A Vision of Catholicity (2/3)

Dr. Justo L. González

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ECLA)
Austin, TX
February, 2012

© Justo L. González
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
info@aeth.org

A Vision of Catholicity[1]

(2 out of 3)

When it comes to the matter of interculturality, and particularly of intercultural education and theological reflection, one question immediately arises: Is not the Christian faith only one, the same for all people, in all places and circumstances? If so, what justification is there for theology arising out of various ethnic perspectives and experiences? Will this not further divide a church which, if anything, is in need of greater unity?

Perhaps the answer to these questions is to be found in Scripture itself—in the variety of witnesses and perspectives which it encompasses within its canon.

Why does the New Testament include four different gospels? Wouldn't it be much simpler to have a single gospel, one bringing together all the teachings to be found in our present four? It certainly would save us much aggravation, as I found when as a high school student I sought to convert my classmates. Silvino, who had read some of the works of the Enlightenment, was quick to point out that the two genealogies in Matthew and Luke do not agree. On a particular occasion, when I had around me a group of attentive students listening to my testimony, he left me wordless by simply reading the various gospel accounts of the feeding of the multitude, and then asking how many times Jesus fed how many, with how many fishes and how many loaves. Others in my class were more receptive, but their questions were no less baffling. Marisol,

[1] At the request of the organizers of the conculstiation, much of this material in the second lecture has been taken from chapter 2 of my book *Out of Every Tribe and nation: Christian Theology at the Ethnic Roundtable* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

whose parents were divorced, asked why in one gospel divorce is absolutely forbidden, and in another an exception is made. And Juan José, perhaps at the instigation of Silvino, wanted to know if Jesus had said "blessed are the poor," or "blessed are the poor in spirit."

I was very excited when I found among my father's books an old "harmony of the gospels." Now I would be able to put them all together into a single coherent story, with no contradictions and no gaps! But I soon found out that the so-called "harmony" did not harmonize anything. On the contrary, it made the contrasts and the contradictions even more glaring. Where was Jesus born? How many years did he spend in his ministry? What was the order of events during that ministry? What did he actually say from the cross? Who were the first witnesses to his resurrection? The "harmony" simply served to show more clearly than ever that the gospels do not agree on these as well as on many other matters.

AETH

Why, then, did the early church decide to include four different gospels in its canon, thus subjecting later generations, not only to puzzlement, but to the ridicule of any who would take the time to see the contradictions between these four accounts? Was it that they were not aware of the differences among the four?

The truth is that the early church included these four gospels in the canon *precisely because they were different*. In the struggle against various Gnostic interpretations of Christianity which denied some of the crucial historical events of the life of Jesus, there was strength in the

argument that these four witnesses, while differing in detail, agreed on the crucial matters under attack. In a court of law, it is difficult to impugn a multiplicity of witnesses who, while differing in matters of detail, agree on the issue at hand. Indeed, if they agree in every detail their authority is questioned, for there is the likelihood that their testimony has been arranged beforehand. Likewise, in the debates of the second century, the church found support for its insistence on the historical events of the life of Jesus, and for its rejection of Gnostic speculations, precisely in this multiform witness of the four gospels.

The most explicit passage from ancient times defending the use of four gospels comes from Irenaeus, who was bishop of Lyon late in the second century, who argues for the authority of the four canonical gospels declaring that . . .

> since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the Church is scattered throughout all the world, and the 'pillar and ground' of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life; it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying all afresh. From which fact it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sitteth upon the cherubim, and contains all things, He who was manifested to men, has given us the Gospel under four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit.

Modern scholars have often ridiculed this passage, as if Irenaeus were building his argument on some magical connection based on the number four. Yet, there is much more to this passage. What Irenaeus is saying is not that, because there are four of this and four of that, there should also be four Gospels. What he is saying is rather that the witnesses to the Gospel must represent the entire *oikoumene* —the entire inhabited earth. Furthermore, this fourfold division of the *oikoumene* is not only geographical, but also chronological, for Irenaeus adds that there

are four "principal" or universal (again, "catholic") covenants throughout history. It is this universality of the Gospel, this catholicity of the faith, that requires the fourfold witness of the four gospels. This fourfold witness is part of its wholeness, its catholicity.

