

OUR SALVATION IN JESUS CHRIST

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Introduction

We Salvatorian men and women have been called to give witness to Jesus Christ the Savior by all the ways and means he inspires in us. In this sense, the term *Salvator mundi* names what is essential to our spirituality and the content of the evangelizing message we proclaim in so many places on the planet. Because of this, it is important to specify what is understood by *salvation* and by Jesus Christ as *Savior*, in order to harmonize the basic content of our proclamation with the ways to present him as Savior of humanity. This text intends, therefore, to reflect in a broad way on the mystery of Jesus as the one who makes available the salvation of the human being in a particular and evocative way. It is not an exhaustive study of the term salvation as found in the Bible nor in systematic theology; rather it is a reflection on the salvation to which we Salvatorians are called to witness and announce. That is, this is an attempt to develop a Salvatorian perspective on Christian salvation that permits us to affirm our desire to be followers and proclaimers of Him who saves us.

1. The hope of salvation

The human being longs to be saved

There are many understandings about human salvation. To be saved can be understood as freeing oneself of something, to be exempted from a punishment, to be kept from a tragedy, to be rescued from some suffering, to be relieved of a sorrow or disgrace. In truth, in light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, to be saved is all of this and much more. It could be said that salvation is constituted by the great hope of humanity, of human beings who relate to the divine. A relationship with God, therefore, is what nurtures persons with the hope of salvation.

Salvation, as a result, is about freedom from death, from condemnation and from human ruin. To be saved implies developing the dynamics that permit one to live life in accord with the aim of why one was created, envisioned, and received. We human beings receive life as a free gift from God and we have been called to live it totally and fully. The plan of salvation is the happiness of each individual in relationship with one's neighbors and with God. To be saved, in the end, means deploying the potentialities of existence itself in a way that responds to the expectations of the creator and master of life.

From the above one can conclude that not being saved means to squander, dishonor, destroy and lose the precious gift of life that each person has received. Based on Judeo-Christian faith it is necessary to add that being saved means being justified; that is, giving life its highest meaning and dignity, ratifying its transcendent and divine character, living it in a way that the Father creator can be proud of his human creature.

Salvation based on biblical revelation

It is possible to affirm that for the people of God in the Old Testament, the hope of salvation was defined by the divine gift of the reestablishment of the people in all its aspects (Zechariah 10:9-12).¹ Israel needed to recover the conditions needed in order to become, once again, the people with whom God had established a covenant of love and for whom God had intervened in a special salvific way from Abraham to the reign of David.² For that reason, the land, the social and religious institutions, the priesthood, governance, and prophecy, as well as the

¹ See KAISSER, Walter, *Hacia una teología del Antiguo Testamento*, Editorial Vida, Miami, 2000.

² See VON RAD, Gerhard, *Teología del Antiguo Testamento I*, Sígueme, Salamanca, 1993, 435-436.

ethical behavior of each Israelite, would become a constitutive part of their identity and highest ideals. Consequently, Jewish hope was based on the loving action of Yahweh who would permit the gathering of the dispersed, their reorganization as a people and their close relationship with Him as their only God. Yahweh would send his Messiah as a confirmation of this social, political and religious restoration.³ Yahweh then would reestablish everything; that is, their life, their land, their people, their institutions, their hearts (Isaiah 26: 19).⁴

In Jesus' time, those who belonged to Jewish culture shared the hope of a salvation that is a response to the great realities that affect human existence and destabilize their interpersonal and social relationships. These realities are illness and sin. Salvatorian is about two situations that touch both the corporal and spiritual dimensions of the person and end up conditioning Christian hope in reference to the need for health and of forgiveness. In this sense, salvation is found especially linked to life and the expectations of the poor and suffering of Israel. Consequently Jesus presents the poor, widows, orphans, foreigners, sinners, publicans and prostitutes as the privileged ones of the Kingdom of God that has been awaited and now has come.

