

The Postmodern Crossroads of Theology in Mexico

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0. A Couple of Anecdotes to Begin

Barely two months ago, Mexico City's Azteca Stadium was the scene of a large-scale event organized by the Legionaries of Christ's lay movement and financed by Televisa, a member of the television duopoly that controls digital media in Mexico. The crowds gathered as a public act of piety to celebrate the beatification of Pope John Paul II. Other media outlets—above all, the press, but also Internet TV and social networking sites—commemorated the day by recalling the impunity that persists in the Catholic Church for the cases of pedophilia, authoritarianism, and corruption that have hit Mexican society very close to home, seriously damaging its confidence in the credibility of the ecclesial institution. Such commemorative acts demonstrate one of the main ecclesial fractures that cut across Mexican society.

More recently, another face of the Church appeared in more than 80 cities in Mexico for the *March for Peace with Justice and Dignity*. The march was organized by the Catholic poet Javier Sicilia whose son, Juan Francisco, was brutally assassinated in Cuernavaca. He is one of the 40,000 dead and 10,000 that have gone missing in this country during the last four years. Mexico carries this burden on its shoulders, not knowing what can be done to stop such violence. This march brought together more than 200,000 citizens in Mexico City alone, in addition to smaller groups, many of which were symbolic, that marched in 80 other cities across the country and the world. Also noteworthy is the fact that a large number of the organizers were *Catholics working in civil organizations* of every kind. The outcry of the masses was an appeal to the Mexican president—incidentally, a practicing Catholic—to listen to the people and modify his militarization strategy. This strategy has unhinged and broken the fragile balance that existed between drug cartels, businessmen, the military, the government, the citizens, and churches. This is another fracture that cuts through the nation like a seismic fault.

You might think that news such as this has little to do with an international meeting on Catholic theology. You might wonder if we have returned to the liberationist and progressive zeal of the century just past. Or maybe some of you can resonate with my reflection today that begins with these stories of *lived theology*.

What I wish to propose in this forum is a *complex scenario* in which theology in Mexico is challenged today to find an appropriate method and consistent practice to contemplate the mystery of God acting in history and also to communicate faith in Jesus Christ as Redeemer of humanity.

1. The Anticlerical Cultural Context

The Church in Mexico finds itself approaching the 500th anniversary, to be celebrated in 2019, of the arrival of the Gospel to our land. After the collapse of the Aztec empire and the Spanish conquest that followed, the long and painful *mestizaje* resulted in a cultural and religious hybrid that has marked the viceregal history before and after the modern period. The Church was, at times, mother and master—above all, in the Guadalupan event—but it also was a stepmother and harlot of disproportionate wealth.

This historical narrative set the scene for the practice of theology in Mexico. In fact, during the Viceroyalty era (16th-18th centuries), the *Real y Pontificia Universidad de México* charted the course of cultural life—above all, in terms of the arts and sciences—with such prominent professors as the philosopher, Fray Alonso de la Veracruz, OSA; the moral economist, Fray Tomás de Mercado, OP, with his *Suma de tratos y contratos* cited so frequently at that time in Europe; and the distinguished astronomer Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, friend of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

When modern ideas began to appear in the 18th century, the servant and, at the same time, powerful Church censored their development until the crisis of the separation of church and state. It was this which, in the 19th century, destroyed the church in Mexico, just as it did in many other parts of the world. The example of the expulsion of the Jesuits was emblematic of this conflict of ideas and political power under Bourbon rule.

Liberal ideas were harshly attacked in the 19th century, until independence was won and the liberals' triumph imposed Neoclassicism and a liberal education, making way for the nation's cultural modernization. The enormous network of convent schools—many of them Jesuit but also Dominican, Franciscan, and Augustinian—that had been the very fabric of viceregal culture came apart at the seams. Schools dedicated to mining, medicine, accounting, and law began to appear, devoid of the seal of Christian thought. The separation of church and state contested by Pope Pius IX was especially stringent in Mexico. During the liberal era championed by President Juárez, the Church that gave rise to the rich splendor of Mexican Baroque became a mere pauper.