At this point it may be helpful to make a slight parenthesis in our argument, and discuss very briefly the original meaning of the term "catholic" as applied to the church and to its faith. Etymologically, the word "catholic" comes from two roots. One is *katá*, which means "according to" —as when the Gospel of Luke is called *katà loúkan*. The other is *holós*, meaning "the whole," is in "holography." Thus, the word *cath'holic* means "according to the whole." It was thus that it was first used in the Christian context, when early in the second century Ignatius of Antioch for the first time applied it to the church, thus speaking for the first time of the cath'holic church as opposed to the sects, each of which follows the opinion of a single teacher and particular group.

AETH

It was slightly more than half a century after Ignatius, that in the passage quoted earlier, Irenaeus is arguing that the cath'holicity of the church, that completeness which is an essential criterion of orthodoxy, requires the multiple witness of the four gospels. Indeed, those whom Irenaeus rejects as heretics are those "who represent the aspects of the Gospel as being either more in number than the aforesaid, or, on the other hand, fewer." Those who add new gospels of their own do so in order "that they may seem to have discovered more than is the truth."

The main point, however, is double: On the one hand, the multiform nature of the Gospel is to be preserved by the admission of the four canonical gospels. On the other, no more gospels are to be admitted, as if any innovator such as Valentinus had the liberty to create an entirely new version of the Gospel.

This is the original meaning of cath'holicity, of true universality, of being "according to the whole." Unfortunately, today when we speak of "universality" we tend to speak in terms of uniformity: something is "universal" because it can be applied equally anywhere. In this sense, "universality" becomes the opposite of "cath'holic" —"according to the whole"— which includes a diverse totality.

There is both a closure and an openness to such cath'holicity. The closure is evident, and eventually became the dominant element in the understanding of cath'holicity. People are not free to invent new doctrines as they see fit. What made this evident to Irenaeus was the historical character of the Christian faith. For Irenaeus, the faith was not so much a series of doctrines as it was a series of acts and promises of God. Such acts and promises cannot be changed. As the four gospels are the historical witness to the crucial events of the life of Jesus, they too cannot be changed.

Although in much of what I have said so far I have underscored the divergences among the four gospels, it is obvious that they were brought together into a single canon primarily because of

AETH

their convergences. And their central point of convergence is the historical Jesus. All of them, each in its own fashion, bear witness to Jesus and to the historical facts surrounding his life, teachings and work. In general, although often for other reasons, most Christians have accepted this element of closure, so that no new gospels can be added to the canon.

On the other hand, there is in this view of the canon an element of openness which we often miss. The multiplicity of the gospels implies that their witness can never be contained in a single, fixed expression. Throughout the ages, the multiplicity of the gospels has produced a discomfort similar to what I felt in my high school years. If there were only one gospel, things would be simpler. Hans Lietzmann has expressed the difficulties and the early attempted solutions quite well:

> The fact of there being four gospels, however, had its disadvantages. As far as the Church was concerned, there was only one gospel, only one message of God to mankind, and the question arose as to why it was divided up among four books. Further, why were there so many repetitions, and also incompatibilities and apparent contradictions, in the various gospels? Surely the ideal state of affairs would be one gospel in one book. That was perhaps the case in the earliest period when the Synoptic gospels were confined, each to different regions, some using one gospel and some another. Marcion had permitted only one gospel book to be used in his church. About A.D. 180 two men commenced a practice which the Church employs to-day, whenever popular preachers attempt to revitalize religion by teaching “Bible history”; out of the four records, they make a single text. The first to do this was bishop Theophilus of Antioch; his work has disappeared without trace. On the other hand, the second enjoyed great success: he was Tatian, a pupil of Justin. His gospel harmony of “the Four”, known as the Diatessaron, arranges sections of all four gospels as a continuous gospel story …
>
> Nevertheless the Church as a whole refused to accept any such abbreviation of the gospel texts. The struggle against the arbitrariness of Marcion and Gnosticism had shown her the value of a tradition founded on a good historical basis ... The four gospels

were thus kept intact.[2]

It is in this resistance to “abbreviation” that the value of the fourfold witness to the Gospel lies. Precisely because there are four gospels, irreducible to a single one, every attempt at systematizing the Gospel falls short of its goal, just as a true “harmony” of the four gospels is unattainable. There is always an element that is left aside, something needing correction.