In Christian terms, therefore, salvation is related to seeing God, encountering Him, experiencing Him as a powerful and strong God who is on the side of those who believe and surrender themselves to Him. This seeing, experiencing, encountering and relating to God will be expressed in human history but its definitive manifestation will be in the future of human beings. This is to say that human salvation, in light of our faith, and thanks to divine revelation in the Sacred Scriptures, has three dimensions: past, present and future. Since God is our beginning, guarantor and goal, God constitutes our salvation; that is, we are saved by God in Jesus Christ (yesterday), God continues to save us each day of our present history (today) and we will be saved in a definitive way after our death (tomorrow and forever). By means of these three dimensions, salvation is expressed as promise and fulfillment, as gift and task, as call and response, as seeking and finding. The above indicates that salvation is comprised of a type of existential horizon that marks life, sustains our daily existence and gives meaning to all that can happen to the human being.

Every person is called to be saved

If salvation is a gift of God given to the human creature, then this implies that God himself has placed within every human being the capacity to seek and attain this gift. We have been created to be saved. God wants that human beings be saved (1 Timothy 2:4); he wants that none of his children be lost (1 John 2:2), that everyone has eternal life (John 3:16). For that reason, every person, every believer, is called to follow the way of salvation, that is to say, to live life in full measure, to await actively the daily action of God as well as his definitive manifestation in the eternal kingdom.

To be called to salvation and to seek this salvation requires the cultivation of such qualities as courage, wisdom, faithfulness and existential coherence in respect to God who creates us, loves us, and saves us. God has made us capable of salvation. For that reason, theological tradition has spoken about humankind as *capax Dei*; and this capacity for salvation is taken from the capacity for divinization that God has given us. The gift of salvation has enabled us so that we do not to let ourselves be vanquished or annihilated by anything or anyone: "Who will separate us from the love God?" (Romans 8:35-39) In truth, the Christian is raised up in the hour of tribulation; it is in difficulty and suffering that we, who believe in God, become stronger (see 2

³ This can be the meaning of the narrative of the dry bones recounted by Ezekiel (37:1ff).

⁴ A recurring term in some prophets is "Offshoot" and "Servant": Zechariah 3:8-9; 6:12; which came from Isaiah 4:2; 53:7 and Jeremiah 6:12.

Corinthians 12:10). This means that we are capable of giving salvific meaning to everything that happens to us.

As a consequence, faith in the God who saves us implies accepting with courage that which in any moment of life can affect our integrity, harmony, wellbeing, or peace. Saving one's life carries with it personal processes of self-worth and actualization, communal processes of recognition and integration, as well as social processes of emancipation and integral liberation. Human salvation corresponds to those dynamisms that humanize, promote, dignify, renew and honor life in all of its dimensions or expressions. In that way, the struggle against injustice, inequality, exclusion and violence become the search for a life that is saved.

2. Jesus Christ our Savior

Given the greatness of freedom, human beings discover the possibility of living life at the margin of the Divine promise of the attainment of the fullness of life and refrain from embracing this promise, i.e., by not knowing God or by doing without God and opposing or rejecting God. This reality is revealed over the course of human history and is discerned at the moment when Jesus of Nazareth breaks into our personal and collective history in a new and decisive way. Jesus reveals a God who is present and active not only in our favor – as Israel believed – but also, a God who is *in us* and *with us*: the true *Emmanuel*. In this sense one can affirm that Jesus manifests himself as the one who desires to restore the human condition, integrate it and dignify it at its roots, that is, in its divine dignity received from the Creator himself.

We need to recall that according to the Judeo-Christian tradition God has always been involved in human history, in the history of the people, in concrete history. Nonetheless, Jesus brings us even closer to the mystery of the saving God by manifesting in a crucial and decisive way the nearness of that God within the mystery of the human being. Jesus reminds us that we were conceived by the saving God for happiness, complete fulfillment, salvation and that through the course of history we got lost due to our pursuit of solely superfluous or trivial interests. As a result, He reveals to us the deeper meaning of the human condition and takes us out of the depths of dehumanization in order to give us again the dignity of being sons and daughters of God. A dehumanized or precarious life is a sign of distance or separation from God. As the one who reveals the Father, Jesus manifests the truth about the human being, about the Church and about God himself.

