and reached to grab my head. My heart stopped. As an enlightened, college-educated young man with the self-assurance such young men so often have, I had always assumed I had risen above any petty bigotry or prejudices I may have harbored as a child. Yet at this moment I became numb with fear, fully expecting that I was about to be mugged. The scruffy homeless man did indeed grab my head. He put both hands on my forehead, as if to extend a blessing, and said calmly, "Thank you. God bless you."

I walked away in a daze, trying to process what had just transpired, both the man's actions and my own instinctive reaction. I had a profound sense of both gratitude and shame. By the time I had composed myself and returned to the street corner to thank him for what he had done for me, he was already gone. For weeks after that, I returned to that street corner hoping to see him so that I could thank him. I never saw him again.

This event was hardly earth shattering or history making, yet it did shatter my life. My world with its preconceptions was turned upside down. In the man's outstretched arms, I was confronted by a love that manifested itself where I least expected to find it; indeed, I had been under the assumption that it was I who, through my charity, was bringing God's love to this homeless man. His "God bless you" in the face of my fear confronted me like a mirror that revealed an ugly reality: my own prejudices. This poor, homeless man was but one of millions of similar persons, the vast majority forgotten by history, whose lives have borne witness to a love that irrupts in our worlds and shatters them forever, a love that transforms hearts of stone, turning them into hearts of flesh and blood. From then on, I've desired nothing more than to believe—*really* believe—and come to know the same God whom that homeless man clearly knew so intimately. I gave the man a few cents; he gave me faith in the power of God's grace to challenge and transform my heart . . . and through nothing more dramatic than a softly spoken "God bless you."

It is to the lives of people like my *abuelita* and this homeless man that Christian theology must first look if it is to be credible in this violent, divided world of the twenty-first century. Neither of these were individuals reluctant to make truth claims or to make an explicit show of their faith, yet their concrete actions demonstrated that, far from foreclosing an openness to other persons, the truth that they asserted demanded such openness: "*Me conformo*," "God bless you." We Christian theologians could do a lot worse than to ground our theological reflections in those two phrases, and in the lived faith in which they were rooted.

Among contemporary theologies, two stand out as particularly influential attempts to retrieve the significance of lived faith for Christian theology: theological aesthetics and liberation theology. Both of these theological movements have insisted on the foundational importance of Christian praxis for Christian theology; theology is incomprehensible, meaningless, irrelevant, and false unless it is grounded in and oriented toward Christian discipleship. For both theological aesthetics and liberation theology, belief in

Jesus Christ is not so much a matter of creedal profession as a matter of personal conversion and practical conviction (though these always remain inextricably related).

At the same time, however, liberation theology has made a fundamental contribution to our understanding of what constitutes lived faith and who are the saints, the holy ones who reveal the truth of Christian faith. From its very beginnings, Christianity has looked to the saints and martyrs as the living paradigms of Christian faith, as those persons whose very lives (and deaths) represent the most convincing apologia for the faith. With their emphasis on praxis as the ground and goal of theology, liberation theologians are located squarely within that tradition, which looks to the lived faith as *locus theologicus*. Yet liberation theologians also call our attention in a special way to a particular dimension of the communion of saints, namely, the special place occupied by the poor and marginalized as privileged witnesses to the truth of Christ. Without idealizing or romanticizing the poor, who as a group are as prone to sin as any other group of human beings, liberation theology nevertheless emphasizes the theological significance of their lived faith in the midst of innocent suffering as a place where we encounter the power, the attractiveness, the beauty of Christ's truth. This is what Jon Sobrino calls "primordial saintliness":

> Saintliness does not have to be accompanied by heroic virtues—which are required for canonization; it is also expressed in a life of everyday heroism. We don't know whether these poor who cry out to live are saints-intercessors or not, but they have the power to move our hearts. They do not perform "miracles," in the sense of violating the laws of nature, which is also required for canonization. But it is not rhetorical to say that their miracles violate the laws of history; it is a miracle to survive in a hostile world that makes their life exceedingly hard. What we call primordial saintliness is the will to live and to survive amid great suffering, the decision and effort that it requires, the unlimited creativity, the strength, the constancy, defying innumerable problems and obstacles.[5]