If there were only one witness to the Gospel, one could claim that a particular exposition of the Christian faith encompasses all of it. But since there are these irreducible witnesses, it follows that by definition the true “cath’holic” faith is pluralistic. It is “according to the whole,” not in the sense that it encompasses the whole in a single, systematic, totally coherent unit, but rather in the sense that it allows for the openness, for the testimony of plural perspectives and experiences, which is implied in the fourfold canonical witness to the Gospel.

AETH

The multiplicity of the gospels implies that, although they do have great authority, they are not “fallen from heaven.” All of them are equally valid witnesses to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet each of them reflects the particular circumstances and perspectives of the Christian community in which it was born. This has implications, not only for our understanding of the gospels, but also for our understanding of the nature of biblical revelation. Precisely because there are four gospels, the authority of the Bible is different from the authority of a Greek oracle or of the Koran. The multiplicity of the gospels, all included in the single canon of the New Testament,

[2] *The Founding of the Church Universal,* vol. II of *A History of the Early Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1938), pp. 98-99.

means that no one of them, by itself, contains the total and final witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It also means that every witness to that Gospel takes place from a particular perspective, and reflects the concrete circumstances in which it takes place. Because there are four gospels, and they do not always agree among themselves, we are unable to claim that the New Testament was handed down from heaven in its final form, and that all we can do now is copy it over and over again.

This plural perspective of Scripture is exemplified by the fourfold witness to the Gospel, but not limited to it. On the contrary, throughout Scripture one finds a multiplicity of perspectives on the same issues and events. Already in the very first chapters of Genesis, there are two different accounts of creation. In one, God creates animals first, and humankind last (Gn. 1.24-24). In another, the man is created first, then the animals, and finally the woman (Gn. 2.7-8, 18-22). Obviously, both cannot be true in the sense of being a literal account of the order of creation. The same is the case throughout the Pentateuch, where several stories are repeated, although with different slants and details. Later, when the time comes to name a king, some texts tell us that this was the will of God (1 Samuel 9), and others say the opposite (1 Samuel 8). Indeed, throughout the historical books, there are several parallel accounts of a number of events, agreeing in the essential, but differing both in details and in the interpretation of the significance of the event.

AETH

When it came to telling the story of the beginning of creation, the ancient Israelites followed an interesting procedure. They collected stories and traditions that already circulated in the Near East, purged and adapted them so they would reflect Israel's understanding of God and of the world, and put them together into what eventually became sacred Scripture. Apparently, what was important to them was not the uniqueness of the story, but the uniqueness of God and the singleness of creation. For this reason, they ended up with more than one story about how the one God made the one creation. The tensions and contradictions among the stories apparently did not bother them, and they were quite ready to include the various stories within the one canon of Sacred Scripture.

Many modern scholars now tell us that these various stories had a multitude of origins, some having been borrowed by the people of Israel from other neighboring peoples. Apparently, some of these stories were more popular in a particular tribe or region. When the present text of Scripture was composed, these different stories were sometimes combined, and sometimes simply placed side by side —as in the case of the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and 2.

Clearly, once these stories came to form part of the sacred canon, first Jews and then Christians agreed that there was something normative about them. Soon there were efforts to coordinate the two, or to explain away the differences, or to say that there were actually two divine acts of creation.

AETH

What Christian orthodoxy most often did was to ignore the differences among these various stories, compile them into a single one that was different from any of the stories found in the sacred text, and implicitly claim that this one compiled story was the only orthodox possibility.

