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La Virgen: A Mexican Perspective

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the communion of saints has had a long history within the Christian tradition. The understanding of this doctrine, however, has shifted through the ages, reflecting both changing theological concerns as well as the preoccupations of the Christian faithful (Osborne, 1987). As is true for all attempts to unpack the meaning of the faith, understandings of the communion of saints are exercises in contextual theology. Particular factors in a given context shape the outcome of a particular theological effort, but in every case contextualization is part of the very nature of all theology (Bevans, 1992).

A critical part of the consideration of the communion of saints is the understanding which emerges of Mary, the special saint. The thesis of this article is that, given the particular cultural and historical factors out of which Mexican religious faith has emerged, *la Santísima Virgen*, particularly, though not exclusively, under the title of Santa María de Guadalupe, is *not* viewed by most Catholics of Mexican descent as a saint—a human being who has led an exemplary Christian life and who after death shares in the beatific vision. Rather, *la Virgen* functions in this context as an icon of God.

Every image of God “functions,” both to explain the current situation in which a people finds itself and, out of that world view, to orient the behavior of the group and of the individual believer (Johnson, 1993). As a result, an exploration of the life situation out of which an image of God comes, and of the behaviors to which it leads, can be used as a methodological key to discover the meaning of any image of the divine. The first three sections of this article, therefore, will deal with the cultural and historical circumstances which have allowed *la Virgen* to be reinterpreted within Mexican Catholicism¹ as an image of God. I will then raise a series of questions which demand further research, and, finally, will explore the giftedness that this particular feature of Mexican Catholicism might be to Roman Catholicism as a whole.²

¹ Although a number of Latino theologians refer to this world view as popular religion, I would suggest that it is actually an alternative, though equally valid, form of Catholicism to that which has developed in North Atlantic countries. See Riebe-Estrella 1998.

² While the contributions of Latinos to the Catholic Church are most often thought of as the result of specific cultural values important in Hispanic life, such as that of family, the U.S. bishops expressly include challenges offered by Latinos to the faith life of the Church: “This Hispanic presence challenges us all to be more *catholic*, more open to the diversity of religious expression” (NCCB, 1984, §1).

A SOCIO-CENTRIC CULTURE

Mexican culture is fundamentally a socio-centric or organic culture. That is, it is premised on the group as the fundamental unit of society. In a socio-centric culture, one's identity is rooted in the group (first, usually, in the primary group which is the family). One matures by accepting and perhaps redefining one's role *within* the group, but never by stepping outside the group (Schweder and Bourne, 1984). For the purposes of this article, the principal consequences of the socio-centric nature of Mexican culture are twofold. First, relationship is primary; maintaining harmony with the other members of one's group and expanding one's world by the inclusion of others in one's group are primary motivators of interpersonal behavior. Second, institutional roles are secondary to roles defined by one's group membership; these latter are relationships founded on trust, a trust which is inviolable since it is the glue of the mutual relationships of the members whose primary source of identity is precisely their membership in the group.

THE RELIGIOUS MESTIZAJE

The second factor which has influenced the texture of Mexican Catholicism is the religious *mestizaje* that took place as a result of the conquest. *Mestizaje* is the mixing together of two elements (cultures, religious systems, races) in such a way that a wholly new element is created: a new culture, a new religious system, a new race (Elizondo, 1978). The two elements of the religious *mestizaje* relevant here are the indigenous or Meso-American world of religious imagination and that of the *conquistadores* of sixteenth century medieval Catholic Spain. These two elements have a peculiar relationship to one another: the indigenous religious world is the *underlay*, what pre-existed and was foundational for Meso-Americans; the religious world of the Spanish conquerors and missionaries is the *overlay*, one imposed from above and foreign to the foundational underlay. This type of relationship is distinct from the meeting of two elements in a situation of equality, and has determining effects on the content of the images of God which result from the *mestizaje*.