In this book, I suggest that, as Christian theologians retrieve the significance of lived faith for theology, the lived faith of the primordial saints in our communities can be a source for understanding the intimate relationship between a theological aesthetics and a theology of liberation (*pace* those proponents of both who would see them as mutually opposed). Perhaps ironically, the reconciling truth of the crucified and risen Christ is revealed, above all, in the invincible faith of the victims of history, in their stubborn insistence that, in the face of all the evidence, life is worth living; life is a gift. If the young Guatemalan mother forced to decide which of her children will go without food today, because there is not enough for all, can still proclaim "*Caminemos con Jesús*" (We walk with Jesus), we must listen. If the elderly Cuban American woman whose family has been ravaged by the violence of exile can still kneel at the foot of the cross, we must pay attention. If the Mexican American farm worker lying in a hospital bed, suffering from a terminal illness caused by repeated exposure to toxic pesticides, can still lovingly caress the medals of *La Morenita* (affectionate term for the dark-skinned Virgin) and the *Sagrado Corazón* (the Sacred Heart) pinned to his pillow, we must not turn away. If it can honestly be affirmed at all, the absolute value of life as a gift will be affirmed most convincingly in the enduring faith, the hope against hope, of those persons who daily live at the very limits of life, at death's door. Paradoxically, it is the unloved, the despised of our world whom God has chosen to bring the good news to a world desperate to feel loved. That is the fundamental message of this book; it is, in my experience, the fundamental message of Jesus Christ.

CRISTO COMPAÑERO: CRUCIFIED AND RISEN

The refrain of one of the most popular and beautiful Latin American hymns declares: "Lord, you have looked into my eyes; smiling, you have called my name." That single line poignantly expresses the core Christian belief so prominent in the Gospels and especially in the writings of Paul: God loved us first. In a 1985 apostolic letter to the youth of the world, John Paul II speaks

movingly of this "look of love" as the sum and substance of the Christian message:

> It is also my hope that, after you have made the discernment of the essential and important questions for you, for the plan of the whole life that lies before you, you will experience what the Gospel means when it says: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." May you experience a look like that! May you experience the truth that he, Christ, looks upon you with love! He looks with love upon every human being. The Gospel confirms this at every step. One can also say that this "loving look" of Christ contains, as it were, a summary and synthesis of the entire Good News. . . . My wish for each of you is that you may discover this look of Christ, and experience it in all its depth. . . . Man needs this loving look. He needs to know that he is loved, loved eternally and chosen from eternity. . . . When everything would make us doubt ourselves and the meaning of our life, then this look of Christ, the awareness of the love that in him has shown itself more powerful than any evil and destruction, this awareness enables us to survive. My wish for you then is that you may experience what the young man in the Gospel experienced: "Jesus, looking upon him, loved him."[6]

Before I look at Christ, Christ has already looked at me. Before I do, think, or feel anything, God has already lovingly looked into my eyes and, smiling, has called out my name. Every other article of Christian faith, every theological statement, is little more than a footnote to this central belief: my entire life is a *response* to a Lover whose very gaze and call have created me and named me, thereby compelling a response. Yet this is also the most unbelievable, literally in-credible aspect of Christian faith—except for those who, on the surface, would appear to have little reason to hold such a belief. As the Jesuit theologian Jon Sobrino observes, "The poor have no problems with God. The classic question of theodicy—the 'problem of God,' the atheism of protest—so reasonably posed by the nonpoor, is no problem at all for the poor (who in good logic ought of course to be the ones to pose it)."[7]

A great irony of our post-Enlightenment world is that the

rejection of God's love in the face of human suffering has come principally from those sectors of society most blessed by economic prosperity and material security. It is not the poor who have become secularized. Indeed, it was precisely their inattentiveness to the experience of the poor and marginalized that led the great modern prophets of "enlightenment" to fail in their annunciation of religion's demise. "It amuses me," wrote Ignacio Ellacuría not long before his death, "when people say 'God has disappeared from the world,' because God has disappeared from Europe or from the European universities; or that the world has entered a post-Christian age and I don't know what else. It's possible that here [in Europe], yes. But this is not the world."[8] Not only has religious faith not succumbed to the forces of secularization, but it continues to thrive and grow—particularly among the very peoples whose suffering is supposed to represent the most devastating argument against religious faith. Either the poor are horribly ignorant, infantile, manipulable, and untrustworthy, or else they're onto something. I prefer to believe that they're onto something.