Such an understanding of the nature of Scripture and of catholicity has led, not only to the Scopes trial and to "scientific creationism," but also to a number of interesting incidents, such as the one told by a Sioux physician:

> A missionary once undertook to instruct a group of Indians in the truths of his holy religion. He told them of the creation of the earth in six days, and of the fall of our first parents by eating an apple.
>
> The courteous savages listened attentively, and, after thanking him, one related in his turn a very ancient tradition concerning the origin of maize. But the missionary plainly showed his disgust and disbelief, indignantly saying:
>
> "What I delivered to you were sacred truths, but this that you tell me is mere fable and falsehood!"
>
> "My brother," gravely replied the offended Indian, "it seems that you have not been well grounded in the rules of civility. You saw that we, who practice these rules, believed your stories; why, then, do you refuse to credit ours?"[3]

AETH

The point here, however, is not simply that the missionary appeared intolerant. The point is rather that the attitude of the supposed unbeliever towards the stories of origins was probably closer to the original composer or writer of Genesis than was the missionary's. In Genesis 1 and 2, two different stories of creation are placed side by side. They represent different tribal traditions. They also speak the truth of creation by the one God. Who was more biblical, the missionary who insisted that his <u>one</u> story of creation was the only true one, or the Indian who was ready to accept that story as well as others?

[3] Told by Dr. Charles Eastman, and quoted by Deloria, *God is Red*, p. 99.

Thus, what is true of the gospels is true of the Bible as a whole. Here too one finds the diversity of perspectives and of interpretations that my friend Silvino pointed out in the gospels, and that I found so embarrassing.

From my earlier perspective as a young student trying to convert my classmates, this was a decided disadvantage. My task would have been much easier if I had been able to produce a single document, with no inner tensions or contradictions. For similar reasons, there have always been in the Church those who have ignored the tensions among the four gospels, and attempted to read the New Testament as if it were fallen from heaven or dictated by God without regard for particular human circumstances, experiences or perspectives.

To do so, however, is to ignore the very nature of the Bible and of the faith to which it witnesses. The Bible is plural. Indeed, the very name, *ta Biblia*, from which we derive our English "Bible," in its original meaning is plural, "the books" —not "the Book," as we now say, but the books. The theology of each of the gospels is different from that of the others, and they are all different from Paul's, Jude's or James'.

Simply and boldly stated, what this means is that the opposite of a pluralistic church and a pluralistic theology is not simply an exclusivistic church and a rigid theology. An exclusivistic church and a rigid theology are by their very nature sectarian and therefore heterodox. We may resent the problems created by the existence in our canon of four gospels that do not agree;

but those four gospels are there precisely to keep us from the easy assumption that we can somehow create, or that we have inherited, a theology that encompasses all truth. Uncomfortable as this is, it is a reminder of the absolute cath'holicity or true universality of the Gospel, which cannot be encompassed by any one perspective, any one theology, or any one culture. As missiologist Lamin Sanneh has stated, "for all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design."[4]

Thus, the ultimate reason why it is important for the church at large to listen to the plural perspectives which are now coming to the table, is that, just as the Gospel is attested in Scripture by a multiform witness, so must it be interpreted and lived today through the multiform witness of many perspectives, so that it may be truly "cath'holic" —according to the whole. Although the Gospel of Mark is God's word to us today, we would lose much if we had only it, and not the other three. The same is true for Matthew, Luke and John. Likewise, though the church is truly the church wherever it is, it too loses much when it is limited to a single perspective, which then appears to be final, complete, and universally applicable.

This must serve as a caution, not only to traditional theology, but also to the various theologies that are emerging out of different perspectives, and to those who seek to incorporate the insights of such perspectives into the theological mainstream. Each of these theologies has significant contributions to make to the whole, and it is to be hoped that, as it is brought before the roundtable of varying perspectives, each of our theologies will be enriched. This does not

[4] Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1989), p. 27.

AETH

mean, however, that what we must now do is simply to bring together all the contributions of these various perspectives, in order then to forge a truly "universal" theology. Such a "universal" theology, were it achievable, would lack true cath'holicity, for the same reason that a "harmony" of the Gospels, one in which all differences are resolved, must never be substituted for the fourfold witness to the Gospel. When used in this manner, "universal," rather than a synonym for "cath'holic," is its antonym.

