

## JESUS THE GALILEAN JEW IN MESTIZO THEOLOGY

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*Galilee must have had special salvific signification for the first Christians, as it played an important role in the post-Easter memory of the followers of Jesus and was part of the earliest kerygma (Acts 10:37–41). This article narrates a Mexican-American pastor's journey that led to a theological exploration of Galilee. It examines why this ethnic reference was so important to bring out the beauty and originality of the liberating way of Jesus, beginning with his very particular identity as a Jewish Galilean from Nazareth.*

AT SOME POINT in my life, Galilee and the Jewish Galilean identity of Jesus came to be fundamental reference points for my theological and pastoral endeavors. To understand the Galilean insight at the core of my work, it must be linked to my journey as a Mexican American priest seeking to probe deeply into the gospel as good news to the poor, as freedom to those imprisoned by structures of exclusion, and as sight to those deprived of seeing and appreciating their own dignity and self-worth.

My theology is driven by pastoral concerns grounded in a pastoral praxis, which it signifies, nurtures, enriches, illuminates, and motivates. Several starting points in this pastoral circle led me to see the theological importance of Galilee. After 30 years I am still fascinated by the Galilee of Jesus, and continue to investigate and develop its significance as new evidence emerges, and the responses of so many people, especially the poor, excluded, and marginalized, encourage me with new insights. Drawing from the experience of victimization, the poor sometimes have insights into Scripture that even the best of scholars might miss. This pattern, which has come to be known as the hermeneutical or epistemological privilege of the poor and excluded, is proclaimed by Jesus in the earliest collections of his sayings: "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike. Yes, Father, such has been your

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gracious will” (Mt 11:25–26; Lk 10:21–22).<sup>1</sup> In the end, a variety of personal, pastoral, and theological concerns has nurtured my appreciation of the manner in which the incarnation and the life of Jesus of Galilee unveils the true meaning and mission of our lives today.

### THE QUEST FOR THEOLOGICAL MEANING

*Jesús Nazareno* is one of the basic icons of my Latino Mestizo spirituality.<sup>2</sup> Since childhood I have related to Jesus as a close friend and fellow sojourner, and have always been fascinated with his humanity. While I never doubted his divinity, I became intrigued with how the divine had become so human. The more I probed into his humanity, the more I appreciated his divinity, for it was precisely through his humanity that followers of Jesus discovered his divinity. I knew he was the Son of God, Second Person of the Trinity, Lord, Savior, and Redeemer, but wondered what that meant for Latinos/as in our daily lives, especially in our struggles for identity and belonging in a society that questions our very humanity.

As a Mexican American priest ordained in the 1960s in San Antonio, Texas, I faced issues of social justice irrupting with great force among my people, especially in relation to questions of racial/ethnic identity and belonging. The Southwest of the United States was the great “*frontera*” between the worlds of Catholic Mestizo Latin America and Protestant White Nordic America, between Mexico and the United States, and the Mexican American people lived in this great “in-between.” The same region had been home to great native populations; then it had become

<sup>1</sup> For a further clarification of the hermeneutical privilege of the poor, consult Daniel G. Groody, *Globalization, Spirituality, and Justice: Navigating the Path to Peace* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2007) 32; and Andrés Torres Queiruga, “Jesus: Genuinely Human,” in *Jesus as Christ*, Concilium 2008/3, ed. Andrés Torres Queiruga et al. (London: SCM, 2008) 33–43.

<sup>2</sup> “*Mestizo*” is the Latin American expression for the English “mixed race.” In Latin America it started with the European-Amerindian encounter of the 15th century when race-mixture became the regular practice throughout the land. It comes through the conjugal and spiritual encounter between persons of different ethnic groups. The process is called “*mestizaje*.” In the Carribean and in some parts of Latin America the mixture with Africans has been referred to as “*mulatez*.” The Mestizo/mulatto tends to be rejected as “impure” by both parent groups. This process of racial/ethnic mixing had been prohibited in the United States, and even now is feared and abhorred by many. Mexican Mestizos in the United States were considered undesirable mongrels and inferior in every way. Mixed race marriages were prohibited in the United States and only in 2000 did the last state (Alabama) abolish its law against this. For a good introduction to “Mestizo Theology” consult Jacques Audinet, “A Mestizo Theology,” in *Beyond Borders: Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000); and Audinet, *The Human Face of Globalization: From Multiculturalism to Mestizaje*, trans. Frances Dal Chele (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

New Spain, then Mexico, and is now the United States. Our people were considered too Mexican by mainline U.S. society, and too “*gringo*” by our families and friends in Mexico. We celebrated all our Catholic and civic feasts and had great loyalty to the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, yet on our pilgrimages there we were often ridiculed by our Mexican friends and family.

Whether we liked it or not, consciously or unconsciously, through tensions, conflicts, associates in the workplace, and friendships, we felt we were becoming part of mainline U.S. culture without losing our Mexican soul. U.S. priests and vowed religious would tell us our religious practices were too pagan and superstitious, while those from Mexico said we were losing the true Catholicism and becoming too Protestant. The U.S. Catholic Church of the 1950s and early 1960s, balancing remnants of the Counter-Reformation with a desire for acceptance in a predominantly Protestant culture, offered religious expressions that seemed foreign to our sensibilities. True, we shared the same creed and sacraments, but our everyday expressions of what it meant to be a good Catholic were notably different.