The Ancient Mexican Faith

The Nahuas (the cultural group to which the major indigenous tribes of the central valley of Mexico belonged) experienced life as the result of opposing forces in tension with one another (Carrasco, 1990). If left to itself, life in the natural world was unstable at best. The Nahuas were an agricultural people and depended upon the interrelation of the natural and divine worlds. In fact, the dynamism of the world was envisioned as a mirror of the world of the divine. Each world was composed of time and space. Like two sets of twin inter-

locking wheels, the time and space of the divine regularly intersected with the time and space of the human and natural world. At those times and in those places, the world of the divine and its power were accessible, with energy flowing in both directions. The tone of encounter was defined as reciprocity (León-Portilla, 1993). That is, the Nahuatl myths of creation told of secondary manifestations of the divine who sacrificed themselves so that the world could be.³ The human response to this divine self-sacrifice was penance and offerings, aimed to reciprocate for the actions of the divine and, in so doing, to feed the energy of forces held in tension, the origination of all that is. Acts of reciprocity accessed the divine power in order to bring it to bear on this life and the vagaries of this life.

Since the human mirrored the divine in an interlocking relationship, religion for the Nahuas was primarily a social phenomenon (of individuals within society and of society with the divine). The divine itself was characterized as social (León-Portilla, 1963:85–95). Though there is plentiful scholarly debate on whether or not Nahuatl religion was polytheistic, the first god (Ometéotl) was dual in manifestation (male and female), but nevertheless one. The sages, some scholars argue, understood all the other “gods” to be further manifestations of the one god (determined in their individuality by times and places), and all of these were also dual (male and female). The common folk may have understood these secondary manifestations to be separate from the first god, but the incorporation of countenances and other attributes of one member of the pantheon into the traits of other members demonstrates the mutual permeability and intrinsic interrelationship of the Nahuatl images of the divine. Whether in the more sophisticated circle of the sages or in the popular beliefs of the common folk, the divine was imaged as multiple, as social, as group; of that we can be certain.

Lastly, it is important to note that the Nahuas had no philosophical system which might elaborate a metaphysical basis for their understanding of the relationship between the manifestations of the divine. Rather, they used poetic structures to open the depths of the human personality to the elusive world of truth. Basing their approach on duality as rooted in the divine, they developed the use of the *difrasismo*, metaphors which generally consisted of two words or phrases joined to form a single idea. Immersion in this poetic language allowed the human heart to perceive in metaphorical language the divine reality, or truth,

³ There is an uncanny similarity in the divine action between the Nahuatl creation myth of the Age of the Fifth Sun and Johannine theology. In the former, creation resulted from the decision and voluntary sacrifice by the sons of the Dual God, who threw themselves into the sacrificial fire; in the latter, God freely gives his Son for the life of the world. For a recounting of the Nahuatl creation myth, see León-Portilla 1963, 38–45.

which was mirrored in human life (Carrasco, 1990:79–81). The metaphorical nature of this language is fundamental for grounding the interchangeableness of images of the divine in the Nahuatl religious imagination.

The Spanish Overlay

Interestingly, sixteenth-century Spanish Catholicism was also shaped by opposing forces held in tension (Marzal, 1993). The nine hundred years of the *reconquista* of Spain from the Moors left their militaristic and triumphalistic imprint on the ethos of medieval Spanish Catholicism. At the same time, it is important to remember that the Catholicism of the conquistadors and the missionaries was one almost untouched by the controversies of the Reformation. Its thought and structure “are essentially identical to those inherited from the twilight of the ancient world and the patristic period” (Weckmann, 1992: 296).

For Spanish Catholics, in contrast to the Nahuas, the divine intervened in this world, but resided in another. Divine power was characterized less as permeating reality than breaking into it. The divine worked often, if not predominantly, through intermediaries (Mary and the saints) who were the objects of intense devotion and subjects of miraculous interventions. The power of the divine was accessed through prayer, ritual and sacrifice. These were understood as a kind of barter, or exchange of one good for another (Marzal, 1993: 149). In this way divine power was brought to bear on this life and the next.

