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Divine Pedagogy: *Dei Verbum* and the Theology of Virgilio Elizondo

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Abstract

The influence of Vatican II and the conciliar era on Virgilio Elizondo's theology is insufficiently acknowledged. In particular, he contended *Dei Verbum* teaches that the Scriptures and Christian tradition not only testify to the past words and deeds of God, but also instruct us in divine pedagogy. He further insisted that the poor and marginal are the privileged bearers of divine revelation, so these and all sources of faith must be engaged through their eyes. Elizondo's theological investigations offer striking insights into *Dei Verbum* and the divine pedagogy it expounds.

Keywords

Virgilio Elizondo, *Dei Verbum*, Galilee, Guadalupe, Latino/a theology, *mestizaje*, popular Catholicism, preferential option for the poor, Vatican II

Authors' Note: We count ourselves among numerous friends of Virgilio Elizondo who were heartbroken at his tragic passing on March 14 a year ago. But this essay is not only a tribute to a dear friend and mentor. It is a first attempt to articulate his theological and pastoral legacy. Our conviction is that scholars, pastors, and promoters of justice have scarcely begun to appreciate Virgilio's vision and genius. Our hope is that these reflections will animate many others to more deeply examine all that God gave and taught us through Virgilio.

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Virgilio Elizondo was a seminarian when Pope John XXIII announced he would convene the Second Vatican Council. He followed the Council with great fascination and subsequently engaged its teachings for more than half a century as a priest, pastor, and theologian. His participation in the Latin American episcopal conferences at Medellín and Puebla and in other developments within the global church deepened and expanded his engagement in Vatican II renewal. Virgilio sought to instantiate the Council fathers' admonition that

> In each major socio-cultural area, such theological speculation should be encouraged, in the light of the universal Church's tradition, as 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.[1]

Consequently he developed a theological vision that led to his wide renown as the founder of US Latino/a theology. In 1972 he established the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC, now the Mexican American Catholic College), a distinguished theological think tank and training center for pastoral leaders among Mexican Americans and other Latinas and Latinos in the United States. As rector of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas from 1983 to 1995, he led the effort to revitalize the parish as a center of public ritual and traditions. Virgilio's ministerial leadership and theological writings echo a recent challenge Pope Francis posed to theologians: "One of the main contributions of the Second Vatican Council was precisely seeking a way to overcome this divorce between theology and pastoral care, between faith and life."[2]

The Influence of Vatican II

The influence of Vatican II and the conciliar era on Elizondo's theology is rarely acknowledged, at least not to the same extent that he himself credited the Council as foundational for his life work and witness. One of his first books, *Christianity and Culture: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology and Ministry for the Bicultural Community* (1975), deemed Vatican II "the most missionary of all Councils."[3] The primary sources he engaged in this book are the Scriptures, the documents of Vatican II and the Medellín conference, and the Mexican-American experience. Virgilio avowed that *Christianity and Culture* was but an initial draft of his later theological investigations, based as it was on his schemas and teaching notes for the foundational

1. *Ad Gentes* (December 7, 1965) 22 (hereafter cited in text as *AG*), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651207_ad-gentes_en.html.
2. Pope Francis, "Video Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in an International Theological Congress Held at the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina" (Buenos Aires, September 1–3, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2015/documents/papa-francesco_20150903_videomessaggio-teologia-buenos-aires.html.
3. Virgilio Elizondo, *Christianity and Culture: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology and Ministry for the Bicultural Community* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1975) 72.

classes he had been developing at MACC. Nonetheless, even in this first sketch of his pastoral theological agenda, one can clearly see the foundational influence of Vatican II.

Elizondo consistently underscored the incarnational principle of the conciliar texts, most succinctly summarized in *Ad Gentes*: "The Church, in order to be able to offer all of them the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, must implant herself into these groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself, in virtue of His Incarnation, to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt" (*AG* 10). For Virgilio, this meant that we cannot approach Jesus as a generic human being. Rather, the Incarnation meant God became human in a specific era, society, and culture—first-century Galilee—and thus knowing Jesus as a Galilean Jew is an indispensable element of what God reveals in Christ. In similar fashion, the church and its evangelizers are not to destroy local cultures, but to incarnate the Gospel in a manner that uplifts each culture's God-given goodness and helps local people themselves purify any imperfections. Inspired by the Council fathers' declaration that the church "fosters and takes to itself, insofar as they are good, the ability, riches and customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself,"[4] Virgilio also insisted that his people's culturally conditioned expressions of faith form their collective soul and thus are an essential *locus theologicus*.