In our missionary speeches, we often ground the missionary enterprise on the "Great Commission," as it appears at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. However, the very possibility of that commission, and its nature, are closely related to the multiplicity of the gospels that witness to the Gospel, and the multiplicity of perspectives in the entire Bible. The fact that there are four "gospels," and that from them we may derive different conclusions and perspectives, is of fundamental importance for the Christian missionary enterprise.

AETH

Precisely because the gospels are four, and the theologies of the New Testament are many, the Gospel can be translated—both in a literal and in a figurative sense.

In a literal sense, it is significant that traditionally the Christian Church has not objected to the translation of Scripture into other languages. Quite the contrary, throughout the ages, and even to this day, missionaries have reduced countless languages to writing, and their primary purpose in doing so has been to translate the Bible to those languages. The resulting

translations are also considered to be “the Bible,” and they do not lack authority because they are in a language different from the original Scriptures. True, one may debate about the best possible translation of a word or phrase, and in this sense some translations are better than others. Yet a translation does not have to wait until it is certified as “exact” —which would in any case be impossible— before it can claim biblical authority. Every translation is an interpretation; and yet, a translation is still “the Bible.”

Christianity is based on the fourfold witness to the Gospel, and on a Bible that includes a similar diversity of perspectives. For such a religion, “cath’holicity” is crucial, and this cath’holicity means, not only being present throughout the world, but also being a faith “according to the whole,” —meaning, in the New Testament, according to the whole witness of all four evangelists, and, in the best times of its history, according to the perspective, experience and witness of all the *oikoumene*.

AETH

As a result of this understanding of its sacred scripture and of the revelation available through it, the Christian missionary enterprise has usually been surprisingly open to inculturation. Quite clearly, the degree and the manner in which such inculturation ought to take place has never been an easy matter to resolve. In India, for instance, the early Portuguese Catholic missionaries have been faulted for seeking to turn their converts into Portuguese —giving them Portuguese names, attire, etc. On the other hand, in the same country, the later Italian Jesuits have also been criticized for carrying inculturation to the point of declaring that the caste system was a

purely cultural matter, having little to do with the Gospel, so that the Church could accept it, having separate services and congregations for different castes. Similar debates have ensued wherever the Christian message has encountered a new culture. In Japan, the issue was whether Shintoism was a political-cultural or a religious matter. In China, the so-called "ancestor worship" was one of many issues so debated. In Africa, polygamy posed similar questions. Various groups and denominations take different stances on these issues. However, the point here is not the particular stance they take. The point is rather that in every case the issue of inculturation, and how it should proceed, is crucial for Christian mission, and this to a degree that is not true of other world religions.

Today it has become quite commonplace to point out the degree to which missionaries and their first converts confused the culture of the missionaries with the Gospel. We all know a number of horror stories: Spanish missionaries in the sixteenth century receiving instructions from Queen Isabella to discourage among their converts the unholy practice of taking daily baths. Attempts by nineteenth century missionaries to "clothe the savages," even though their traditional attire was better suited to the local climate than the European garb imposed upon them. Protestants in Latin America who would drink tea rather than coffee, because that was the preferred beverage of the missionaries who first came to them.

On the other hand, the very fact that we now recognize all these as horror stories is indicative of the contradiction between such procedures and the very nature of Christianity. When one stops

AETH

to reflect about it, it is indeed odd how followers of an avowedly and unashamedly missionary religion such as Christianity can be so critical of missionary efforts that have gained so many converts. The reason for this is that there is something in Christianity that makes the forced acculturation of its converts repugnant to itself —even though historically Christians have often and repeatedly practiced such forced acculturation. When Christians, particularly those whose Christian confession is the result of colonial and cultural imperialism, criticize and bewail that manner in which those who brought the Gospel to them also brought a foreign culture, they do so, not only out of a sense of cultural or national identity, but also out of their understanding of the Gospel itself.

From its very inception, the Gospel was proclaimed within a culture. Jesus came to his contemporaries within the context of the Jewish culture of his time and place. It was as Jews —more concretely, as Galilean Jews— that his first disciples received him. Ever since, in the passage to the various forms of Hellenistic culture, in the conversion of the Germanic peoples, and in every other missionary enterprise and conversion experience, people have met Christ mediated through cultures —both theirs and the culture of those who communicated the Gospel to them.