And that something is the incredible though simple truth that life is worth living . . . no matter what. Again, paradoxically, the encounter with death, poverty, and human powerlessness in all its guises liberates us to fully embrace life itself. In the Christian tradition, this paradoxical liberation is expressed above all in the crucified and risen Christ. It is no accident, therefore, that the crucified Christ plays such a central role in Latino/a popular Catholicism.

Yet if the crucified Christ reveals that life is good no matter what, this life is no mere abstraction; it is life as defined and constituted by Love, that is, by relationships. However important are traditional interpretations of Christ's passion and death that focus on theological notions of atonement, redemption, or sacrifice, the fundamental practical significance of the Crucified is that, no matter what, God accompanies us. This is the sine qua non of all interpretations of the cross: if God is Love, then, like any true love, this Love desires to become completely one with the beloved, sharing with and accompanying the beloved in everything. Our own human experience of love bears this out; whether parent and child, husband and wife, or close friends, the

lover desires to be totally one with the beloved, to share fully in the life of the beloved. Indeed, this desire becomes particularly acute precisely at those times when the beloved is undergoing struggle, pain, and suffering. At those times the father desires to take upon himself the pain of his prematurely terminally ill child, or the wife the pain of her laid-off husband, or the friend the struggles of his despondent friend. The incarnation and, especially, the passion and crucifixion of Christ are thus the manifestation of a Love that can only desire to share fully in our humanness, a Love that refuses to remain at arm's length in the face of human powerlessness and death.

The poor are the unlikely witnesses to the central claim of the Christian faith: "the Father loves you" (John 16:27). Not surprisingly, then, the Christ who accompanies us is at the heart of Latino/a popular Catholicism. For, as Hans Urs von Balthasar argues, "to say that God loves us would be an empty phrase—looking at the world as it is—had it not been substantiated by the Incarnation, Cross and Resurrection of Jesus, by his absolute solidarity with us and had it not involved a revelation of the innermost nature of God (Trinity as love) through Jesus' relationship with the Father in the Holy Spirit."[9] Christ is credible because he is with us, as is declared in this Peruvian song to "Nuestro Señor de los Milagros" (Our Lord of the Miracles):

> When the poor have nothing and yet share,
> When a man is thirsty and yet gives us water,
> When the weak person gives strength to a friend,
> It is God who walks in our steps.
>
> When joy grows and floods over us,
> When our lips proclaim the truth,
> When we love the simple person's feelings,
> It is God who walks in our steps.
>
> When the people organize and struggle together,
> When we conquer oppression with our struggles,
> When we establish justice for all,
> It is God who walks in our steps.[10]

This experience of God's presence with us, especially in our struggles, is what makes God's love believable, Christ's message credible, and life livable. "Be the problems of the 'truth' of Christ what they may," writes Sobrino, "his credibility is assured as far as the poor are concerned, for he maintained his nearness to them to the end. In this sense the cross of Jesus is seen as the paramount symbol of Jesus' approach to the poor, and hence the guarantee of his indisputable credibility."[11] Because Jesus accompanies us, he is real, and because he is real, he liberates. And the Cross is the guarantee that he does, in fact, remain with us—that he walks with us even today. Sobrino comments as follows:

> A vague, undifferentiated faith in God is not enough to generate hope. Not even the admission that God is mighty, or that God has made promises, will do this. Something else besides the generic or abstract attributes of the divinity is necessary in order to generate hope. This distinct element—which, furthermore, is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian God—is something the poor have discovered viscerally, and in reality itself: the nearness of God. God instills hope because God is credible, and God is credible because God is close to the poor. . . . Therefore when the poor hear and understand that God delivers up the Son, and that God is crucified—something that to the mind of the nonpoor will always be either a scandal or a pure anthropomorphism—then, paradoxically, their hope becomes real.[12]

God's nearness as symbolized by the Crucified is not the consequence of Christian belief so much as the foundation of belief. If asked to give a reason for our belief, we might repeat the words of the Mexican *abuelita* who, when asked to defend her devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe, replied simply: "*Se quedó.*" She stayed. Guadalupe did not abandon us in our time of need but shared our pain with us, thus making it possible for us to struggle on.