A brief comparison of these two worlds of religious imagination shows striking similarities but with significant differences. Both worlds of religious imagination had a preoccupation with avoiding disaster and with protection from evil (life forces/*reconquista*). In both worlds, the divine was readily accessible, though for Meso-Americans it was by interpenetration, and for Spaniards by intervention. In both, one accessed a single divine source or power, but in multiple manifestations or through intermediaries. Access was achieved through ritual where there is an “interchange” between the human and the divine (for the Nahuas, it was understood as reciprocity, due to the divine initiative; for Spanish Catholics, it was seen as earning a favor).

The imposition of the Spanish religious imagination over the Nahuatl recalls the inequality of the relationship between the two elements. Visually, one might think of the Spanish world being pushed down over the indigenous. But the indigenous is the *materia prima*, the matrix, as it were, on which the Spanish imagination was imposed. Where there are similarities between the overlay and the underlay, Spanish imagery can be accepted, though it is still seen within a different matrix, or through different eyes. In this case, religious forms be taken on by the indigenous; even the imagery can be adopted, though its mean-

ing will be at least somewhat transformed by the matrix. Where the worlds are greatly dissimilar, chances are that the indigenous perspective will prevail since it is foundational.

At this juncture, one must also recall what has been said about the contours of Mexican culture. In the peculiar mixing that is a *mestizaje* the cultural contours of the indigenous world will help determine the shape the overlay begins to take as it is imposed on the indigenous underlay.

Mexican Religious Imagination

Mexicans begin with the primacy of relationships. As we have seen, the primacy of relationship in a socio-centric culture is founded on the group as the source of identity. One's primary world is expanded by the inclusion of others, not simply in relationship, but in membership in the group. The interlocking of the divine with the human in the Nahuatl religious world reflects the expansion of the human world to include the divine. In other words, the new religious world of the *mestizaje*, of Mexican culture, will image the divine as part of life's landscape. The presence of the divine is pervasive and close; it can be encountered everywhere and always, without prejudicing *particularly* sacred times and places. One is unable to separate either life or the world into spheres of sacred and profane (Elizondo, 1975:158)

This foundational relationship with the divine implies, as it does with any member of one's group, mutual responsibilities based on trust. The exercise of these responsibilities issues in an interchange of goods, though this is understood not as earning a favor, but as the natural outcome of the fundamental relationship. One can approach the divine, either directly or through intermediaries/manifestations, and in a spirit of reciprocity one makes an offer in exchange for the divine power which is needed to effect change in one's life and one's world. This is not to force God's or a saint's hand; it is rather a way of concretizing the mutual responsibility that relationship with the divine naturally demands. The *manda/promesa*, the promise to do something for God or a saint if, or, better, *as* the divine acceded to the request, is more correctly interpreted within the context of reciprocity rather than as a form of bartering because, in practice, the promise must be kept whether or not the favor is forthcoming. To be in relationship, to love, is to "do for."

The exercise of reciprocity or mutual responsibility enfleshes the trust which is the "glue" sealing the relationships of the group members. While it is true that roles are defined before the exercise of reciprocity and they must be respected, nevertheless it is the fulfillment of the trust which actually determines the relationships which will be solidified and relied upon. Though in European Catholicism patron saints or Mary are not God, Mexicans approach these figures primarily because their reciprocity in relationship is tested and true.

Furthermore, it must be said that discerning whether or not the intermediaries are divine themselves is not a preoccupation for us Mexicans. Rather, in exercising their reciprocity, such intermediaries allow us truly to expand our world to include the divine. No matter who the intermediaries are in themselves, therefore, the divine is present to us in them on the foundational level on which they live. Therefore, attention to the specificity of roles (God, Christ, Mary, the saints) is not of great importance; they may, in fact, be interchangeable. Being Christo-centric, Marian, or God-centered are not our questions. What we do perceive is that the divine is present to us in all the graciousness that reciprocity entails (mutual love), however we might image that relationship.