This is a very important point to remember as we approach the subject of this consultation. There is always the danger, on the part of a dominant culture, not to see the degree to which its understanding of the faith is itself culturally conditioned. In the most blatant cases, the

AETH

resultant is the long series of "horror stories" in mission to which I have already referred. But there is a more subtle manner in which cultural imperialism functions, usually without the knowledge of those who practice it —or even of those who suffer it.

The greatest danger for those whose theology reflects the dominant culture is to forget that the same questions that must be asked regarding the inculturation of Christianity in non-Western cultures must also be asked regarding its dominant inculturation in the West. The question of Christianity and culture is not only a missiological question, to be posed in those instances where Christianity crosses cultural boundaries. It is also a crucial theological question for Christianity in those areas and cultures in which it is dominant. Yet, it is a question seldom asked.

It is important to clarify the nature of this question. The question is not, how should Christianity relate to culture in the United States in the first decades of the twenty-fifth century? That is certainly an important question. The culture around us is changing, and the church must give careful consideration to its response to such changes. The question of the manner in which Christianity ought to relate to culture is essentially the same as Niebuhr's question in *Christ and Culture*. But this is not the question to which I am referring. Indeed, the very fact of posing the question in such terms is an indication that we have not understood the fundamental issue. It takes for granted that one somehow knows what Christianity is apart from culture, and that what one must then inquire is how such Christianity should be brought to bear on a changing

AETH

culture. The “Christ” of the Christ and culture question is of necessity the Christ of a culture. Therefore, to ask how Christianity ought to relate to culture begs the previous questions: To what extent is our present understanding of Christianity determined by our culture? How does our culture limit our understanding of Christianity? How should such an understanding be corrected?

Obviously, the best way to do so is to be in dialogue with those whose understanding of Christianity has been shaped by other cultures and social conditions. Just as we may be able to see how their own culture impacts their understanding and their practice of Christianity, so are they able to see how our own culture and our own social conditions impact our understanding and our practice of Christianity.

AETH

Theologians and theological institutions representing the dominant culture seldom ask questions about their theology which would lead them to see how profoundly they are affected by their own culture and their own social standing. They should be forced to ask such questions by the obvious alienness of Scripture and by the existence of a *cath’holic* church which does not always share the perceptions of the dominant culture. Yet it is easy to avoid such questions. For obvious reasons —including the economic realities of the educational and the publishing enterprises— the dialogue among theologians of the dominant culture seems to overshadow any theological work or perceptions by others. Likewise, the educational model of the dominant culture takes for granted that it is the best possible model, and that by allowing entrance into it

to ethnic minorities and people of different cultural backgrounds they are doing them a great favor.

One way in which the challenge of other cultures and perspectives is avoided is by devoting one's attention to increasingly specialized or abstract topics, as is currently happening in some of our supposedly "best" universities and schools of theology —often a modern version of the ancient question about angels dancing on the head of a pin. When others interpret the Christian faith in terms of their own culture and traditions, those in the dominant culture often see such interpretations as quaint or even interesting; but they seldom ask themselves how such other interpretations of the Christian faith should impact or change their own. Without asking that question, however, no theology can be truly cath'holic. And without a cath'holic, universal approach to its own theology, the church itself rapidly becomes parochial, even though it may be present throughout the world. As African theologian John S. Mbiti has expressed it,

> As the Church becomes worldwide, as it affirms the universality for which God's dispersal of history has destined it, let those of us who are its sons and daughters, and who are privileged to be its theologians, also think big, think far in time and space. Theology should strain its neck to see beyond the horizons of our traditional structures, beyond the comforts of our ready-made methodologies of theologizing; it should be with the Church where it is, rubbing shoulders with human beings whose condition, outlook, concerns, and world views are not those with which we are familiar.[5]

One of the goals of truly *cath'holic* education within church institutions must be precisely to pose such a challenge, not only to themselves, but also to the church at large, and in particular to those among its theologians who represent the dominant culture and whose thinking tends

[5]"Theological Impotence and the Universality of the Church." in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, eds., *Mission Trends* No. 3 (New York and Grand Rapids: Paulist and Eerdmans, 1976), p. 9.

to be limited by those cultural parameters. After all, if theology in the United States is to be, as Mbiti says, where the church is, it will find it increasingly necessary to be where the church is actually growing, namely, in our ghettos, our barrios, and all our minority communities.