The Crucified is not only a symbol of suffering but, even more, a symbol of indestructible hope, hope in a liberation experienced not first in some future victory but in the present, silent solidarity of the One who, like the Mother who accompanied him to Calvary,

stays when everyone else has abandoned us. This hope born of compassion, or shared suffering, is beautifully conveyed in the verses of the Brazilian poet and Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga:

> Because your solitude is mine as well;
> And all of me is but a wound, where
> Some blood wells up; and where
> A dead man waits, I reclaim the spring,
> Dead with him already before my death.[13]

For those who have known such hope, "Perfect joy will not come at the hour of triumph; perfect joy was already experienced in the moment of silent obedience."[14] Silent obedience—like Christ on Calvary. Our silence meets God's silence. Yet the anguish of abandonment is experienced as painful only because it is experienced in its relationship to perfect joy, reconciliation, communion.

A WOUNDED RESURRECTION

In our journeying with *Cristo Compañero*, this Christ who accompanies us, the wounds "where some blood wells up" become the signs of that companionship and, therefore, the source of our hope. Yes, the resurrection will indeed ensure that our hope is not in vain, but not even the resurrection can erase the wounds; the resurrected, glorified body of Jesus Christ still bore (and bears) the wounds of companionship, compassion, solidarity . . . and betrayal and abandonment. The wounds on Christ's glorified body are the incarnated memory of the bonds that defined his life and death. Jesus' wounds are the direct, inevitable consequence of his compassionate relationships with the poor, sinners, prostitutes, and other presumed unsavory characters. The wounds are also the consequence of betrayed relationships, the betrayal Jesus suffered when his disciples abandoned him and fled out of fear for their own lives.

If it is truly the victory of life over death, then the resurrection must vindicate and restore not just the life of the individual person Jesus Christ; the resurrection must also vindicate and restore the relationships that themselves have helped define Christ. The resurrection must be more than the restoration to life of an

autonomous, isolated individual; it must be the resurrection of *Cristo Compañero*, Christ-as-companion. The resurrection is the victory of companionship over abandonment, the victory of community over estrangement. Also resurrected are those bonds that had been severed at Calvary when Jesus' friends abandoned him. Without reconciliation there can be no resurrection.

Yet the troubling wounds remain, don't they? When the resurrected Christ appears to the cowering disciples, he shows them the wounds. Indeed, he demands that the disciples look at the wounds and insists, in the case of Thomas, that the unbelieving disciple put his hand in the wounds. What must have been an extraordinarily shocking, stomach-churning scene is powerfully depicted in the famous Caravaggio painting of Thomas peering curiously into the wound in Jesus' side, probing deep inside the open wound, his fingers peeling back folds of skin as if to examine just how deep the wound is. What must Thomas or any of the other disciples in the upper room have thought at the moment? What must have been running through their minds or, more importantly, through their hearts—they who, only three days earlier, had fled in terror from their friend as he was being dragged off to Calvary?

No wonder the disciples were frightened! Indeed, they must have been scared to death at the sight of the man they had just betrayed, who was now confronting them with the visible, concrete signs of that betrayal—those irksome wounds. The disciples had probably assumed that now that Jesus was dead, they could put the past behind them, chalk it up to a misguided idealism, and go on to live the lives of good, upstanding fishermen, tax collectors, and so on. But then Jesus walks in to remind them of that troubling past, to prick consciences that had just begun to find some equilibrium, however tenuous. Moreover, Jesus sticks his wounds in their faces. He doesn't say, "Let bygones be bygones" or "Forgive and forget." Instead, he refuses to allow his disciples to forget what they had done to him; Jesus forces them to confront the painful consequences of their abandonment and betrayal: "Look and see. . . . Put your hand here. . . . Do *not* forget what you have done to me!"

Before there can be a restoration of companionship, there must be a restoration of memory, the memory of innocent suffering. Far from implying a forgetting of past suffering, resurrection and

reconciliation imply an acknowledgment that past injustices are never erased by future victories, past suffering remains forever a part of the history of the resurrection; the wounds remain forever inscribed on the body of Christ. The resurrected Christ is and will always be also the crucified Christ. Like Paul, Christians always preach a simultaneously crucified and risen Christ (not a once-crucified but now-risen Christ).

The restoration of the disciples' memory makes Jesus' approach even more in-credible. In the face of the disciples' betrayal and abandonment of Jesus, Jesus now approaches them with open arms, invites them to become reconciled, and sits down with them to break bread, to share a meal. The memory of innocent suffering, inscribed on the body of the resurrected Jesus, confronts the disciples not in order to condemn them but precisely to invite them to become reconciled, to invite them to participate in Jesus Christ's resurrection. Like the homeless man who confronted me many years ago, Jesus stretches out his arms not to denounce or attack but to bless. In the mirror that is Jesus' scarred body, the disciples see themselves convicted, challenged to repent, and invited to become reconciled.