The 1960s was a time of great turmoil, optimism, and expectations. The civil rights movement awakened expectations for racial and ethnic equality, while the Second Vatican Council aroused hopes for a more authentic sense of Christian unity, emphasizing not uniformity but unity in diversity. Church leaders proclaimed the rights of peoples to maintain their unique cultures and spiritual traditions as they were brought into the communion of the faithful. Church documents counseled that cultural differences should not be seen as a threat to unity but rather as an enrichment of Catholicity.

Conciliar constitutions and decrees affirmed that the sacred liturgy should be adorned with music, arts, and customs that reflect “the genius and talents of the various races and peoples,” and that churches should incorporate and ennoble “whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples” around the world. Missioners were reminded that they, like the Apostles “following the footsteps of Christ,” were to preach the word of truth that would beget churches, so that “the kingdom of God [would] be proclaimed and established throughout the world.” “Thus from the seed which is the word of God, particular autochthonous churches should be sufficiently established and should grow up all over the world, endowed with their own maturity and vital forces.”<sup>3</sup>

Vatican II also emphasized that the word of God is the seed that sprouts new life in the land that has received it. We realized that, having been born from the evangelization of Mexico, we were one of those young churches.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum concilium* no. 37; *Lumen gentium* no. 17; *Ad gentes* nos. 1 and 6. All quotations from Vatican II documents are taken from the official translation on the Vatican Web site.

And we felt that the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity provided the following mandate for our pastoral work:

The young churches . . . borrow from the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and disciplines, all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, or enhance the grace of their Savior, or dispose Christian life the way it should be.

To achieve this goal, it is necessary that in each major socio-cultural area, such theological speculation should be encouraged, in the light of the universal Church's tradition, and may submit to a new scrutiny the words and deeds which God has revealed, and which have been set down in Sacred Scripture and explained by the Fathers and by the magisterium.

Thus it will be more clearly seen in what ways faith may seek for understanding, with due regard for the philosophy and wisdom of these peoples; it will be seen in what ways their customs, views on life, and social order can be reconciled with the manner of living taught by divine revelation. From here the way will be opened to a more profound adaptation in the whole area of Christian life.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, guided and motivated by this and similar ecclesial exhortations, we studied the great *mestizaje* that began with the 15th-century European conquest of the Amerindians along with the fascinating evangelization that accompanied and sometimes clashed with the colonizing enterprise. This encounter gave birth to a new human group and the new church of Latin America.<sup>5</sup> For us today, the decree *Ad gentes* still serves as a guide for understanding the development of such new churches, as it reminds us to stay in communion with the universal church while at the same time developing an ecclesial life in accordance with local culture, music, art, traditions, and religious expressions. For this development to occur, however, it soon became clear that serious theological reflection would be required to help the younger churches grow into maturity and assume their rightful place in the communion of churches.

This type of theological reflection became evident to me while attending the Medellín Conference in 1968.<sup>6</sup> The Church in Latin America was on

<sup>4</sup> *Ad gentes* no. 22.

<sup>5</sup> For an excellent and comprehensive investigation of the evangelization of Mexico, consult Jaime Lara, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2004); and Lara, *Christian Texts for Aztecs: Art and Liturgy in Colonial Mexico* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2008). The core thesis of these two books is that the indigenous religious ethos was not destroyed; it was recycled. This recycling is what I call the religious *mestizaje* of Latin American Catholicism.

<sup>6</sup> The General Conferences of Latin American Bishops are fascinating gatherings of the pope, members of the Roman Curia, bishops, clergy, religious, laity, and experts from various fields in theology, catechetics, economics, sociology, etc. to pray, critically discuss, and elaborate a theology and pastoral plan for Latin America. The later conferences have included the bishops of the Caribbean. The first conference was held in Rio de Janeiro; the second met in Medellín, Colombia

fire with a zeal for interpreting and applying Vatican II to the Latin American context. The pope, bishops, theologians, priests, religious, and laity came together to probe the meaning and challenges of faith on the Continent. The theological reflection was critical, dynamic, and creative in responding to the question, What does it mean to be church in the context of Latin America—with its long history of conquest, colonization, exploitation, sexism, and racism, and its increasing plague of poverty and misery? Great insights emerged, but by far the most provocative and illuminating were the preferential option for the poor/excluded and the realization that sin is embedded in unjust social structures of institutionalized violence.<sup>7</sup> Pope John Paul II would later refer to the latter as structural or social sin.<sup>8</sup> Structural sin distorts and perverts the priorities, values, perceptions, understandings, and even conceptualizations of God of those born and raised in social settings under its influence, leading them to do evil while thinking it good and noble. Such distorted thinking has justified collective and individual crimes of conquest, extermination, segregation, and enslavement throughout history, and unfortunately continues to do so today.

While Medellín was fascinating, we Mexican Americans faced not just poverty but also lingering issues of segregation, exclusion and marginalization. And, as we soon discovered, by being from the United States, we were equally distanced from both our U.S. and our Latin American brothers and sisters. We were and certainly continue to be deeply inspired and edified by our Latin American brethren, but we had to pick up on their spirit and probe the meaning of faith in our own reality within the United States. Our Latin American friends challenged us: “You are living an entirely new situation. You must do the theological and catechetical reflection that the Church needs in your region; we cannot do it for you.”

Living in the great *frontera*, the great border “in-between” the United States and Mexico, some of us, though descendants of the cultural and ecclesial *mestizaje* of Latin America, began to see our reality as a “second *mestizaje*”<sup>9</sup> with contemporary mainline U.S., Anglo-Saxon, Protestant

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(1968); and the last one met in Aparecida, Brazil (2007). It is a good example of a regional church doing theology collaboratively.