This is consistent with the missionary vocation of the church. When asked about the basis for that vocation, we often quote the "Great Commission," which we love to quote as "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them," etc. Were we not as used as we are to hearing the Commission thus quoted, we would realize that it is a strange set of words. In normal speech, you don't begin by saying, "therefore." We do not say, "therefore I'll not see you tomorrow" without first saying something such as "I'll be busy tomorrow." The "therefore" requires an antecedent, the reason for what comes after the therefore.

In the case of the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, that antecedent is quite clear. What Jesus says is "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," etc. The reason for "going" is *not* to make Jesus Lord over the nations. According to Jesus himself, he already has *all* authority over the *all* nations to which his disciples are sent. Those intrepid missionaries who over the centuries have traveled far and wide to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ were not really taking him to those distant lands. Nor were they seeking to make him Lord of those lands. He already *is* there, in those lands and he already *is* Lord of those lands. People there may not know his name. They may need to hear the preaching of the Gospel. But even so, *all* authority has already given him in heaven and on

AETH

earth. Thus, those missionaries were not taking Jesus to those lands. They were taking the knowledge and the name of Jesus. They were taking his teachings. They were taking the hope which he brings.

But there is more. If it is true that all authority has been given to him in heaven and on earth, then it would seem that our task, upon encountering those who do not believe, is not only to tell them about Jesus, but also to try to discover what he was doing there even before our arrival, and what he is doing there quite apart from our preaching and our teaching. In consequence, a church or a Christian institution that has a truly biblical understanding of the Great Commission will seek, not only to have others learn about Jesus and his authority, but also to learn about his presence and his activity in those others. And therefore, all imperialistic or paternalistic views of the mission on the part of a church make that church the loser. And the same is true of any Christian academic institution that, in including a variety of cultures, ethnicities, and social standings, only sees the good that it is doing, and does not see the good that God is doing for them in such inclusion. Once again, a variety of perspectives and experiences is necessary for the cath'holicity of the church as well as for a holistic education of any kind.

On the other hand, there is also the danger, on the part of those representing non-dominant cultures —or cultures which, although dominant in their countries of origin, are not traditionally Christian— that, in our attempts to rediscover and reaffirm elements in our traditional culture

that have been suppressed, we may fall into the trap of romanticizing culture.

Such romantization of culture takes two common forms. One is to idealize one's culture, as if it were perfect, and did not stand in need of correction from the Gospel. This is an understandable reaction on the part of those who have repeatedly been told that their culture was incompatible with Christianity, and now find otherwise. When various peoples become Christian, they do not —they cannot— leave their culture behind, no matter how much they are told that they ought to do so, and no matter how hard they strive at meeting such a goal. Culture is not something that one can put on and take off, like a winter coat. "Culture is not a mere refinement that is added unto one's being, nor a valuable, though inaccessible, inheritance of traditions. It is rather an entire pattern or design for life in which the identity of each of its members is at stake."[6] For this reason, one should not be surprised if sincere Christians who have sought to leave behind their ancestral cultures, when finally convinced that such efforts were not necessary, react by romanticizing that culture, claiming for it a perfection which it never had, and which they themselves would not claim had it not been for their own frustration with the dominant, supposedly "Christian" culture.

