

BLESSINGS ON INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF LATIN AMERICA

1. The Papal Address was given at the Conference Hall on May 13, 2007, to inaugurate the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which is being held close to the Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, Patroness of Brazil. The theme of the General Conference is: *“Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so that our peoples may have life in him”*
2. His address affirmed that “Faith in God has animated the life and culture of these nations **for more than five centuries**. From the encounter between that faith and the indigenous peoples, there has emerged the rich Christian culture of this Continent, expressed in art, music, literature, and above all, in the religious traditions and in the peoples’ whole way of being, united as they are by a shared history and a shared creed that give rise to a great underlying harmony, despite the diversity of cultures and languages.”
3. The papal address continues: “For them, it meant knowing and welcoming Christ, the unknown God whom their ancestors were seeking, without realizing it, in their rich religious traditions. **Christ is the Saviour for whom they were silently longing.**” “In effect, the proclamation of Jesus and of his Gospel did not at any point involve an alienation of the pre-Columbian cultures, nor was it the imposition of a foreign culture.
4. The two expressions that the indigenous peoples took offence are: “Faith in God has animated the life and culture of these nations **for more than five centuries**” ... **“Christ is the Saviour for whom they were silently longing.”** Understandably so, as the natives still feel the pain of their violated past as a result of the colonist’s expansionist policy of the Cross and Gun. (See details in Section: *Collective Memory: Pained and Blessed*)

ADVERSE REACTIONS

5. The chief coordinator of the Amazon Indian group COIAB, Jecinaldo Satere Mawe, "It's arrogant and disrespectful to consider our cultural heritage secondary to theirs." [see Robert Mickens, “A quiet sort of welcome,” [THE TABLET 19 May 2007:12]
6. Several non-indigenous pastoral persons swiftly and angrily tried to offer explanations suggesting the Pope was right and the objections of Native People were out of line. A few days later the Pope recanted those lines and said the Church does not reject or makes light of the sufferings of Indigenous Peoples.
7. Leading Indigenous spokespersons and Elders, on the other hand, sought a meeting, a discussion and an explanation. They did not speak out against the Pope or the Church. This, however was the perception of the European and the Euro-American church leaders uncomfortable with the inquiries brought up by Native peoples.
8. It has proven to be very difficult for most Natives in a position of Church service to be able to talk with decision making hierarchy about the issues. There are so few places that native people can turn to and expect an on par and mutually respecting meeting on these issues. The indigenous of the Americas have no

political clout or real sovereignty that could demand or expect to be heard out as other groups can be heard in cases like this.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY: PAINFUL YET BLESSED

9. All these indigenous leaders came from a vivid collective memory of being colonized, hunted down, enslaved, tortured, raped and murdered by the Spanish colonists. The Spanish missionaries failed miserably to bring Christ to a violated people, “notably the Franciscans in the area of what is now Mexico City, but the efforts of these good men were hampered by the cruel practices of the conquistadores. ...There were very few converts. History is a witness of the allergy to conversion of the people in the early years of the conquest.” (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*)
10. The violated memory of the Indians resounds in their hearts: “At the time of the conquest, when Juan Diego lived, many of the invaders thought the indigenous people did not even have souls and that therefore did not have the right to own anything and should be subject. They were treated badly and enslaved. They were forbidden to speak their own language. With the conquistadores, however, came missionaries who wanted to share their faith with them. It was hard going, of course, because of the terrible treatment they were receiving. Only a very few natives had become Christian.” (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*).
11. In the face of such violence, the “missionaries defended the natives, especially Franciscan Bishop Zumárraga of Mexico City.” (The book by Eduardo Chavez Sanchez, *Juan Diego, Una Vida de Santidad que Marcó la Historia*; Mexico City, Editorial Porrúa, 2002 recounts in detail this history). Bishop Zumárraga wrote to the king in Spain to tell him that the situation was so bad that only a miracle of God could save the situation and the earth. The missionaries prayed for a miracle.” (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*).
12. The miracle occurred through Mary, the Virgin of Guadalupe, sent to Juan Diego to bring God's message to the Bishop to construct a church in her honor on the hill of Tepeyac. The confirmation of the message was sent in the form of roses, and through Juan Diego, to all of the continents of America, leaving her own image, pregnant with the child Jesus, on his *tilma* as a sign of new life. That image, brought to Bishop Zumárraga, still exists in its original colors in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. She appeared as La Morenita, the brown Lady, speaking Nahuatl, the language of the people, forbidden by the conquistadores. This is the perfect example of inculturation and the faith, provided by God himself.” (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*).
13. Virgil Elizondo tells us that "The subjugated Mexican people came to life again because of Guadalupe. The response of the Indians was a spontaneous explosion of pilgrimages, festivals and conversions to the religion of the Virgin. Out of the meaningless and chaotic existence of the postconquest years, a new meaning had erupted. . ." "In the person of Juan Diego was represented the Indian nations defeated and slaughtered, but now brought to life. They who had been robbed of their lands and of their way of life and even of their gods were now coming to life. They who had been silenced were now speaking again through the voice of the