An essential aspect of Christ's passion and crucifixion was his experience of abandonment; though the physical suffering he underwent was horrific enough, this itself must have paled in comparison to the profound emotional and spiritual suffering of experiencing himself abandoned by his closest friends and, above all, by God. If our own experiences of God's absence can bring such agony even though we have never known complete union with God, how utterly devastating must have been the experience of divine abandonment for Jesus, who had lived his entire life in perfect intimacy and union with God. However painful the physical torture he underwent, surely this spiritual torture made Christ's suffering on the cross the most horrific ever experienced. Many, many human beings have endured—and continue to endure—the physical pain that Jesus suffered, but no one has ever had to endure the extremity of his spiritual and emotional anguish. On the cross, God chooses to experience divine abandonment. In so doing, God chooses to embrace every form of human death, every human experience of abandonment, which, however terrifying, cannot ultimately compare to the terror experienced by Christ on the cross, where the Son himself cries out to his Father for help and hears only silence.

The resurrection would require and imply an affirmation of all those bonds in the face of death, Christ's bonds with the Father and with his disciples. If the resurrection affirms the Father's ultimate refusal to abandon the Son to the forces of death, so too does it call for a reconciliation that transforms Christ's estrangement from his disciples into a renewed community. When the resurrected Christ presents himself to the disciples, he thus invites them to believe not just that he himself has been raised from the dead but that a reconciled community of faith has now been made possible—if they will but acknowledge the enduring wounds and recognize themselves mirrored in those wounds, that is, if they accept Jesus' loving invitation to conversion.

THE DENIAL OF SUFFERING

The response to Christ's invitation—"put your fingers here . . . and believe"—defines Christian faith. Had Thomas recoiled from Christ's wounds in horror, the resurrected Christ could justifiably be identified with an unspoiled victory that overcomes death by obliterating it from our memory; this would truly be the conqueror Christ, "el Conquistador." The crucified and risen Christ embodies the intimate connection between death and life, the fact that woundedness is an integral dimension of all life, even if only as the ineradicable memory of suffering. To recoil from Christ's wound is to rupture that connection, to miss the very core of the Christian kerygma.

The refusal to face Christ's wounds, wounds that appear on his resurrected body, is *the* mortal sin (in the most literal sense of the term), for it leads inevitably to the death of others and, indeed, to our own death. Indeed, the murderous consequences of the denial of death in contemporary Western societies were examined in the 1970s by the social psychologist Ernest Becker, who argued that the anxiety and even terror that we experience in the face of our own mortality is the foundational experience around which we construct our selves and our societies.[15] This need to deny our mortality, our ultimate powerlessness in the face of death, is what drives us to construct personal identities,

social institutions, ideologies, and belief systems that can make us feel invulnerable and ultimately invincible. To be a human being is to exist in a state of the most profound vulnerability and contingency; our lives are ultimately not in our control, for they can be extinguished at any moment. But we cannot bear this fact. So we construct a world that will shield us against this terrifying truth. Invariably, however, we eventually discover that the world we construct in order to shield us from our own mortality and powerlessness has resulted in the very opposite: a world that fosters death in all its forms. What Becker details is precisely the process by which the individual strives to exempt him- or herself from the common lot of all persons, our common mortality. That process ultimately deals death, to the others against whom the individual must assert his or her singular invulnerability, and death to the individual him- or herself, since the need to presume oneself invulnerable leads to total isolation—from other persons, from God, and even from oneself.

In the language of social psychology, Becker thus articulates the consequences of erasing, ignoring, or failing to acknowledge the wounds on the risen body of Christ—the consequences of interpreting the resurrection apart from its concrete history, which includes the abandonment signaled by the crowing cock as well as the wounds resulting from that abandonment. Those consequences are always horrific. The corollary of our obsessive need to feel invulnerable in the face of our mortality is the need to avoid all pain, all suffering, for these appear in our lives as unwanted reminders that we are not in control of our own lives, that we are indeed vulnerable. If death is the ultimate enemy, the ultimate threat to our sense of security and invulnerability, so too are all those partial deaths that foreshadow our common end: illness, old age, poverty, failure, abandonment—which must be avoided at all costs. Indeed, our consumer culture is premised upon and driven by the promise that all these forms of human vulnerability are avoidable . . . if we have a large enough bank account, the right kind of insurance, the latest model automobile, or the most effective deodorant ("Never let them see you sweat"). Likewise, authentic human relationships of mutual love and trust are to be shunned, since these always involve a dimension of vulnerability and even pain in the face of an other who, however much we may