<sup>7</sup> Second General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *The Church in the Present-Day Transformation of Latin America in the Light of the Council* (Washington: Secretariat for Latin America, NCCB, 1979). For a critical development of the basic notions of this document, see the works of Gustavo Gutiérrez, especially *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (December 30, 1987) no. 30; *Reconciliatio et paenitentia* (December 2, 1984) no. 16; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no. 408 (Washington: USCC, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> For a more complete explanation of this concept in my work, see Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1983, 2000, 2002) 13–16; *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*

culture. Thus, in the late 1960s a small group of Mexican American priests and religious men and women, inspired by the civil rights movements and the directives of Vatican II, formed a group to examine our cultural and religious identity and belonging. There were few of us, since Mexican Americans had been prevented from entering many seminaries and religious orders, but we were determined to make a difference and to bring positive recognition by the Church to the religious treasures of our people. At that time, our religious traditions were regarded by many as backward and even pagan, but today Pope Benedict XVI refers to them as the great spiritual heritage, soul, and treasure of the Latin American people.

We formed associations to pray and reflect together. We experienced tremendous enthusiasm as we began to study the documents of Vatican II, our history, the evangelization that brought us Christian faith, the socio-economic conditions of our people, and the religious practices that had sustained our faith through the frequent absence of priests or sacraments. But enthusiasm was not enough. We needed academic tools to probe more critically and creatively into the reality of our people and to formulate a theological understanding of our faith as lived and practiced. Other cultural contexts had produced ground-breaking theologies, and we had much to learn from them, but they only motivated us to seek to understand ourselves from within the theological meaning of our own reality and life. As pastors and religious leaders, we had an obligation to our people and to our Church.<sup>10</sup>

In 1968, I was challenged by friends and colleagues to lead the way and was offered the opportunity to spend a year at the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila, where I lived with Indian, Asian, and African students studying forms of evangelization and inculturation. We were blessed with great scholars who, inspired by the way of the Incarnation, explored Christianity not just theologically but also anthropologically, bringing out the human signification of God's salvific process.

At the East Asian Pastoral Institute I learned that culture is not simply folklore, but the common soul and defining spirit of a people, the colored lens through which we see and interpret reality. I realized that authentic

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(Boulder: University of Colorado, 2000); and for a more expansive application within the United States, see Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> A few years ago John P. Meier affirmed this obligation in his *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 3 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1991: "We learn from past quests, to be sure, but we cannot substitute the lessons of others for our own personal wrestling with the central problems of life, problems that affect each person must face squarely alone. . . . It is also true of every educated Christian's need to search for answers about the reality and the meaning of the man named Jesus" (1:4).

evangelization and the development of local churches are impossible without a deep anthropological appreciation of the people's heritage and culture, and without a sound anthropological translation and interpretation of Scripture and church teaching. I was also fascinated to discover the need for critical biblical exegesis as a condition for authentic evangelization.<sup>11</sup> The life of the local church draws new and deeper insights and meaning from Scripture, which requires not only exegesis but also cultural hermeneutics to explain what their faith, experience, and cultural life contribute to their (and our) understanding of the meaning of the text.

Several years later while studying in Paris, I would realize that the Fathers of the Church were quite practiced in cultural hermeneutics.<sup>12</sup> Mexican American activists together with the bishops of Texas founded the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in San Antonio in 1972 to promote this type of reflection for our people. MACC was to be a place of research and formation with a small resident international faculty, working in close collaboration with friends and colleagues in Latin America, Asia, India, and Europe.<sup>13</sup> We had not yet started to make friends in Africa, but enriching relationships were to come.

Later, because of my work at MACC, I was invited to do doctoral studies at the Institut Catholique de Paris, where I had the good fortune to study historical theology with Marie Dominique Chenu, O.P., ecclesiology with Yves Congar, O.P., sociology and theology with Jacques Audinet, *nouvelle théologie* with Claude Geffre, O.P., and René Marlé, S.J., and patristic theology and methods for actualizing the word of God with Charles Kannengiesser, S.J. In Paris I learned that all theological reflection, consciously or not, is socially and culturally situated.<sup>14</sup> Our social situation gives us a unique perspective, and when we come together in

<sup>11</sup> This is precisely what I understand Benedict XVI to be referring to in his introduction to *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) esp. xvi–xxii.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Kannengiesser, "Avenir des traditions fondatrices: La Christologie comme tâche au champ des études patristiques," *Recherches de science religieuse* 65 (1977) 139–68. The subject of this particular issue was: "Visages du Christ: Les tâches présentes de la christologie." This article along with many conversations with the author were very influential in clarifying the vision of my task.

<sup>13</sup> Using the pedagogical approach of Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), MACC brought in Mexican Americans from throughout the country to reflect on our reality and our aspirations; our team also traveled throughout the Southwest, to many parts of the country, and even overseas to consult with our people stationed there, listening to the people's narratives and gradually developing a historical, social, and religious self-study of our reality and our collective aspirations.

<sup>14</sup> I would like to see theologians and biblical scholars start with a brief biographical statement of their sociocultural conditioning. It would help the reader to appreciate both the richness and limitations of their work.

communion and dialogue, the perspectives of each enriches the entire church. It is not a question of placing one theology against another, but of bringing them together as various beautiful pieces of one mosaic.