- Lady. They who only wanted to die now wanted to live. . .” Virgil Elizondo tells us that “The subjugated Mexican people came to life again because of Guadalupe. The response of the Indians was a spontaneous explosion of pilgrimages, festivals and conversions to the religion of the Virgin. Out of the meaningless and chaotic existence of the postconquest years, a new meaning had erupted. . .” (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*).
14. "The power of hope offered by the drama of Guadalupe came from the fact that the unexpected good news of God's presence was offered to all by someone from whom nothing special was expected: the conquered Indian, the lowest of the low. . ." The Native Americans quickly arrived by the thousands asking to be baptized. In fact, in a little time the numbers seeking baptism were so great that the missionaries stopped the baptisms for a time to write to Rome to ask how to proceed in such an unprecedented situation. The challenge was how to catechize and give a good foundation in the faith when there were so many asking for baptism and later confession.” In a few years eight million were baptized. "Without a doubt, this massive conversion of the indigenous people was a surprise for the missionaries ... and was their seeking of not just the sacrament of Baptism, but also Confession: It occurred that--said Mendieta (*Fray Gerónimo de Mendieta, Historia Eclesiastica Indiana*)--by the roads, mountains and deserted spots a thousand or two thousand Indians followed the religious, just to go to confession, leaving behind their homes and properties; and many of them pregnant women, and so many that some had their babies on the way, and almost all carrying their children on their backs. Other elderly people who could hardly stand even with a supporting stick, and blind people, walked 15 or twenty leagues to search for a confessor. The healthy came thirty leagues, and others went from monastery to monastery, more than eighty leagues. Because on every side there was so much to do, they found no entry. Many of them brought their women and children and their little food, as if they were moving to another area. And they sometimes waited one or two months . . ." (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*).
 15. Elizondo wrote, "The cultural clash of sixteenth-century Spain and Mexico was resolved and reconciled by the brown Lady of Guadalupe. . . Guadalupe is the key to understanding the Christianity of the New World, the self-image of Mexicans, of Mexican-Americans, and of all Latin Americans." (See Mark and Louise Zwick, *Reaction to Benedict XVI in Brazil: Our Lady of Guadalupe Bridges the Gap*).
 16. Dorothy Day of the US shares her insight: “Ironically, we hear much about the terrible cruelty of the Spaniards with the conquest, but we hear very little about the cruelty of the English-speaking in the United States who decimated the Native American population. The Puritans would not have been open to an appearance from the blessed Mother to save the people. The Native Americans fared no better, and actually much worse, as the policy of "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" was implemented in the U. S.” (See *Houston Catholic Worker*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4, July-August 2007)

BLESSINGS & INSIGHTS

17. Margaret Hebblethwaite remarks: “There was more ground for hope in the afternoon when Benedict XVI, usually so wedded to European Christian culture,

