The Church and the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas: In-Between Colonization and Reconciliation

by Michel Andraos

In his recent book *The Comeback*, public intellectual John Ralston Saul, reading the signs of the times in Canada so to speak, asserted that the situation of the Indigenous Peoples is the single most important issue before us. Until not long ago, he notes, “It was clear—or so the common, self-serving argument went—that these native populations were unfortunately unsuited to the modern world. Backward. Weak. Stuck in irrelevant cultures. Much of this argument was folded into standard Victorian, imperial, Christian notions of charity.”¹ This situation has been changing over the past hundred years and the Indigenous Peoples have made a *comeback*, observes the author. It’s a comeback to a position of self-affirmation with power that, to many observers of history, seems irreversible. Enrique Dussel calls this comeback a cultural eruption beyond modernity.² Many Indigenous academics would prefer to call this comeback resurgence or rebirth.³ While this resurgence for many people is either not noticeable or a surprise, for the Indigenous Peoples in general it is neither. They have been preparing for it and waiting patiently for a long time, sometimes in active silence and at other times with strong protest. They saw the resurgence coming and have been announcing a new dawn for a while. But where is the church in all this?

³ See in particular the works of Leanne Simpson and Taiaiake Alfred.

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Despite the violent history between Western Christianity and the Indigenous Peoples, particularly since 1492, the Second Vatican Council had no mention of this history and relationship. This perhaps was one of the main gaps in the Council. In light of the new Indigenous resurgence, however, the relationship between the churches and Indigenous Peoples globally took a new turn, especially since the 1980s. The preparations for the events commemorating the 500th anniversary of the conquest of the Americas and the colonization of Indigenous Peoples by Western Europeans became an opportunity, particularly for the churches in the Americas, to reflect on the history of this violent relationship during five long centuries and draw some lessons. In the Roman Catholic Church, Pope John Paul II paid particular attention to meeting with Indigenous Peoples all over the world during his pontificate. Between the late 1970s and the mid 1990s he visited many Indigenous communities in the Americas, all the way from Fort Simpson in Canada’s North-West Territories to Temuco, Chile, in the southern-most part of the hemisphere, including most countries in between. He did the same in other parts of the world, countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, among others. His discourse at these meetings—expressing respect for their spiritual traditions and cultural values—was consistent and generally well received. He delivered strong messages to the Indigenous communities he met, to the church, and to society at large. In most of his speeches he affirmed Indigenous Peoples’ rights to their lands, cultures, and religious practices, and he denounced the injustices and discrimination they experienced in the past, and, in most situations, continue to experience. The core of his messages was about reconciliation, inculturation of the gospel message in Indigenous cultures, and the need for revitalizing Christianity among Indigenous Peoples. In some instances, he acknowledged the mistakes of the past and the involvement of the church in colonization, but did not offer any formal or specific apologies in that regard. He called for the Indigenous Peoples to take their proper place in the church and affirmed that in many of his speeches. He notes in one of his typical speeches:

> Concerning your proper place in the Church, I urge everyone to promote those pastoral initiatives that foster the indigenous communities’ greater integration and participation... Ultimately, it is a question of indigenous Catholics becoming the agents of their own development and evangelization in all areas, including the various ministries. What a great joy it will be to see the day when your communities can be served by missionaries, priests, and bishops who have come from your own families and can guide you in adoring God ‘in spirit and truth’ (Jn 4:23)... The Church, which has been with you in your journey throughout these 500 years, will do everything in her power to help the descendants of the ancient peoples of America to occupy their rightful place in society and the ecclesial communities.

Decades later, however, the pope’s wish still has not materialized, and it is still rare to see Indigenous leaders in the church. How do we understand this phenomenon? Did John Paul II’s call for the revitalization of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples and his invitation to a new, different relationship come too late, or perhaps are no longer relevant to their resurgence?

At the last conference of the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean that took place in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007 during the pontificate of Benedict XVI, the theme of Indigenous Peoples was prominent. The conference affirmed the teachings of Pope John Paul II and of previous bishops’ conferences, especially the one that took place in Santo Domingo in 1992, the last conference before Aparecida. The topics of colonization and asking for

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forgiveness, however, were softened in the Aparecida documents. The teaching and pastoral approach, as in the past, acknowledge the injustice done to Indigenous Peoples and their rights, but there was no breakthrough. The theology of this and previous documents does not go beyond the problematic traditional fulfillment theology. This traditional theological approach acknowledges the “seeds of the Word” in Indigenous cultures, and looks with “esteem” at their religious experience and spiritual life, but is usually very quick to add that this experience “reaches its fullness in the revelation of the true face of God by Jesus Christ,” normally in the church. (Aparecida #528) This is a theological dead end for any interreligious dialogue in general, but particularly for dialogue with Indigenous Peoples.