seek to control, always remains beyond our control; if one falls in love, one might get burned. So we surround ourselves with things that promise security and invulnerability, and we run from persons, since they demand vulnerability and the possibility of pain. We fall in love with cars, houses, mobile phones, and computers even as we remain unattached to human persons. (The global economic crisis of 2008-2009 has demonstrated the tenuousness of that love, yet it remains to be seen whether we have learned the lesson.)

But we run not just from any persons; rather, we run from weak, powerless, vulnerable, wounded persons in particular, for they especially threaten our sense of invulnerability. They are the mirrors of our own souls, whose very existence threatens our sense of invulnerability, security, and control. What I feared about that African American man who confronted me in inner-city New Haven was simply the fact that he was there, the fact that he confronted me and, in doing so, forced me to recognize my connection to him and to his predicament. That was terrifying.

In fact, the very existence of the wounded in our midst is so terrifying that we must eradicate them or, at least, hide them from view, get them off the streets—so that we won't have to see them and their uncomfortable wounds. So, argues Becker, the violence inflicted on the weak among us—from the Jews in Nazi concentration camps to the children left to die in the poverty of our contemporary concentration camps, the ghettoes of Western cities and third-world rural villages—is simply the social face of the denial of death. If we deny death, we inflict it, but we also inflict it on ourselves. The fear of pain and vulnerability that causes us to shun real human relationships, to shun that true love that always involves surrender and vulnerability in the face of an other, ultimately kills our interior life, our ability to feel anything—pain or joy or love. As psychologists remind us, if we repress painful feelings out of fear, we instinctively also repress any positive feelings; we cannot pick and choose which feelings to repress. To repress all feelings of insecurity or pain out of fear is to make joy and love impossible.

The result of this pathological fear of our own fragility as human beings is the despair and hopelessness that lie just beneath the surface of our most successful communities and families. To scratch that well-manicured surface is to discover the silent des-

peration that manifests itself in a myriad of self-destructive ways, from chronic depression, to every conceivable form of addiction, to destroyed and destructive relationships, to suicide—simply the literal expression of the internal suicide we have already committed when we wall ourselves off from others and, therefore, from ourselves. Thus, the suicide rate among suburban white males—the highest for any demographic group—is simply the corollary of the murder rate among inner-city African American and Latino males. The former is a direct result of our failure to confront the latter.

The most threatening others are precisely those who are the weakest, most powerless and fragile, for these represent the repressed, dangerous memory of our common mortality. A direct, intimate relationship thus exists between the struggle for social justice and the possibility of authentic Christian worship, the expression of gratitude for a life that is not ours but is pure gift. The act of solidarity with the wounded other is, at the same time, an acknowledgment of our common woundedness, our common powerlessness. Such solidarity also acknowledges our complicity in the infliction of those wounds. For that reason, we must continue to erect geographical, social, cultural, racial, economic, and psychological barriers between ourselves and them, so that we will not have to face them, and thus face ourselves. In the end, what we fear most is not those persons but ourselves—our weak, fragile, vulnerable, wounded selves. So we avoid touching—or even seeing—the wounds. We avoid risking the act of solidarity, or companionship with the victims of history.[16]

DANGEROUS MEMORIES

Like Christ himself, the crucified victims of history bear the wounds of their suffering and that of past generations; they are Christ's companions on a journey whose goal of resurrection-reconciliation is already experienced in the midst of that com-panionship ("sharing bread with"). The wounds remain visible not in order to condemn but in order to call forth that conversion that alone makes possible an authentic reconciliation, in order to help the doubting Thomases of the first world see themselves mirrored

and implicated in those wounds. The resurrected Christ is—and can only be—the crucified Christ.

This Christ is also, therefore, the companion of Latino/a communities in our own histories, where resurrection remains always marked by the memories of suffering, violence, and struggle—what Johann Baptist Metz has called "dangerous memories," for they "make demands on us."[17] They are dangerous, also, precisely because they can never be erased; no amount of future success or liberation can wipe away the wounds, the price paid for that success or liberation. As the German Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin reminds us, "Every great work of civilization is at the same time a work of barbarism."[18] Every resurrection involves a passion and a death, even if they are only in the form of wounds or scars—that is, dangerous memories.