Against this background, I formulated my theological frame of reference: (1) study and present the historical, social, and religious situation of the people as the arena for the work of both sin and grace; (2) read the gospel matrix from our sociocultural situation; and (3) read the culture in light of the gospel in order to discern the meaning of the word of God today.<sup>15</sup> This approach would bring out aspects of the gospel we had not anticipated and uncover aspects of the historical-cultural situation we ourselves had missed. The idea was to “submit to a new scrutiny the deeds and words which God has revealed” so that the faith of the people might develop a more complete self-understanding.<sup>16</sup>

### THE GALILEAN INSIGHT

In writing my doctoral thesis in Paris (1976–1978), it was not difficult to put together the historical, cultural, and religious sections. I had been gathering material and developing the key concepts with our interdisciplinary and interethnic team at the Mexican American Cultural Center for several years. The historical context would be the twofold conquest and colonization: first Spain’s conquest of today’s Latin America, and then the U.S. conquest of the northern region of Mexico. This historical process had produced our *mestizaje* with deep contemporary problems of identity and belonging rooted in marginalization—and sometimes total exclusion—from both parent groups. It was from within this perspective that I began to search the Gospels for the Christian meaning of our quest.

The great theologies I studied and loved were fascinating but still distant, and they offered no theological understanding of the Mestizo reality of our living faith. What did the gospel have to offer our people? Could the gospel help us understand the deeper meaning of our historical process and culture? In what ways did the gospel bring healing and empowerment to Mexican-American people in the context of an Anglo-American culture

<sup>15</sup> I am grateful to Michael Lee for his analysis of my pastoral/theological method in this issue of *Theological Studies* in terms of the traditional categories of *ver*, *juzgar*, *actuar* (to see, to judge, and to act), which he says means (1) to do a critical analysis of reality, (2) to scrutinize the inspired word and tradition for guidance, and (3) to discern a Christian response. This is the method used by the Church of Latin America, which has become basic to the work of MACC, and which I have used in hundreds of grassroots Bible reading sessions throughout the Southwest. It has become so ingrained that I did not even think of identifying it.

<sup>16</sup> *Ad gentes* no. 22.



that marginalized and excluded us? Some scriptural concepts started to emerge as programmatic: the rejected “suffering servant” and the “new heaven and new earth” of Isaiah’s universalism; Philippians’ total self-emptying of the Son; the kingdom of God wherein all are welcomed; the positive dealings of Jesus with the “impure” and “excluded”; and the declaration that “the stone rejected by the builders has become the cornerstone” (Mt 21:42, Mk 12:10, Lk 20:17, Acts 4:11, 1 Pt 2:7). Since the New Testament asserts that Jesus brings about a new creation, I wondered if the “stone rejected” becoming the cornerstone of the new creation might not be a critical allusion to the builders of unjust and arrogant societies harkening back to the Tower of Babel (Gen 11)—the very ones rejected by them would become the foundation stones of the new!

In praying over Scripture and reading through various theological and biblical journals in light of the fascination of our people with the earthly (carnal) *Jesús Nazareno*, a question emerged, a curiosity at first, as to why the constant mention of Galilee in the Gospel narratives was not, as far as I could see, a contemporary theological point of reference? More than 60 times the Gospels mention “Galilee,” “Galileans,” and places in Galilee. Luke places the Annunciation (1:26–38) and the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus in Galilee (4:14–21). Mark places “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ” there (1:1, 9), along with the majority of his ministry. In three Gospels the risen Lord sends the disciples to Galilee where they will see him (Mt 28:7; Mk 16:7; Jn 21:1); Luke does not send them back to Galilee, but at Pentecost the speakers are identified as Galileans (Acts 2:7).

In Galilee Peter is commissioned to be the leader of the new flock (Jn 21:15–17), and from Galilee the disciples are sent to all nations and to the ends of the earth (Mt 28:16–20). Given the importance of Jerusalem to Jewish restoration thinking at the time, I wondered why Galilee had become such an important point of reference in the Gospels. Galilee seemed of little or no importance in the Hebrew Bible and had apparently negative connotations for some of the people at the time of Jesus (Mt 21:10–11; Jn 1:46, 49; 7:52). It seemed to me that Galilee must have been of special salvific signification to the first Christians, since it plays an important role in the post-Easter memory of the followers of Jesus and becomes part of the earliest kerygma (Acts 10:37–41).<sup>17</sup> The question pressed itself: Why is Jesus’ ethnic identity as a Jewish Galilean from Nazareth an important dimension of the incarnation, and what does it disclose about the beauty and originality of Jesus’ liberating life and message?

<sup>17</sup> Sean Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus Story* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005) 171–74.

In one of the few references found in the Hebrew Bible, the Prophet Isaiah (9:1–2) refers to “Galilee of the Gentiles.”<sup>18</sup> Isaiah also speaks of universal salvation for all the nations, of a new era of peace and harmony, and even of a new heaven and a new earth. The influence of Isaiah’s perspective in the New Testament seemed to suggest a unique and unsuspected role for Galilee in God’s salvific plan for the restoration of unity among the human family, a unity and harmony that had been destroyed by sin since the very beginning of creation (Gen 3–11).<sup>19</sup> The relative unimportance of Galilee seemed to fit with the idea that the gospel is absurd to many, that the ways of God appear as foolishness to the wise of this world, and that the redemptive grace of God is an unexpected gift.<sup>20</sup>

As I read the literature, I began to identify more and more with Galilee as the land of various invasions and multiple ethnic encounters.<sup>21</sup> Occupied by many nations, centuries of rebuilding on previously occupied layers had left its mark on the land and its people. It appeared to have been a frontier region of Israel surrounded by foreign nations, a land of multiple borders! Being surrounded and even partially populated by cities of various ethnicities, cultural encounters, tensions, and exchanges would have taken place in various degrees.<sup>22</sup> Rural Galilean Jews spoke with a regional accent (Lk 22:73) apparently regarded as laughable, and were ridiculed by people in Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> They may have gone for work or even been conscripted as forced labor in the great building projects of the area, as poor people go wherever work is available.