Every culture, though a God-given gift, has also been tainted by sin. Furthermore, in the origin itself of our various cultures there is a history of oppressions we must not idealize. As I pointed out yesterday, the fact that I speak Spanish is the result of a long series of conquests, some dating back more than a thousand years. In these conquests, people were subjugated and even

[6] Emesto Cavassa, "Vivir lo de Dios de otro modo: Inculturación y fe," *Páginas* (Lima), p. 20.

obliterated. I speak Spanish because Castile conquered Andalucia. I speak Spanish because some of my Spanish ancestors conquered and oppressed some of my native American ancestors. I speak Spanish because, for whatever reasons, my native ancestors were among those who capitulated before the military, cultural, and religious onslaught of Spain. Therefore, even though I love my language and the sentiments it can express, I must not idealize my own culture to such a degree that I forget the many oppressions and injustices through which it was forged. I expect that, if we go back far enough, we shall find similar origins to other cultures. Africans were sold into slavery by other Africans, and some Native American cultures built empires at the expense of neighboring peoples. Also, for a number of reasons, many traditional cultures have proven quite oppressive to women. On this score, the warning of Robert Schreiter is in order:

> cultural romanticism will tend to see only good in a culture and to believe that the ideal state of the culture would be reached if it were left untouched by the outside world. To be sure, the more intimately acquainted one becomes with a culture and the more one sees its delicate balancing of forces, the more one can become entranced by its beauty. But to fall prey to this kind of romanticism assumes that there is no sin in the world, that people cannot be and are not often cruel to one another, and that culture contact is always a bad thing. One should remember that, if Christianity is alive at all in a situation, it will certainly change things about the culture. The Christian message, after all, is about change: repentance, salvation, and an eschatological reality to be realized. To think that Christianity will not change a situation is to rob the Christian message of its most important part.[7]

The other danger on the part of those seeking to rediscover the value and significance of their culture is to fall into a static understanding of culture. Culture, when it is relevant, is a living thing. Like all living things, it affects its environment and is affected by it. Although cultures are

[7] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), p. 29.

by nature slow to change, for they encompass the wisdom of centuries, only a dead culture ceases to change. Thus, when "indigenization shades into antiquarianism,"[8] one suspects that the culture being defended and restored is no longer a living one, but rather a museum piece. Cultures interact. Such interaction does not always have positive results, and more often than not reflects impositions brought about by military or economic force. Yet the result of such interaction is that old cultures take new shapes, and new cultures are also born.

When those of us who speak out of other cultures speak to the rest of the church, our function is not —or at least should not be— that of apologists for our various cultures. We know that cultures are not normally transferable. I cannot simply convince another to come join my culture. Nor can I divest myself of my culture and join theirs. At best, I can interpret my culture to others so that they may see that it is worthy of respect, and that it may have something to contribute to human well-being. And they can interpret their culture to me, so that I may glimpse some of its worth and beauty, and come to respect its actual and potential contribution to humankind. Those of us who are representatives of cultures that have often been colonized and oppressed find it necessary to insist on this point, for throughout history —and to this day— others have sought to impose their culture on us under the guise of evangelization. Our ancestors were told that there was a "Christian" culture, and that in order to accept it they had to reject their own. Even today, in a myriad ways, we are being told the same. Such notions we unreservedly reject.

AETH

[8]Harvey Cox, in "Inculturation Reconsidered,"*Christianity and Crisis*, May 13, 1991, p. 141.

We come rather as Christians who confess and rejoice that our cultural identities and experiences have given us particular perspectives and insights into the meaning of the Gospel. We seek to call the entire church to an understanding of itself and of its message that is more truly cath'holic.

It is important, however, to insist on the vision of cath'holicity implied in this last statement. We do not call for the development of a new, more inclusive universal theology, into which our various insights would be incorporated so as to form a new orthodoxy to be accepted by all. We call rather for a theological stance similar to that of the early church when it made provision for the fourfold witness to the Gospel. Just as the conversation among the four gospels can never be reduced to a "harmony" of the gospels, so should the dialogue at the ethnic and cultural roundtable never be reduced to a new "universal" theology. Just as the four gospels stand in the way of any proposed "abbreviation" of the Gospel, so let our ongoing dialogue, our various perspectives, our agreements and disagreements, stand in the way of any proposed "universal" theology —which would soon become an instrument for the oppression of those who disagree.

AETH

Ours must have a vision of cath'holicity; of cath'holicity so far-reaching that it can never be reduced to uniform universality.