For the United States, Latinos and Latinas are among those historically marginalized groups that represent "dangerous memories," wounds on the American Dream. To look into the scarred faces and hands of the Salvadoran day laborer standing in a parking lot at dawn, pleading for work to support his family back home, or to place one's hand in the side of the bullet-ridden body of the Puerto Rican boy whose young life has been traded for an even younger pair of Nike sneakers, is to recognize in their bodies the price of resurrection, the cost of success. The bodies of the poor are reminders that, whether or not we stand at the end of history, what is certain is that the history of the victims has not ended:

> What has ended, perhaps, is the history of grand ideological dramas, of divine deceptions, of grand justifications for supposed gestures of progress. . . . But the history of the victims does not appear to have ended, the subversive memory that reveals how our presumed greatness was composed simply of blood and death.[19]

The temptation to think of itself as standing at the end of history is particularly strong for the United States. Unique among nations, the United States has no common history that extends beyond the modern period. Indeed, the United States was founded

precisely as a rejection of the past, a new city on the hill, a new Jerusalem. As such, the forging of this new nation demanded the eradication of all vestiges of the past, including those peoples who happened to be living on the land that had been chosen for this bold experiment; the nation would be created *ex nihilo* on virgin land, in the wilderness. The price of liberation, the barbaric costs of civilization, would thus be simply wiped away; history would be wiped clean. The American project thus presupposed the possibility of a pure history, a civilization unmarked by barbarism, a resurrection without any remaining signs of the crucifixion. We have destroyed even the ruins of our progress.

The history of Latin America was quite different. The Spanish conquest and colonization did not seek the creation of a new historical reality but the incorporation of this new world into the nascent Spanish empire. For this purpose, the outright extermination of the native populations would be counterproductive; what was required was the assimilation and pacification of the Amerindians. The new lands were not seen primarily as virgin territory for the establishment of new colonies but as repositories of natural resources that could be mined and exported back to Spain to fund the Crown's imperial projects in the wake of the *reconquista*. To this end, the Amerindians would be enslaved, gathered into *encomiendas*, and used as a source of labor.

If nevertheless millions were brutally murdered, and more millions fell victim to the diseases brought by the Europeans, these outcomes were byproducts of the imperial designs of the conquistadores, not an intrinsic aspect of the colonizing ideology, as it was among the English settlers in the North. While the modern drive for territorial expansion and domination was at the heart of both the Iberian and British colonization of the Americas, the processes of expansion developed differently in the North and South:

> The difference was that in the north it was possible and convenient to push back the native inhabitants rather than to conquer and subdue them. What northern colonialists wanted was land [rather than slave labor]. The original inhabitants were a hindrance. So, instead of subjugating the Indians, they set about to push them off their lands, and eventually to exterminate them. If the myth in the Spanish colonies was that the Indians were like children who needed someone to govern them, the myth in the English colonies was that the Indians were nonpeople; they didn't exist, their lands were a vacuum. In north Georgia, in the middle of Cherokee County, there is a monument to a white man who was, so the monument says, "the first man to settle in these parts." And this, in a county that is still called "Cherokee"! This contrast in the colonizing process led to a "border" mentality in Mexico and much of Latin America, and a "frontier" mentality in the United States.[20]

The violence of conquest in Latin America thus did not exclude the possibility of *mestizaje* (racial-cultural mixture). Even if often through the violent raping of indigenous women, a mixing of indigenous and European races took place that would mark the history of Latin America until today. The wounds of Latin American history could not be erased, for they were inscribed on the mestizo faces of its people, in their language, cultures, and religions. U.S. Hispanics cannot escape their dangerous memories, however hard some may try; the memories make demands of everyone, including the victims. At some profound level, all Hispanics know that Latin America is the child of violence, the European conquistador and the indigenous mother:

> Hispanics . . . always knew that our ancestors were not guiltless. Our Spanish ancestors took the lands of our Indian ancestors. Some of our Indian ancestors practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism. Some of our Spanish forefathers raped our Indian foremothers. Some of our Indian foremothers betrayed their people in favor of the invaders. It is not a pretty story. But it is more real than the story that white settlers came to this land with pure motivations, and that any abuse of its inhabitants was the exception rather than the rule. It is also a story resulting in a painful identity.[21]