While the culture, politics, and Judaism of Galilee were closely related to those of Judea, the various implications of what it meant to be “Galilean” were ambiguous, ranging from simple regional identification to very derogatory connotations. The inhabitants were mostly poor, rural peasants exploited by distant landowners and even Temple officials, some of whom considered them backward, impure, rebellious, and ignorant. Many negative stereotypes about the Galilean Jews abounded, and despite their love

<sup>18</sup> Whether this was the case or not, as argued by contemporary scholars, this certainly seems to be how Galilee was perceived by Isaiah and later on framed in Matthew’s Gospel.

<sup>19</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 386–409.

<sup>20</sup> See 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 where the theme of wisdom and foolishness is brought out not only in the cross but also in the annunciation to Mary in the Galilean town of Nazareth. See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church* nos. 486, 498.

<sup>21</sup> For a further development of this point, see Virgilio Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> For a clear, precise presentation of the Jewish and Gentile presence in Galilee and its surrounding regions, see Mark A. Chancey, *The Myth of A Gentile Galilee* (New York: Cambridge University, 2002) 120–66.

<sup>23</sup> Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 3:631.

and loyalty to Jerusalem and the Temple, they were despised among some elites who lived there.<sup>24</sup> While Jewish by population, Galilee was a land of regular, often tense cultural encounters and exchange of locals with occupying foreigners and/or non-Jewish neighbors, a kind of *frontera* where relatively homogeneous Jewish villagers met and interacted with diverse others under difficult circumstances.

Jesus lived and moved along the fringes of Galilee, making his home base in Capernaum, a crossroads between local peasantry and international trade routes.<sup>25</sup> He also apparently made various visits into the regions of the Decapolis—"These 'crossings over' in the Gospels refer at a literal level to the lake, but reflect also the crossing over of a cultural barrier."<sup>26</sup> All this would have put Jesus into contact with people of other ethnicities and religions. As Sean Freyne has stated, "Jesus' movements in these 'outer' border regions of an essentially Jewish Galilee pointed to his greater sense of freedom with regard to contact with non-Jews than that displayed by some at least of his Galilean co-religionists."<sup>27</sup>

Historical, literary, and archeological investigation continues to produce new evidence and historical insights into the cultural, political, and religious realities of Galilee.<sup>28</sup> These findings are important for New Testament interpretation and certainly for my work. On the other hand, while such studies provide a rich understanding of the stage setting for Jesus' life and ministry, they can never replace the New Testament as the inspired memory of Jesus. As Pope Benedict XVI writes in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, "I trust the Gospels."<sup>29</sup> Various theologians have engaged the aforementioned studies to profound effect, such as Elizabeth Johnson, whose *Truly Our Sister* examines the lives of Galilean women and Mary.<sup>30</sup> Pablo Alonso, S.J., in *The Woman Who Changed Jesus: Crossing Boundaries*, examines the effect of foreigners on Jesus.<sup>31</sup> Sean Freyne's article in this issue is a

<sup>24</sup> It seems from the Gospel narratives as though Jesus never spent a night in Jerusalem. Could the reason be that Galileans were not welcome in Jerusalem at night because they were regarded as troublemakers, or simply because of who they were?

<sup>25</sup> Paul Hertig, "The Multi-ethnic Journeys of Jesus in Matthew: Margin-Center Dynamics," *Missiology: An International Review* 26 (1998) 23–36, at 25. There were more important international trade routes elsewhere, but some did pass through Galilee, allowing encounters with foreigners.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Reed, *Archaeology and the Galilean Jesus: A re-examination of the Evidence* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 2002) 216.

<sup>27</sup> Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean* 109–10.

<sup>28</sup> Sean Freyne, "Jesus the Jew," in *Jesus as Christ* 24–32.

<sup>29</sup> Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* xxi.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Pablo Alonso Vicente, "The Woman Who Changed Jesus: Crossing Boundaries in Mk 7, 24–30" (Ph.D. diss., Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2006).

marvelous example of how historical, geographical, and archeological studies yield a deeper understanding of the life of Jesus as it appears in the Gospel narratives.

For me, however, the point of departure has been the question described above: What was the theological significance of Jewish Galilee and its Gentile surroundings for the Gospel writers and early Christians? In view of the emphasis in the Gospels on the identity and mission of Jesus to uplift the downtrodden and to bring the kingdom of God to everyone beginning with Israel, how did the reputation of Galilee shape the writing and reception of the canonical Gospels and their salvific message? The question is not so much about historical or archeological knowledge of the social world of Galilee, as important and helpful as that is, but about the possible symbolic-theological meaning of Galilee for the first Christian communities and their writings about Jesus.