The ways and means Jesus uses to make the God who saves us accessible to him are those used for human mediation: words and actions. Thus, Jesus is acknowledged as the Son of God and as God himself in person due to what he does and to what he says about God, in a way that does not spare anything so that in his life, God the Trinity, from whom he has received everything, can be perceived and experienced. It can be said that: seeing the preaching and praxis of Jesus in the midst of his people, there was no other option for those who were his eyewitnesses than to confess him as the God who saves with us and in us.

Sharing the Jewish faith of his time, Jesus of Nazareth establishes a new way of understanding God and of relating to Him. Our God has not forgotten his people; rather he has come, he has broken into history in an unprecedented and transformational way, making himself present no longer in the national history of a people nor in a natural and impersonal way. God has arrived to reign in all the dimensions of human existence and of history: personal, communal, social, and cosmic. As believers in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we acknowledge that in Him, God is saving the world and consequently those who live in that world; that, as a result, He is the savior of humanity, of every man and every woman open to that hope.

Jesus Christ is our Savior

This is the truth of our faith: in Jesus Christ humanity has been saved. But it is necessary to have in mind that the salvation to which Jesus gives us access, comes from the other side of history, beyond the Jewish expectations of a powerful king. God truly breaks into our history as a loving and just God, like a beloved Father.⁵ He does not manifest his power as domination but rather as love that saves every human being. His power is service and generous self-giving. Given that this divine salvation spills over the boundaries of the chosen people, Israel, and is extended to every man and woman of every people and nation, the means used by Jesus to make his salvific work comprehensible will be those situations in which every person can find him or herself easily at any time: poverty, illness, the suffering that comes from exclusion.

The salvation of God in Jesus Christ does not come to us from the courts of the kings of the earth, from the majestic temple of the Jews nor from the centers of power and knowledge of the era. Salvation comes in Jesus, a common Nazarene and a peasant who is marginalized and of little prestige to his people. The gospels relate this and some studies of the historical Jesus delve into this.⁶ The salvation that Jesus brings to us is a salvation that comes from the peripheries of humanity, from the early stages of history, from the humbleness of a manager and the loud cry from a cross; all at the margins of history. Jesus accepts freely, without self-interest and lovingly this divine plan of salvation: "I lay down my life on my own" (see John 10:17-18). This means that our liberty and our responsibility are implicated in the realization of our concrete salvation and in the salvation of all humanity.

Jesus brings us near to the God who saves us and establishes for us a life that is truly saved by taking on the fullness of our human condition in order to expiate the sin of all human beings (Hebrews 2:5-18; Philippians 2:6-11). For that reason he is the only mediator between the God who saves and us human beings. He saves because of his existence beyond sin, that is to say, beyond the lack of loving. Jesus unmask sin and announces a life without sin, that is, a life in the process of conversion and of commitment to overcome social sin that threatens our being sons and daughters of God as well as threatens a world in which God lives, reigns and loves. Consequently, whoever believes in Jesus has the certainty that only by living his/her life in the style of Jesus—that is, carrying one's cross with Jesus—is one able to be saved, because love alone saves. This is what comprises the *following* Jesus, to which each of us is called in order to be saved.⁷ We know Jesus to the extent that we follow him, and in this process of following is how we come to know the true God,⁸ the one who gives us eternal life and saves us. Perhaps this is the meaning of the text that Fr. Jordan extracted from the Gospel of John in order to stress Jesus Christ as the Savior (John 17:3).

⁵ KASPER, Walter. *Jesús, el Cristo. Sígueme*, Salamanca, 1978. Kasper affirms: "...he [Jesus] shares in God's almighty power, which consists of love" (p. 135) (in English: *Jesus the Christ*, London/New York: Burns & Oates/Paulist Press, 1976, p. 110).

⁶ Cf. MEIER, John P. *Un judío marginal. Nueva visión del Jesús histórico. Tomo I: Las raíces del problema y de la persona*. Verbo Divino, Estella, 2ª ed., 1998 (in English: *A marginal Jew*. Doubleday-Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1991). CROSSAN, John Dominic. *El Jesús de la historia. Vida de un campesino judío*. Crítica, Barcelona, 2ª ed. 2007 (in English: CROSSAN, J.D. *The historical Jesus. The life of a mediterranean Jewish peasant*. San Francisco: Harper, 1991). PAGOLA, José Antonio, *Jesús, Aproximación histórica*, PPC, Madrid, 8ª edición, 2008.