THE ORIGINATING CONTEXT: THE CONQUEST

The third factor that has influenced the texture of Latino popular religious beliefs is the originating context of Latino popular religion, the conquest itself. Whether one chooses to talk of the events following 1492 as “encounter” or “discovery,” the next decades were for the indigenous of the Americas decades of violence and vanquishment. More than simply an atmosphere of violence, the context of the religious *mes-tizaje* I have been describing was one of vanquishment, of some peoples “having become the losing victims of someone else’s victory” (Espín, 1992a: 74). The resulting sense of powerlessness and of marginalization serves as the color for the texture of the cloth woven from the coming together of two worlds of religious imagination. It should not be surprising that the way we Latinos image our relationship with the divine is an attempt to counter both our powerlessness and our marginalization.

The socialization of the divine, imaged as relationships quite similar to those we have in the group(s) which found our identity, allows us access to the divine power in acts of reciprocity which serve to ward off the evil and bring the good, acts which we are sociologically powerless to do ourselves. Mexican religious practice often centers on the themes of protection and nurture, imaged in the icon of Our Lady of Guadalupe. As a female representation of the divine (the Nahuatl divine is both male and female), she guards and protects her children, wraps them in her maternal mantle, and accompanies them on their journey. As *la Dolorosa*, another pivotal aspect of *la Virgen*, she herself has felt powerless in the face of the death of her Son and, though vanquished, she was not victimized, but endured her powerlessness with integrity. More than a model of the prime virtue of *aguantar*,⁴ she is the source of the power to do as she did. Whether as Guadalupe or as *la Dolorosa*, she images the presence of the divine in power for the powerless, some-

⁴ *Aguantar* is usually translated as “to endure.” However, it bears the connotation of “persevering through.”

times to change life but always to endure it with integrity. For those who cannot change life's conditions, meaning is found *in* suffering, not simply beyond it. The important arena is not the next encounter with the enemy; those lines have been drawn and we have been counted the losers. The important arena is the integrity of the group, preserving intact the relationships from which identity, and so life, come.

QUESTIONS THAT REMAIN

The contours of Mexican culture, the similarities of the overlay and the underlay in the religious *mestizaje* which is Mexican Catholicism, and the marginalization and powerlessness of the majority of Mexican believers set the stage for the reinterpretation of *la Virgen* as an image of the divine. Yet the exact contours of this new religious imagination remain shrouded by the catechesis that the Mexican faithful have undergone. Analysis of significant religious celebrations such as *Mañanitas to la Virgen* indicate that indeed she functions as the divine (Riebestrella, 1998). A growing body of Latino literature portrays her as the divine presence (Villaseñor, 1991, esp. 423–25 and Castillo, 1996). Yet Mexican Catholics, in the imposition of Spanish medieval Catholicism, have learned to articulate their faith in Western categories of thought. How does one get underneath the language to the religious imagination which actually informs religious practices and expressions, especially when one suspects that the language hides the actual configuration of faith? (Espín, 1992b and 1994). In addition, what effects has the *segundo mestizaje*, the encounter between Mexican Catholicism and U.S. Catholicism, had on this reinterpretation of *la Virgen*, given the improved socio-economic conditions of many U.S. Latinos and their exposure to church life and religious education within the context of the United States?

Both these questions call for further research, not only from within the theological disciplines but also research which employs the perspective and tools of the social sciences.

THE GIFTS OF LA VIRGEN

Yet, while this research remains to be undertaken, Mexican Catholicism's reinterpretation of *la Virgen* as an image of God already offers a series of insights which might prove enriching to Roman Catholicism in today's Western cultural scene.

The death of the great utopias and demise of a single overarching narrative which mark the boundary between modernity and post-modernity leave many U.S. Catholics with only a quite personalized and privatized faith. *La Virgen* counters that perspective as the active presence of the divine in a resacralized world.

As a female image of the divine, she allows women another avenue for understanding themselves as *imago Dei*. Not only does the God portrayed in Roman Catholicism have female characteristics, but the divine itself can be understood as female. Rooted in a religious imagination which holds to duality but equality, woman is affirmed as reflective of God without denying God's image present in men as well.

Finally, in a society in which the gap between rich and poor grows larger each day and approximates in the U.S. context what has been true for so long in marginalized countries, *la Virgen* makes readily available a sense of the divine which is in solidarity with the world's suffering and oppressed.

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