Given that the New Testament is to be read within the totality of Scripture, and since the redemption brought by Jesus Christ was nothing less than a new creation, I have come to the realization that it is important to situate Jesus both within the context of the Jewish heritage of his time and within the larger biblical notion of creation and sin. Jesus goes to the very depths of the tradition to bring out its farthest-reaching implications. Sin divides individuals and nations, transforming them into enemies. It creates, legitimizes, and imposes marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation, robbing people of knowledge about their God-given dignity as human beings. Jesus came to break the many divisive, deep-rooted, and even sacralized barriers that thwart the unity of the human family and consign certain individuals and entire groups to unworthiness and inferiority.<sup>32</sup>

When God became human, healing humanity through his experience as a person who was wounded and hurt in many ways, God did not become a generic human being, a Roman, a Greek, or even an elite Judean Jew. He became a marginal, Galilean Jew, a village craftsman living with his family and neighbors in a village situated on the periphery of the political, intellectual, and religious powers of the world.<sup>33</sup> From his childhood visits to the Temple to his death on the cross, it is evident that Jesus loved his Jewish religion with its unwavering hope in the God who saves. He died as a pious Jew reciting the evening prayer of his people, placing hope and confidence in the God who saves (Lk 24:46). It is equally true, however, that he does not seem to have been limited by an overly strict

<sup>32</sup> The great tragedy of this type of mentality is that it has helped produce and continues to inflame not only the exclusion but even the genocide of millions of people.

<sup>33</sup> For an excellent and concise description of the identity of a marginal Galilean Jew, see Meier, *A Marginal Jew* 1:6–9.

religious interpretation of the *Sabbat*, and the codes of purity/impurity and exclusion that seem to have been common in his times. God's love is greater than any human tradition that tends to limit or even hide it (Mk 2:27–28).

Jesus became a man at once distant from all power centers of domination and at the crossroads where various peoples encounter one another. Since grace builds upon nature, I wondered if Jesus' Galilean experience could have been a cultural preparation for the new humanity inaugurated by him and promoted by the New Testament, one that would not be limited by blood or ethnicity. In the end, I started to see the vision of Jesus as rooted in, yet transcending, his experiences in Galilee: a vision that could serve as a prototype of the *fronteras* of the world—whether they be nations or neighborhoods—where diverse peoples encounter one another not to fight, humiliate, or exclude one another, but to form new friendships and families in a space where the “impure” and excluded can find new possibilities and inaugurate new beginnings. Jesus the Galilean Jew who interprets his context in light of God's way thus appears as the doorway—the sheep gate—through which all peoples are invited into the new flock, the new humanity.

In becoming a Galilean Jew, a craftsman in an insignificant village, and son of Mary, Jesus becomes one of the rejects and marginalized of society, along with the millions who suffer exclusion, segregation, and rejection simply because of ethnicity or origin. He suffers in his flesh the multiple effects of the victims of the sin of the world. Yet, in his baptism, he comes out of this oppressive and dehumanizing situation of rejection as the beloved Son of God (Mk 1:11; Mt 3:17; Lk 3:22), leaving behind the dehumanizing scars of rejection, while still knowing the pain. From here he sets out on his mission to proclaim the kingdom of God wherein all who believe in him will be welcomed, especially those excluded and humiliated by society. He takes a most common, beautiful, and emotional symbol of his people, the “kingdom of God,” and proposes an earth-shaking new interpretation: everyone will be welcomed, beginning with the despised and impure of his society (Mt 21:31). The “rejected one” rejects rejection by living and proclaiming a universal welcome and love for all. He invites all to repent of their feelings and attitudes of inferiority or superiority, of impurity or purity, of belonging or rejection, and to recognize that we are all children of God called to share in the common table, the table of the new family that goes beyond blood or social status. It is in this experience of radical acceptance that new life begins.

One of the unquestioned constants in the life of Jesus was his association with the socially despised outsiders and untouchables. Through contact with him, the lowliest of society recover their sense of God-given dignity, and the excluded experience a new sense of belonging. Jesus was not afraid to touch and associate with the impure and with public sinners, even dining

with them. Jesus loved people and was not afraid to share in their joys and sorrows, regardless of what society thought of them. I suspect that in this he scandalized everyone because he refused to be scandalized by anyone. He did not merely proclaim a new understanding of the kingdom, but he lived it out in his practice of joyful table fellowship with everyone. It was this experience of table fellowship, especially with tax collectors and public sinners, that was most meaningful to Jesus' followers and most offensive and scandalous to his opponents.<sup>34</sup>

The response of Jesus to his Galilean context is a key to the salvific understanding of his identity and mission. In choosing the rejected of our sinful world, God reveals the lie of the world; and in welcoming everyone into the reign of God, beginning with the rejected, God demolishes the power of this world's segregating structures and reveals the truth of God's creation. Creation is for everyone, and not exclusively for any one person or human group. No wonder the Temple veil rips apart upon Jesus' death! This rejection of rejection is good news to the downtrodden but threatening to those in control of status and belonging, whose laws and traditions often exclude and disgrace others (Lk 11:46; Mt 23:4).

As a man, Jesus was certainly conditioned and prepared for his mission by the historical-cultural and geographical setting of his upbringing, yet in his intimate contact with Abba, the Creator God, he brings insights that transcend his particular historical-cultural location. The divine initiative works through the culturally conditioned humanity of Jesus. He comes out of the restorationist hopes of his Jewish people, but he interprets them in a freeing, loving, creative, and universal way that is quickly demonized by many of the scholars and hierarchs of his religion. His detractors called him a blasphemer and a troublemaker; questioned by his family, he was eventually "handed over" to the Romans who condemned him to crucifixion. Thus Jesus must confront the structures that legitimize the unjust ways of his sinful world that hide and pervert the truth of God. He must go to Jerusalem where the Jewish aristocratic elite collaborated with the Roman authorities in the domination and exploitation of their own people.<sup>35</sup> He goes to confront, not with violence, military might, or armed revolution, but as the suffering servant who confronts only with the power of truth in the service of love. He came to break the spiral of violence, and even if the cost was the cross, he would triumph through the power of unlimited love. While it is never easy, Jesus shows us that we must confront the sin

<sup>34</sup> For a beautiful and profound elaboration of this point, see Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1967).