⁷ We know Jesus in the measure that we follow him, and in this process of following is how we come to know the true God, the one who gives us eternal life and saves us. Perhaps this is the meaning of the text that Fr. Jordan has taken from the gospel of John to emphasize Jesus as Savior (John 17:3).

⁸ This refers to following as a way marked by theory and praxis that makes authentic faith possible: See SOBRINO, Jon, *La fe en Jesucristo. Ensayo desde las víctimas*. Trotta, Madrid, 3ª Ed. 2007 (in English: *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). Here Sobrino affirms: "Outside the following of Jesus, in my view, we have no sure means of knowing what we are talking about when we confess Jesus Christ" (Sobrino, Sp. p. 455; Eng. p. 324).

To confess that Jesus Christ saves us means therefore to recognize Jesus as the one in whom God and humanity are being reconciled.⁹ He reminds us or he restores us to our condition of being sons and daughters of God. For that reason by believing, loving, following and knowing Jesus Christ every person recovers the best of his/her human condition, the grandeur of his or her divine parentage. This relationship to God will open to us new relationships with our peers and permit us to contribute to the construction of a humanity that is reconciled, just, brotherly and sisterly, and peaceful.

3. We Participate and cooperate in the work of salvation today

Preaching and praxis in the manner of the Divine Savior

According to the biblical accounts Jesus saves through his praxis and his message, through his death and his resurrection; that is, by living his humanity fully, assuming the human condition with depth and radically. He saves us by working, struggling daily, making the effort to understand life and the world, committing himself to comprehend the people of his time, sharing with the lowliest, suffering with those who suffer, liberating and encouraging the downcast, helping the needy that came to him, facing undeserved contempt, enduring the torment of death. And he saves us in a definitive way thanks to the response the Father gives to his life and to his mission by the resurrection. That is, Jesus Christ has saved us by living his humanity fully through his acts of justice, in which he fulfilled the salvific plan of the Father, thanks to the decisive action of the Holy Spirit in Him.¹⁰ God does not save us from a special realm and outside of human history, rather from within its core. For that reason we do not have to think that being saved means going out of our historical confines; rather, better, it is accepting them with loftiness and responsibility, in the manner of Jesus.

The traits and specific emphases of our way of following and proclaiming Jesus Christ are taken from the preaching and praxis through which Jesus brings us near to God and his Kingdom. Consequently, we our mission is to help the persons with whom we live and work have a deep and transformative experience of God. Jesus restores human dignity in all of its expressions; he approaches all persons and acknowledges them, embraces them and values them. Jesus listens to them and looks at them; he touches them and raises them up; he reinstates them and reintegrates them into society. Based on this, our evangelizing praxis ought to enable others to have the conviction and the joy of believing in Jesus as the Divine Savior, who, in return, gives us the desire to live the pleasure and passion for life.

Jesus preferred the means, situations and attitudes of the poor and excluded of his people as a pledge of the universality of the Kingdom of God. For that reason our evangelizing action should always take on the cause of the poor. They ought to remain at the center of our struggles: “You always have the poor with you” (John 12:8). Our option for the poor implies the struggle to overcome poverty and its dehumanizing characteristics produced by extreme material need. It also requires the recognition of and commitment to persons who have closed themselves off from God and who by their injustice, corruption, selfishness, exclusion and hatred (signs of sin) generate and nurture despair and suffering in so many men and women. It was through his option for the poor that Jesus expressed the universality of divine love, the universality of salvation. The models for entering the Kingdom of salvation are the poor who are able to have God as their only absolute, the small ones who due to their weakness and vulnerability cannot dominate or humiliate others, and the sinner who dares to repent and be converted, expressing in that way the loving and transforming power of our God.

⁹ “...God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ...” (2 Corinthians 5:19)

¹⁰ In my judgment, this is the meaning of Paul’s message in Titus 3:4-7.