- affirmed “the wisdom of the indigenous peoples” which “fortunately led them to form a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith which the missionaries were offering them. Hence the rich and profound popular religiosity, in which we see the soul of the Latin American peoples.” “By going to the conference, Benedict XVI has left his mark on it. But rather than a rubber stamp, it looks as if it may be an invitation to speak just a little more freely than before, and to be just a little more open to the wisdom of indigenous cultures. Just a little.” [See Margaret Hebblethwaite, “Continent of Hope,” [THE TABLET 19 May 2007:14]
18. Indeed, the papal analysis could not be closer to the truth in terms of the following insights:
- love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, pardon and
 - reconciliation; the God who loved us to the point of handing himself over for us;
 - love for the Lord present in the Eucharist, the incarnate God, dead and risen in order to be the bread of life;
 - the God who is close to the poor and to those who suffer;
 - the profound devotion to the most holy Virgin of Guadalupe, the *Aparecida*, the Virgin invoked under various national and local titles. When the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared to the native Indian Saint Juan Diego, she spoke these important words to him: “*Am I not your mother? Are you not under my shadow and my gaze? Am I not the source of your joy? Are you not sheltered underneath my mantle, under the embrace of my arms?*” (Nican Mopohua, nos. 118-119).
19. The papal address concludes: “All this forms the great mosaic of popular piety which is the precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified.”
20. The papal address indeed did not gloss over the plight of the indigenous peoples, neither in the past nor in the age of neo-liberal economic globalization, viewed through the lens of the papal analysis: “the phenomenon of globalization as a network of relationships extending over the whole planet. Although from certain points of view this benefits the great family of humanity, and is a sign of its profound aspiration towards unity, nevertheless it also undoubtedly brings with it the risk of vast monopolies and of treating profit as the supreme value. As in all areas of human activity, globalization too must be led by ethics, placing everything at the service of the human person, created in the image and likeness of God.”

PAPAL ANALYSES

21. The papal analysis is aware of the plight of the indigenous peoples in the light of the political life of Latin America, stating its concern “in the face of authoritarian forms of government and regimes wedded to certain ideologies that we thought had been superseded, and which do not correspond to the Christian vision of man and society as taught by the Social Doctrine of the Church. On the other side of the coin, the liberal economy of some Latin American countries must take account of equity, because of the ever increasing sectors of society that find themselves oppressed by immense poverty or even despoiled of their own natural resources.”

22. As a result of these death-dealing forces, the papal analysis observes: “one can detect a certain weakening of Christian life in society overall and of participation in the life of the Catholic Church, due to secularism, hedonism, indifferentism and proselytism by numerous sects, animist religions and new pseudo-religious phenomena.”
23. The pastoral response of the papal analysis is situated within the overall mission of evangelization: “we must remember that evangelization has always developed alongside the promotion of the human person and authentic Christian liberation. “Love of God and love of neighbour have become one; in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God” (Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 15). For the same reason, there will also need to be social catechesis and a sufficient formation in the social teaching of the Church, for which a very useful tool is the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The Christian life is not expressed solely in personal virtues, **but also in social and political virtues.**”
24. Yet the papal analysis clearly states that: “If the Church were to start transforming herself into a directly political subject, she would do less, not more, for the poor and for justice, because she would lose her independence and her moral authority, identifying herself with a single political path and with debatable partisan positions. The Church is the advocate of justice and of the poor, precisely because she does not identify with politicians nor with partisan interests. Only by remaining independent can she teach the great criteria and inalienable values, guide consciences and offer a life choice that goes beyond the political sphere. To form consciences, to be the advocate of justice and truth, to educate in individual and political virtues: that is the fundamental vocation of the Church in this area. And lay Catholics must be aware of their responsibilities in public life; they must be present in the formation of the necessary consensus and in opposition to injustice.”
25. The papal analysis insists that “Just structures will never be complete in a definitive way. As history continues to evolve, they must be constantly renewed and updated; they must always be imbued with a political and humane *ethos*—and we have to work hard to ensure its presence and effectiveness. In other words, the presence of God, friendship with the incarnate Son of God, the light of his word: these are always fundamental conditions for the presence and efficacy of justice and love in our societies.”
26. The strongest condemnation of political systems in the papal address states thus: “This was precisely the great error of the dominant tendencies of the last century, a most destructive error, as we can see from the results of both Marxist and capitalist systems. They falsify the notion of reality by detaching it from the foundational and decisive reality which is God. Anyone who excludes God from his horizons falsifies the notion of “reality” and, in consequence, can only end up in blind alleys or with recipes for destruction.”
27. With this sharp analysis, the papal address has delivered its strongest “critique of both Marxism and capitalism, calling them both Godless ideologies that “falsify the notion of reality”. Only believers (“those who recognize God”) were able to respond to reality in a “truly human manner” while those who excluded God would only end up in “blind alleys or with recipes of destruction.” [see Margaret Hebblethwaite, “Continent of Hope,” [THE TABLET 19 May 2007:14]
28. This papal analysis, according to EDITORIAL THE TABLET 19 May 2007, entitled **POOR TAKE PRIORITY** alerts the world of a new political reality in