Hispanics are, in turn, a dangerous memory for the United States, the cost of U.S. economic and political expansion, however liberating this may have been. Whether through the annexation of half of Mexico in 1848, through the U.S. victory in the Spanish-

American War, or though the so-called stabilization of Central American countries under the U.S. Marines, the United States has laid the groundwork for its economic and political successes—and for the waves of Latin American immigration that so many now perceive as threatening. But an acknowledgment of this fact would necessarily call into question the United States' very identity as the New Jerusalem. "It is precisely in that willful innocence," warns Justo González, "that guilt lies."[22] "The reason why this country has refused to hear the truth in its own history," he continues, "is that as long as it is innocent of such truth, it does not have to deal with the injustices that lie at the heart of its power and its social order."[23] The reason that the wounds must be exposed and the dangerous memories recalled is not to ascribe blame to some while exonerating others. The reason is that only when we are honest about our present and past reality can we more effectively bring our future reality into harmony with our national ideals. (After all, repressed memories live on under the surface and continue to resurface in barbaric ways, such as attacks against immigrants and anyone whose existence recalls those dangerous memories.) To serve as just such a reminder is, according to González,

> one of our functions as a Hispanic minority in this country. It is not a pleasant function, for few love those who destroy the myths by which they live. But it is a necessary function that we must courageously fulfill. . . . In our country, such guilty innocence is the handmaiden of injustice. Injustice thrives on the myth that the present order is somehow the result of pure intentions and a guiltless history. . . . Perhaps once we are agreed that we are all *ladrones* [thieves], it will be easier for all of us to see more clearly into issues of justice.[24]

Perhaps our country will treat its Latinos and Latinas differently when it acknowledges that the Hispanic presence here, in U.S. cities and towns, is a direct result of this country's progress. Can our society admit that that progress, however extraordinary, has nevertheless come at great cost, a cost that our entire nation is currently paying—whether in the physical poverty of our blighted inner cities, the spiritual poverty of our gated suburbs, or our national estrangement from such a large portion of humanity?

JESUS CHRIST: THE WAY, THE TRUTH, AND THE LIFE

Of its very essence, then, the truth of Christ's claims (and the claims of Christians through the ages) is an embodied truth—namely, that of the crucified and risen Lord who continues to accompany us today. The Christian faith is an inherently sacramental faith; it exists only in embodied, incarnate form. The paradigm of that embodiment is the Christ who presented himself to his disciples after the resurrection, wounded yet glorified. Christ invited the disciples to acknowledge a peculiar kind of truth, one that could be known only insofar as they were willing to participate in it—that is, only insofar as they were willing to place their hands in his wounds, acknowledge their complicity in his crucifixion, receive Christ's forgiveness, and then sit down to break bread with him. To know the truth is to become a participant in the life of the crucified and risen Christ, which in turn implies a participation in the lives of those peoples who are themselves crucified victims, those whose wounded bodies are the mirrors of our souls.

The task of the remainder of this book is to explore some of the implications of this assertion. I suggest that, while many of those implications have been either forgotten or ignored in Euro-American Catholicism, they remain visible in U.S. Latino/a Catholic communities. Consequently, the popular religious practices of U.S. Latinos and Latinas are a vital resource for a U.S. Catholic Church struggling to find ways of proclaiming the truth of Christ in our contemporary, twenty-first-century context.

However, as I further suggest, the significance of U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism cannot be appreciated within a liberal-conservative ideological spectrum. More importantly, the truth of the Christian faith cannot be adequately proclaimed and articulated within such an ideological context; in both its liberal and conservative variants, U.S. Catholicism remains beholden to a fundamentally rationalistic worldview incapable of appreciating the fundamentally participatory character of the Christian truth. The contemporary conflict between liberals and conservatives in the U.S. Catholic Church is a conflict between siblings whose common progenitor is an Enlightenment rationalism suspicious of bodily, lived existence.

I set forth this argument by placing into conversation what I consider three of the most important contemporary resources for articulating a participatory understanding of Jesus Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. These resources are U.S. Latino/a popular Catholicism, Latin American liberation theology, and theological aesthetics. At their best, all three represent dangerous memories of a sacramental faith that makes demands on us: faith in the crucified and risen Christ.