<sup>35</sup> Note the confrontations of Jesus with the Temple authorities in all four Gospel accounts: Matthew 21:12–27; Mark 11:11–33; Luke 19:45–20:8; John 2:1–22.

structured so deeply within our own ways of life that we often take it as natural, sometimes even sacred, truth!

When we see through the seeming tragedy of Golgotha and discover that sin, both structural and personal, was the real cause of this drama, we realize that blaming the Jewish people or even their first-century elites can lead us to ignore the role of our own sinfulness today, which crucify not one, but many people.<sup>36</sup> Only when we can see that it was the twisted logic of power and unjust social structures that demanded the crucifixion of Jesus (Jn 11:50; Mk 14:1b; Lk 26:4; 22:2) will we begin to unveil the same absurdities that continue to demand the crucifixions of prophets and the innocent victims of every type. Blaming the Jewish people or even their leaders is an easy way to mask our own unjust social arrangements (our idols) and to ignore their consequences.<sup>37</sup>

Misuse of Scripture is not uncommon. Many in Europe marginalized and persecuted our Jewish brothers and sisters out of a warped reading of the gospel. Many in the Americas used Scripture to justify the enslavement of Africans, the exploitation of the Amerindians through the *encomienda* system as an aspect of evangelization, and the elimination of the natives as God's will. Some in the United States today justify persecuting and imprisoning poor, defenseless, undocumented immigrants through a superficial reading of Romans 13 on obedience to civil authority. This perversion of the gospel must be denounced. Jesus is the prophet who remains faithful to the poor and confronts injustice with the power of love in the

<sup>36</sup> Consult the various works of Ignacio Ellacuría, Jon Sobrino, and Robert Lassalle-Klein on the crucified peoples; see esp. Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Crucified People," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 580–604; Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) and *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2001); and Robert Lassalle-Klein, "Jesus of Galilee and the Crucified People: Jon Sobrino, S.J., Ignacio Ellacuría, S.J., and the Future of Contextual Christology," in this issue of *Theological Studies*; and Lassalle-Klein, "A Postcolonial Christ," in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003) 135–53; also Daniel G. Groody, C.S.C., ed., *The Option for the Poor in Christian Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2007); Groody's award-winning documentary, *Dying to Live* (2006); and his article in this issue of *Theological Studies*. See also Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo, eds., *1492–1992: The Voice of the Victims*, Concilium 1990/6 (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990); and Virgilio Elizondo, ed., *Way of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in the Americas* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1992).

<sup>37</sup> Virgilio Elizondo, "Unmasking the Idols," and "Evil and the Experience of God," in *Beyond Borders: The Writings of Virgilio Elizondo and Friends*, ed. Timothy Matovina (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2000) 217–24, 225–32.

service of truth. He witnesses to the truth that love unites all in a new humanity; knowing it would cost him his life, he did not remain silent.<sup>38</sup>

In rejecting Jesus, those invested in the sinful structures he sought to change decided he must be eliminated; they even stirred up the people to demand his crucifixion. The one who rejects rejection is violently rejected by the leaders and people of a disordered world. With his death on the cross, it remains to be seen whose way is true. Yet in raising him from the dead, God identifies the way of Jesus as his own; confirming his announcement of God's kingdom of love, reconciliation, and compassion will always be a challenge to the unjust persons and structures of the world. The power of God's loving truth will triumph over the powers of death and the forces of evil, no matter how righteous and sacred they might appear to be.

Luke-Acts tells us that on the morning of Pentecost the Apostles received the Holy Spirit and were empowered to proclaim this new way of love to all humanity. The nations that were scattered and became enemies at Babel, now begin to be reunited as one people. The great miracle of Pentecost is not only that each one hears in his or her own tongue, but that it is the new Galileans, the very ones whose speech was difficult to understand and often ridiculed, that are now understood by all. Those who had nothing to offer—"Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46); "no prophet arises in Galilee" (Jn 7:52)—now have the best thing to offer, and thus begins the Christian movement.

All these considerations led me to formulate what I have called the "Galilean principle": out of the rejects and ridiculed of society a new society of universal welcome and love is possible. From the margins Jesus initiates not a new center but rather a new movement of the Spirit that enables people to cross segregating boundaries and form a new human family based on love of God and love of neighbor. Thus, in going to Jerusalem, Jesus not only confronts unjust structures that sacralize exclusion and legitimize exploitation, but through his loving passion and sacrifice on the cross, he crosses the ultimate boundary of death into new life, beckoning us to follow in his saving footsteps. After his resurrection, he sends his followers back to Galilee, where they would see him and continue to expand his border-crossing movement. Galilee would never become the center, but it was the point of departure for the beginning of a new

<sup>38</sup> Examples of those in our own times who did not remain silent are Archbishop Oscar Romero and the Jesuit martyrs of the University of Central American in El Salvador; also in El Salvador were Maryknoll Sisters Mora Clarke and Ita Ford, Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel, and Jean Donovan; in Guatemala, Bishop Juan José Gerardi, Father Stanley Rother, and the many other catechists and *ministros de la palabra* who were killed because of their proclamation of the truth of the Scriptures.



creation, as the Galilees today continue to be points of departure for new humanities to emerge.