- Latin America: “Instead of a series of right –wing juntas who looked for support from old-fashioned church traditionalists, from rich landowners and from the US, the continental centre of gravity is now left-of-centre. Marxism is not the American bogeyman it was, not least because the CIA no longer sees it as an ideological fifth column to be manipulated by the Soviet Union. The Church’s own fear of Marxism – that it could subvert the Catholic Church from inside by means of liberation theology – has given way to a more relaxed and case-to-case critique of this blend of economic analysis and theological insight.”
29. The editorial continues: “It is in this context that Pope Benedict’s message to the Bishops of Latin America, at the beginning of CELAM, the Latin American and Caribbean bishop’s conference, has to be understood rather than confrontation and contradiction, but with a somewhat poignant regret that more of the politicians who are leading Latin America towards social democracy were not practicing Catholics themselves. But neither capitalism nor Marxism meets human needs, he declared, and politics has to be humanized by faith in Jesus Christ.” “Pope Benedict has put his own seal on these changes, which may revive an interest in politics for the sake of the poor and set the Church firmly against the extreme division between wealth and poverty which is still a shocking feature of many South American societies – as is corruption.”

PAPAL PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES

30. The theological or faith response recommended in the papal address is: “For a Christian, the nucleus of the reply is simple: only God knows God, only his Son who is God from God, true God, knows him. And he “who is nearest to the Father’s heart has made him known” (*Jn* 1:18). Hence **the unique and irreplaceable importance of Christ for us, for humanity**. If we do not know God in and with Christ, all of reality is transformed into an indecipherable enigma; there is no way, and without a way, there is neither life nor truth.”
31. The knowing and loving of God is the **WAY forward** for the Latin American Church as “**God is the foundational reality**, not a God who is merely imagined or hypothetical, but God with a human face; he is **God-with-us**, the **God who loves even to the Cross**. When the disciple arrives at an understanding of this love of Christ “to the end”, he cannot fail to respond to this love with a similar love: “I will follow you wherever you go” (*Lk* 9:57).”
32. The papal catechesis continues: “We can ask ourselves a further question: what does faith in this God give us? The first response is: it gives us a family, the universal family of God in the Catholic Church. Faith releases us from the isolation of the “I”, because it leads us to **communion**: the encounter with God is, in itself and as such, **an encounter with our brothers and sisters**, an act of convocation, of unification, **of responsibility towards the other and towards others**. In this sense, **the preferential option for the poor is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us**, so as to enrich us with his poverty (cf. *2 Cor* 8:9).”
33. Hence the papal address prayerfully petitions on behalf of the vulnerable in the Latin American society: “*Remain, Lord, with those in our societies who are most vulnerable; remain with the poor and the lowly, with indigenous peoples and Afro-Americans, who have not always found space and support to express the richness of their culture and the wisdom of their identity.*”

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