In the 20th century, a religiously devout society coexisted with an anticlerical government that subjected the Catholic Church to silence in the public sphere and coerced it into *de facto* negotiations with local, regional, and national authorities. In Mexico, the Cristero War signified a crucible, a genuine purification of faith, for the simple working class whose well-to-do bishops—save a few honorable exceptions—abandoned them to their own devices.

2. A Complex Ecclesial Diversity

Such vicissitude in modern Mexican history explains the 19th- and 20th-century break with a tradition of Catholic thought that did not begin to be restored until after the Cristero War (1926-1929) and the modernizing momentum of the Mexican political and economic system. In the 1950s, Marianists, Lasallians, and Jesuits began to establish *universities of Christian inspiration*. A Catholic university was unthinkable in Mexico until after President Salinas's controversial 1992 reforms.

Theological studies in 20th-century Mexico were basically reserved for the clergy in such distinguished seminaries as those in Puebla, Guadalajara, and Zamora, with the painful exile to the United States's Montezuma Seminary in New Mexico after the Cristero War and its aftermath in the 1930s. These theological studies were always recognized by the Church but not by the State. In the midst of such contrived coexistence, the Jesuits had managed, since the 1870s, to attain state recognition of theological studies under the name "religious sciences." Thus, for decades, the teaching of Catholic theology in Mexico was confined to the ecclesial sphere.

In spite of this adverse cultural climate, beginning with Vatican II and its fecund reception in 1968 at the Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín, Colombia, centers of theological studies grew in number with the presence of the religious and laity. But this phenomenon didn't last long. For example, the *Instituto Teológico de Estudios Superiores, ITES* (Theological Institute of Higher Studies), which taught theology with a return to original sources and a marked emphasis on liberation, existed scarcely 15 years. The *Centro de Comunicación Social, CENCOS* (Social Communication Center), that was founded by bishops and the laity was later disavowed by the episcopate for its critical stance toward the Mexican economic and political system. Similarly, the *Sociedad Teológica Mexicana* (Mexican Theological Society) was dissolved, and the experiences of engagement, theological reflection, and commitment to social change were confined to a purely ecclesial context.

During John Paul II's pontificate, however, there was a flourishing of neo-apologetic lay and consecrated life movements. They sought to reconstruct Christianity and, in particular, the presence of the institutional Church in public spheres such as education, politics, and the media. In the Mexican context, the most notable are *Regnum Christi*, the apostolic movement affiliated with the *Legionaries of Christ*; the numeraries and supernumeraries of *Opus Dei*; and some members of *Community and Liberation*. These had more of a presence in university and educational circles than did other pastorally-minded groups like the *Focolare* or the Neocatechumenates founded by Spaniard Kiko Argüello. During this time in Mexico, new religious congregations were also born to defend the faith against so-called sects. With missionary and popular, communal appeal, these communities promoted a neo-apologetic theology that had little real doctrinal or theological value.

One particular phenomenon that affected Catholic theology's development in Mexico was the canonical visitation to the nation's centers of religious studies by the *Congregation for Religious Life* in the 1990s. Its objective was clear: to uncover those sources that were perverting traditional theology by incorporating the concepts of liberation theology. Course curricula were examined, as were the profiles of professors, administrators, and their relationships with sociopolitical stakeholders. The consequences of this visitation by the Congregation were complex. On the one hand, it diminished the teaching of liberation theology with the disciplining of its leading proponents. However, on the other hand, it inspired the development of theological reflection through other lenses such as that of the migrant, the indigenous, and sexual minorities, as well as the ecological and feminist perspectives. It is important to underscore the laity's role in this social and epistemological transition. Particularly noteworthy are the laity's ethical commitment and astute analysis of the realities of the faith applied to the secular world.

3. The Road Ahead for Theology Today

More than simply recounting the difficulties and progress of theology in Mexico, I would like to suggest now a few core focal points that are, in my opinion, essential to the rejuvenation and vitality of Catholic theology.