To be witnesses of salvation presupposes believing and loving the Son of God, being at the side of the Savior and becoming close to him, knowing and following him as the only Savior. Based on this conviction we go to the human frontiers with the firm desire to share with all men and women the greatness, the truth, the benefit of faith in Jesus Christ the Savior. Our mission is to continue the mission of the Savior, that is, to cooperate in the saving work of Jesus: to be saved, to save one another, to help others be saved and to contribute to the salvation of the world. In truth this is the mission of the entire Church (LG, 8).¹¹ But Francis Jordan has given us a particular aspect insisting that we do this by means of the spoken, and written word and by our actions; by being apostles and promoting the apostolic life in all believers; by giving witness to evangelical unity and dedication (apostolic zeal); by living simply and giving priority to work with the poor, children, and youth; by going to those places where the experience of salvation is most needed, publicly and from house to house (Rule of 1884).

The ways and means that the Savior used to bring the Kingdom of God closer inspire our proclamation of salvation. Jesus' recourse to parables poses the need for us to grasp as clearly as possible the mystery of salvation so that we can transmit it in an understandable way to people of all times and places. This demands of us ongoing theological preparation and updating. The remarkable signs of the Kingdom by means of Jesus' miracles pose for us the challenge of attending to the deepest needs of persons today helping them overcome the situations of blindness in face of dehumanizing realities, of abasement that impedes advancement towards the realization of their full humanity, of instability both personal and social, of suffering of whatever type, and of premature death. This requires of us attention to our personal, family and social history in order to be able to give proper witness of faith and of salvation today. In our interest in the worth and full realization of persons as well as our constant reference to the God who has been revealed in Jesus, the attitudes of simplicity of life and joy of heart, prophetic creativity and courage should characterize our apostolic mission today.

We give witness of salvation here and now

As Salvatorians the mission (task) and charism (trait) of following and proclaiming the Savior demands that we acquire clarity in respect to the mystery of the salvation of humanity that has been concretized in the incarnation and total self-giving of the Son in our own history, with all of its grandness and failure.

Being witnesses of salvation carries enormous challenges and consequences in favor of human life at all of its levels. At the individual level it implies an untiring interest in promoting processes of self-realization and personal wholeness, which presumes a holistic human liberation (spiritual, material, rational). At the communal level it means the constant promotion of the dynamics of the renewal of life that we construct together. At the social level it implies betting on processes of reconciliation and inter-human coexistence that assure the maximum wellbeing of men and women. To be Salvatorians requires putting ourselves on the side of life, justice, solidarity, reconciliation, and nonviolence. Our proclamation of salvation therefore is related to the concern for health, education, rights, the economy, politics, culture and science; that is, with the task of being builders of a new and better society.

All of the above launches us to the ongoing task of discerning the best means and strategies that will help many to come to the Savior in a close and transforming way. Among our evangelizing strategies are: providing a formal education that permits contributing to the building of a world saved by Jesus Christ; furthering catechetical instruction that nurtures deep conviction and

¹¹ According to Vatican Council II, the Church is the living instrument of the salvation brought by Jesus, as a result "the Church is called to follow the same route [of the Savior] that it might communicate the fruits of salvation to men" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 8).

commitment to faith in the Lord; offering formation to the religious conscience that carries with it overcoming clericalism, infantilism, and Christian indifference that is rooted in some sectors of our Church. Formation in all the dimensions of our complex humanity would help all faithful Christians to understand and assume the salvation that Jesus Christ has brought us as an expression of the integral realization of the person and the establishment of a world where God reigns by loving and renewing all that exists. This implies also a commitment to liberation from all that dehumanizes the person, destroys our planet and threatens the possibility of life of coming generations. To be witnesses of salvation in Jesus Christ would be in the end, to offer persons and communities motives to live life with meaning, insisting on social reconciliation and revitalizing hope in a different and better world for everyone.

Questions for reflection

1. Reread the Charter of the Salvatorian Family in light of this article.
 - a. Take note of the words or phrases that call your attention and ask yourself: “what is this saying to me and how will I respond?”
 - b. What might be some of the implications for the Salvatorian Family in your region or globally?
2. In light of this article, if you were to revise the Charter of the Salvatorian Family, what would you add or change?
3. What concrete experience of universality have I had? Does this experience contribute to my personal growth?
4. “Work for the salvation of souls” (Father Jordan). What does this mean for me/us in this time? How would I translate this in today’s language?