Pope Francis seems to be taking a new approach. In a landmark speech at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, on July 9, 2015, which was co-sponsored by the Vatican Council for Justice and Peace, he spoke to the Indigenous Peoples present very clearly about the impact of colonialism on the poor, past and present. He also asked for forgiveness for the sins committed against them in the name of God. “I humbly ask forgiveness, not only for the offenses of the Church herself, but also for the crimes committed against the native peoples during the so-called conquest of America... There was sin, a great deal of it, for which we did not ask pardon. So for this, we ask forgiveness, I ask forgiveness,” said Pope Francis.

In his more recent visit to San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, on February 16, 2016, where the majority of the faithful in this diocese are Indigenous from Mayan origin, he again asked for forgiveness during his homily. Not only that, but he also emphasized the important contribution of Indigenous Peoples to humanity and to the church. “You have much to teach us, much to teach humanity,” he said. In addition, he quoted in the same homily the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Maya. Symbolically, his visit and actions are very significant and meaningful gestures in a region of Mexico considered to be the heartland of Indigenous Peoples’ resistance and resurgence, and where the ongoing uprising against the Mexican government began on January 1, 1994. In a very insightful article on this papal visit, Indigenous Mexican theologian Eleazar López Hernández notes that the pope, in deciding to visit San Cristobal de Las Casas, realized the best symbolic gestures of his visit to Mexico. With his presence, said Hernández, the pope “healed the wounds caused by misunderstanding and unjust accusations [by the Vatican] directed against this prophetic and martyr local church.”6 There was no affirmation of a fulfillment theology in his discourse, which is a departure from previous papal homilies at Indigenous gatherings.

Ironically, it is precisely in this diocese that the Vatican had imposed a ban on ordaining Indigenous permanent deacons since 2000. The ban was announced during the pontificate of John Paul II and was maintained during the pontificate of Benedict, despite many attempts by the diocese asking the Vatican for permission to restore the program. The permanent deaconate program was the cornerstone of Indigenous leadership in this local church.7 The Vatican’s ban was lifted and the program restored only recently, in May 2015, a few months before Pope Francis’s visit to Chiapas. At the end of the mass in San Cristobal, representatives of the Indigenous communities thanked Pope Francis, saying, “Thank you for having again authorized the role of the indigenous permanent diaconate, with its own culture, and for having approved the use of our languages in the liturgy.”8 After the liturgy, Pope Francis visited the tomb of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, who died in January 2011, and who had also suffered from imposed sanctions by the Vatican in the 1990s. Ruiz is globally known for his bold ecclesial and pastoral approach toward the Indigenous Peoples in his diocese and beyond.9

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8 Vatican Information Service, February 16, 2016.
At the present moment, the comeback and resurgence mentioned above are with us and are unsettling to both the nation-states and the churches. According to their civilizing and Christianizing joint mission, there was not supposed to be Indigenous Peoples to deal with by now; they should have all been either assimilated into the modern states and into Christianity or disappeared. But the project failed and the Indigenous Peoples, as small as they are in numbers, are back as peoples and nations with moral, cultural, political, and spiritual force, and with determination. They want their land, and they affirm their cultural worldviews, ways of life, languages, and spiritual traditions. They affirm their distinct identities in the society at large, and also in the churches, for those who remained Christian. Modern states and the churches, as we know them today, do not seem structurally capable of dealing with the “others” within who claim and affirm both difference and at the same time full equality. This is why they do not know what to do with Indigenous Peoples. The colonial project of assimilation has failed. The churches have been trying for some decades to promote processes of inculturation and a theology of reconciliation. But these too have failed for the most part. The fulfillment theology, which seems to be in the DNA of the churches, like the assimilation projects of the states, is not an option for the future. The mistrust between Indigenous Peoples and the institutions of Christianity and the states goes very deep. Both states and churches need to re-invent themselves if they are to have a new relationship. But are they capable of doing that? Moreover, a growing number of Indigenous organizations and scholars do not want to use the language of reconciliation. Many believe that this rhetoric is not fully genuine, does not go far enough, and undermines their resurgence. Theologically, the desired reconciliation requires, in addition to asking for forgiveness, proposing a new theology and ecclesiology, radically different from the colonial past and present. For many, the new moves by Pope Francis are steps in the right direction. But are the churches and theology there yet?