Jesus reflects the restorationist aspirations of first-century Judaism common to Judea and Galilee, but his religious imagination, illuminated by prayer, creates new alternatives that surpass everyone's expectations. From the peripheries of power and closed belonging, which tend to become "idols" confusing their own ways with God's, God raises followers of Jesus in each generation to be visionaries and prophets of new humanities shaped by his vision. The early Christian movement is a powerful witness to this ongoing border-crossing that enables diverse people to continue being who they are, but in a radically new way that defies the power of any border to prevent the love of God and neighbor. Enemies could become friends, foreigners could now become neighbors, and strangers could become family.

These insights into the life of Jesus in Galilee enabled me to see our situation of border-crossings and *mestizaje* in South Texas not as deficient but as pregnant with multiple possibilities for a broader, more generous future for humanity. Looking through the eyes of Jesus as I knew him, I came to see our protests and social movements as our way of following him into Jerusalem. I began to see our fiestas, especially the massive celebrations of Our Lady of Guadalupe, as expressions of his resurrection, celebrations of the new life begun in us, yet not complete.

### A GALILEAN INTERPRETATION FOR TODAY

Galilee led me to reflect on traditional theological themes in a way that unveiled unexpected theological dimensions of Mestizo identity. Through numerous Bible-reading community groups<sup>39</sup> throughout the Southwest and many other parts of the United States, we Mestizos started to see our situation through the eyes of Jesus the Galilean Jew who reveals the truth of life. We started to see our rejection and marginalization as an element of our election by God to start something new.<sup>40</sup> God chooses and calls

<sup>39</sup> Using the approach of Brazilian biblical scholar Carlos Mesters, MACC organized hundreds of Bible reading groups that would discuss the participants' life situation before reading and discussing the Gospel text. The main interest is not to interpret the text's historical-literal meaning (although this can be brought out by the leader), but to interpret the life of the participants through the Bible. This method is a communitarian adaption of the *lectio divina*. Some of the insights of my own work came from these Bible study groups. For an explanation of this method, see Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower: A New Reading of the Bible*, trans. Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Divine election is not a privilege to lord it over others, but a responsibility to be of service in the construction of a new humanity. See Jon Sobrino, "El reino de dios y Jesús, compassion, justicia, mesa compartida," *Concilium* 326 (June 2008) 403–4.

individuals and groups. What was our call? We started to see our ambiguous “in-between” identity as the basis for a new, more universal identity, a new source of belonging, and a call to service. We started to investigate parallels between our Mestizo experience of living in the “in-between,” of crossing borders on a daily basis, and the constant border-crossings of Jesus in Galilee. This has given us useful insights, addressing the rich potential of the multiple and massive border crossings that characterize the emerging global village. While we cannot live without borders of various kinds, they do not have to be divisive and destructive. Mestizo peoples inhabit the “in-between” of nations and cultures, playing a painful but creative mediating role in processes of intercultural encounter that foster a gradual movement from closed particularities to a more open universality. As in Galilee, so in our Mexican-American fiestas, the joy of inclusive table fellowship serves as a living sign of the universal reign of God begun by Jesus, full of promise, though not yet complete.

I believe that we have been called to work, as Jesus did, so that others will not have to suffer the pains of exclusion, marginalization, and segregation that we have suffered. The simplicity of our devotions and the festive spirit of our religious traditions, when considered in light of the prayer life of Jesus and his participation in festive rituals, are revealed not as underdeveloped, superstitious, or pagan vestiges of earlier practices, but as beautiful expressions of a Mestizo people living joyfully in communion with God. Beyond any human suffering, there is the joy of living in communion with God and with one another.

The journey of Jesus to Jerusalem and the cross is likewise a call to be involved in the issues and movements of social justice. This is what I have called the Jerusalem principle. It is not sufficient merely to do good and avoid evil; rather we must do good and struggle against evil. The journey embodies the gradual but necessary tearing down of deeply rooted traditions of segregation, exclusion, and degradation, as symbolized by the tearing asunder of the Temple veil. The path is never easy—there is no escape from the violence of the cross—and human experience is full of violence and injustice. But Jesus shows us that we should not allow these negative experiences to deter us from the work of building the reign of God. We must pass through violence in order to follow Jesus in cooperating with God’s efforts to bring forth new forms of life.

Movements like the United Farm Workers of César Chávez and Dolores Huerta; the Southwest Voter Registration League of Willie Velazquez; grass-roots community organizing; the efforts of the National Council of La Raza, and Mexicans and Americans Thinking Together (MATT) to promote humanitarian immigration reform; pro-life groups; and many other such efforts can be seen as actions of the Spirit as we confront injustices that have become ingrained in the structures of our society.

As a resurrected people, even in the midst of our suffering and struggles, we do not lose the joy of our new life, which by our faith we know is already beginning within us. Just as the Galileans had something of value to offer at the time of Jesus, what we offer society is not just for ourselves, but for the good of humanity. Nowhere is this better captured than in our all-inclusive religious fiestas—affirmations of the triumph of the spirit of love despite forces that oppose it. As a resurrected people following the way of Jesus, we are constantly on the move, going beyond the limits of our borders toward a broader and more inclusive humanity, helping to bring about not just the redemption of individuals but the progressive redemption of humanity.

Through the optic of the path tread by the Galilean Jesus, our own Mexican-American Mestizo life takes on a new and beautiful meaning: shame is transformed into honor, resentment into gratitude, exclusion into mission, and sadness into joy. Involvement in movements for social justice is our way to Jerusalem, while our festive celebrations are an affirmation of the Lord who has risen for and in us. In Christ crucified and resurrected, the sufferings of the moment are the birth pains of a new existence. In Jesus the Galilean Jew, our people's love and devotion to *Jesús Nazareno* is a dynamic, living source of life, affirmation, mission, strength, encouragement, and joy.