3.1 Differentiated Academic Formation

Since ITES closed in the 1980s, separate theological institutions have existed according to the different types of students being educated: seminarians, religious women, religious men, and the laity. This institutional fragmentation has tremendously weakened the development of a distinctly Catholic academic theology

in Mexico. For that reason, strong theological thought that is rooted in the local context is only just beginning to evolve. Although, there are, in fact, always a few goodly trespassers who manage to scale these walls at the U.S.-Mexico border, for example.

For our part, the *Unión de Instituciones Teológicas Católicas en México* (UITCAM), which I currently serve as president, has set out to take the steps necessary to overcome such historical differences. As of today, we have eight members, all institutions of higher education that teach Catholic theology in Mexico City at the undergraduate level and postgraduate theology in both the state and ecclesial spheres. We represent a university community of close to 800 students, 120 professors, and 4 academic theological journals: *Anámnesis* of the Dominican Friars of the Province of Santiago de México; *Efemérides Mexicana* of the Universidad Pontificia de México; *Revista Iberoamericana de Teología* of the Universidad Iberoamericana Ciudad de México; and *Voces. Revista de Teología Misionera* of the Universidad Intercontinental. Additionally, there is one annual publication, *Libro anual del ISEE*.

UITCAM was born 10 years ago with the idea of creating an American-style consortium (e.g., GTU), but that model did not correspond to the national context in Mexico. After a time of hibernation, two years ago, UITCAM revived its directive to find channels for promoting a progressive academic cooperation through standardization and approval of courses, instructor exchanges, interlibrary loans, and common lines of investigation. For a start, eight years ago UITCAM began publishing the *Bienial teológica* with a definite impact on both academia and public opinión. Similarly, we organize student/alumni society meetings every two years. We also established the Fray Pedro de la Peña OP Medal, an award named for the first theology professor in Mexico in 1575 and that honors an instructor for his/her Catholic theology teaching career. Recently, we've also begun to produce various joint publications.

The canonical difficulties are serious insofar as they impede students of diverse ecclesial identities from enrolling regularly in the concerned theological institutions. The differences between the institutions for religious men and women and, laity and clergy, for example, are a stumbling block on the road to strengthening a healthy Catholic theology that is also ecclesial, critical, and faithful to the living tradition of the Church.

3.2 Theological Thought in the Public Arena: The Urgent Question of Violence

Despite this adverse institutional panorama, the fact that Catholics have joined social movements (such as [advocacy] for naturalization, the indigenous, women, migrants, and the LGBTTI community) has been one of the *theological loci* of the greatest

Christian commitment within Catholic theological reflection in Mexico. The lay and women's movements have been particularly important.

Currently in Mexico, Catholics organize or participate in over 100 centers that promote human rights, social development, health, and education. And these organizations are in frequent dialogue with other Christian communities and the secular world. They carry out their work generating along the way their own theological reflection from the experience of being engaged in the world.

The main contributions of these organizations can be found in their *reflexive vitality* and not so much in the framework of academic formation available to church leaders. Publications by organizations such as *Centro de Comunicación Social* (CENCOS), *el Centro Antonio de Montesinos*, (CAM), *el Instituto de Doctrina Social Cristiana*, IMDOSOC (Institute of Social Christian Doctrine), and a few others are giving way to online publications like that of the *Asociación Teológica Ecuménica de México*, ATEM (Ecumenical Theological Association of Mexico), and has also given birth to the Mexican Association of Feminist Theologians. It's also especially important to stress the role, in recent years, of the journal *Conspiratio*. Published by Catholic intellectuals, its impact is growing significantly in national public debates.

The urgent question of violence imposes itself into every sphere as a *locus theologicus* during these times of apocalyptic rationality. On the other hand, theology becomes a mirror house of salvation that hinders the intelligence of a faith in which God redeems in the midst of the spiral of hate and violence.

One relevant tool to construct a hermeneutics of salvation during a time of collapse is the heuristic proposed 50 years ago by the mimetic theory of René Girard. This tool is not sufficient, however. While the ethics of discourse and the philosophy of liberation may have contributed new elements several decades ago, the disenchantment with their nihilist baggage which marks the younger generations is another sign of the times that we must carefully examine.

Moreover, the return, in these fragmented times, of apophatic theology with its nihilist backdrop could be one of the keys to pursuing the dialogue with postmodern culture across the globe. So, theology cannot relinquish contemplating and proclaiming that mysterious retracing of the real that is the unconditional, limitless Love fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

In this new scenario where a new model of rationality is in the making, it will be essential for theology to think through its method, its mediations, its hermeneutical keys, and its impact in the birthing of a globalized culture that can overcome violence.

3.3 Reconciliation with the Indigenous Peoples

Since the West first arrived on these shores, the indigenous peoples' resistance to old and new colonial domination has lasted for centuries. Beginning in 1974 with the providential *Congreso Indígena*, the modern consciousness of Mexico's indigenous population began to awaken. This meeting was organized in San Cristóbal de Las Casas in Chiapas to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the death of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, OP, the champion of Mexico's native people.

But the turning point for the indigenous voice and presence in the national and continental debate was 1992. This year marked the 500th anniversary of the beginning of the conquest of the Americas, and was, as Dussel noted, symbolic of the exclusion of "the other" instituted by a Eurocentric modernity. Beginning in 1992, the native peoples of Mexico and Latin America took back their voice. They began to make themselves heard first in the public forums but also in the Catholic Church and other Christian communities.

In the Catholic context, the *teología india* suffered an initial antagonism from the Roman Curia and also from some active Mexican church leaders linked to [institutions of] power and money. It has managed, however, to survive and bear its rich first fruits of *flor y canto*. It is ancestral wisdom transformed into symbol, life, a yearning for justice and social change that is sealed by the feast as the compassionate and joyful presence of God revealed by Christ Jesus. For this reason, the indigenous theology is a way of being *Iglesia autóctona*, faithful to the signs of the times proclaimed with Gospel audacity half a century ago by *Gaudium et Spes*. It is like a flourishing ceiba tree planted in the garden of God, rooted in ancestral wisdom and the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This tree is the true Word of God that is born in the indigenous heart and has allowed the native peoples to recover their dignity. It strengthens their heart just as it does their words and ethical/political actions and continues to shelter the people of God in its shade.

Symbolic rather than discursive and theoretical, this theology challenges Western rationality, particularly academic theology's Greco-Roman divisions, to search for new *sapiential syntheses* in the endless dialogue between faith and culture. This dialogue began with that first synthesis of Paul's Phariseeism with Greek universalism which gave birth to Christianity and other foundational traditions such as the Jerusalemite, Johannine, Antiochene, and Alexandrian.

4. In Conclusion

Lastly, it seems important here to emphasize a factor that has brought about a substantial change in the theological discussion in this era of globalization and exclusion. On one hand, the crisis of modernity brought into the postmodern theological debate a return to the fundamentals. This came with an appreciation of the universal value of Christianity's pre-modern achievements as well as its integral vision of the human person and the transcendent sense of its acts, a return [nonetheless] accompanied by a certain nostalgia for Christendom.

But on the other hand, this crisis puts before us a great, unprecedented challenge. It challenges us to *give a reason for Christian hope* in the midst of instrumental modernity without renouncing the gains of emancipation illustrated by human rights and the advancement of cultural and religious pluralism. We must search for the adequate conceptual framework to explain how salvation occurs in the violent and fragmented history of humanity.

That is why it is so urgent today to develop an in-depth dialogue with the rationalities of the South and the Far East to discern "what the Spirit says to the churches." If Catholic theology in our part of the world wants to nourish communities of the faithful in their *sequela Christi*, it is imperative to find the right categories of reflection, theological method, and analytical and practical mediations for our times.

Such is the state of postmodern theology that is so critical today in Mexico as in other corners of our common household [*nuestra casa común*].