Arguably the conciliar document that most shaped Elizondo's theological vision was *Dei Verbum*, and particularly a key passage from its opening paragraphs: "This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them."[5] In one of his first published articles, Elizondo presented an extended reflection on this text. He underscored that "evangelization is not just a word" but "a creative act." Words and acts are intimately united and mutually revelatory; "Jesus in his deeds and words *is* the Gospel." He is the gift of God's "selfless love unlimited" who invites humans to conversion and participation in the divine life.[6] Elizondo developed these insights in the context of his experience as a *mestizo* (person of mixed ethnic or racial heritage) theologian of the borderlands. Thus, he turned to modern exegetical methods that focused on the cultural, literary, and theological significance of the Galilean borderlands in the gospels, and he grounded this biblical exegesis in the pastoral praxis of accompaniment among US Latino/a communities as they live out their faith in the borderlands of our own world. This dialogue between God's words and deeds in the past, and God's words and deeds in the present—between Scripture and pastoral praxis—is the locus of divine revelation.

4. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) 13, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.
5. *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965) 2 (hereafter cited in text as *DV*), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.
6. Virgilio Elizondo, "Biblical Pedagogy of Evangelization," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 168 (October 1974) 526–43 at 527, emphasis in original.

The title for Elizondo's early article—which is echoed in the title of this article—accentuates the understanding of revelation at the core of his theological project. "Biblical Pedagogy of Evangelization" emphasizes that the Scriptures and Christian tradition testify to the past words and deeds of God in order to instruct us in divine pedagogy. Citing the "dynamic process" of deeds and words in the vocation of Abraham, the Exodus, and the prophets, Elizondo concludes that the biblical history of Israel "is not just the history of a human group" but an illustration "of how God is working in humanity." Thus it is not surprising that early Christian communities were "not interested in simply canonizing the specific deeds and words of Jesus." Indeed, the evangelists "do not hesitate to bring out the meaning of the words and teachings of Jesus in the light of the problems, needs, customs and vocabulary of their particular people." This striking claim encapsulates Virgilio's perspective on divine pedagogy: the gospel writers were not merely recording what Jesus said and did, but already discerning how his words and deeds addressed concerns in each evangelist's community. Moreover, because God spoke and acted in certain ways in the past, and it is the same God speaking and acting in the present, then by knowing this past we can more faithfully discern God's message and calling today. This remains the fundamental theological task. In Virgilio's words, "today the starting point, the locus, of God's revelation is the present day tensions, crises and emotions which arise out of [our] struggle for a more human existence in our world."[7]

Virgilio dedicated his life to unveiling God's words and deeds within his borderlands Mexican-American community. Heeding the Vatican II call for a return to the sources of faith, his theology and pastoral praxis were rooted in his creative reexamination of two foundational sources of faith in that community: the gospel accounts of the Galilean Jesus, and the image and narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Inspired by Medellín's challenge to become a church of the poor, he insisted that the poor and marginal are the privileged bearers of divine revelation, so these and all other sources of faith must be engaged through their eyes. Thus he brought this epistemological privilege of the poor to bear on the interpretation of Vatican II, and specifically *Dei Verbum.* Virgilio's theological investigations within his particular faith community enrich the global church with profound insights into *Dei Verbum* and the divine pedagogy it expounds.

Galilee: A Hermeneutical Key to the Gospel

At the heart of Elizondo's life and scholarship is the figure of Jesus Christ, the full embodiment of God's self-revelation in history. This Jesus, moreover, is more than a historical figure—though he was that—and more than the central "object" of Christian belief—though he is that. For Elizondo, Jesus is above all the One who accompanies us in our everyday lives, especially in our struggles:

> I have no problem with the Christological teachings of our Church, but the Jesus I know and seek to follow cannot be reduced to a mere doctrine any more than you or I can be reduced to a mere definition about our identity. We are much more. The Jesus who accompanies us

7. Ibid. 528, 529, 530, 537.

> throughout our lives and suffers with us in our afflictions has been a tremendous source of strength in our culture.[8]

Thus, the historical Jesus, the Jesus of the gospels, and the Jesus of tradition all derive their meaning and credibility only from their integral relationship to the Jesus who accompanies us today. If God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ is not available to us today, then the meaning and credibility of that revelation in the past is called into question. This implies, further, that the credibility and accuracy of historical and theological assertions about Jesus Christ's identity cannot be determined apart from the revelation of that identity in our everyday lives today. The reverse, of course, is also true: the Jesus who accompanies us today must be the same Jesus of the gospels and the tradition. This is simply another way of stating the key aforementioned principle of *Dei Verbum*, which affirms the integral unity of revelation:

> [God's] plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man [and woman] shines out for our sake in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. (*DV* 2)

The God whose words and deeds are manifest in Jesus of Nazareth, in the gospel narratives, and in the church's christological doctrines, is the same God whom we encounter today in the person of Jesus our companion. That God is encountered and known, not primarily through theological analyses or doctrinal propositions, but through an interpersonal relationship. The "inner unity" of Christ's "deeds and words" is simply the consequence of the inherently interpersonal character of divine revelation.

While Elizondo's theology is thus strongly informed by *Dei Verbum*'s integral understanding of divine revelation as incorporating the historical relationship between God and humanity embodied in a unity of deeds and words, the Mexican-American theologian also develops further some of the implications of that understanding. Elizondo specifies the concrete, practical implications of such an integral, holistic, interpersonal understanding of divine revelation. If divine revelation is an integral unity of Christ's deeds and words, where in the church and in the world are Christ's deeds and words being revealed today? Where is the Jesus of the gospels and Christian tradition being encountered today? Where is the Jesus who was crucified and resurrected, and who has been proclaimed for two millennia by his church, accompanying his people today? The answer to those questions will determine, for Elizondo, the place where he must go—both as pastor and theologian—in order to encounter the living God. *Dei Verbum* does not directly address these questions, but Elizondo does: the place where, in a special way, Jesus is accompanying his people today is the same

8. Virgilio Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003) 2.

place he did 2,000 years ago, in Galilee. The theological task is thus also intrinsically missional; the theologian must *go to* Galilee, not just to proclaim the Good News but because "there you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:7, NABRE, used throughout).

Elizondo reads *Dei Verbum* and Vatican II through the lens of what he calls "the Galilee principle": "What human beings reject, God chooses as his very own."[9] Thus he claims that the unifying principle of God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ—from the gospels to the present—is God's preferential love for the poor. That principle unlocks the meaning and import of *Dei Verbum* for today. While *Dei Verbum* asserts the central importance of Scripture, tradition, and the "divine pedagogy," Elizondo specifies the historical locus and shape of the divine pedagogy today. His work will in turn have a number of further implications for encountering the living Christ today, as well as for theological method in general and Christology in particular. Elizondo's Galilee principle affirms that: (1) the poor are the privileged bearers of divine revelation; (2) their lived faith (their relationship with God in history) is thus the privileged locus of theology; (3) a fundamental source for theological reflection must thus be "popular Catholicism"; (4) a pastoral praxis of accompaniment is thus intrinsic to the theological task, and not just an "application" of prior theological reflection; (5) in doing theology, we learn from the poor before we ever teach the poor; (6) therefore, our understanding of Scripture and tradition (the divine pedagogy) will be dependent on our ability to interpret these through the eyes of the poor, from within the context of their lived faith.

Once divine deeds are understood as integral to divine words, neither Scripture nor tradition can any longer be viewed as mere objects "out there" that are to be studied in order to be understood. They must be interpreted from within a pastoral praxis, from within the context of "the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation," while Scripture and tradition in turn "proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them" (*DV* 2). If the divine pedagogy revealed in Scripture and tradition presupposes the integral unity of divine words and deeds, that unity extends beyond biblical times to the present, embracing divine words and deeds throughout salvation history, since "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Elizondo thus reads the gospels and Christian tradition—the "words" of divine revelation—through God's ongoing revelation—the "deeds" that God continues to enact in the world today. In so doing, however, he discovers that those deeds have a special purchase on the lives and struggles of the poor and marginalized in our world; God's deeds are revealed, in a special way, among the poor and excluded of our world, who experience God as companion and liberator in the midst of their afflictions. In his classic *Galilean Journey*, Elizondo thus makes more concrete and specific the teaching of *Dei Verbum* in the same way that Gustavo Gutiérrez concretizes the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* in his groundbreaking *A Theology of Liberation* (and through his influence on the Medellín conference and documents).

9. Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*, rev. and expanded ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000) 91.

Elizondo's theological project was rooted in his pastoral praxis among Mexican Americans in his hometown of San Antonio, Texas and, more broadly, among Latinos/as in the United States. As rector of San Antonio's San Fernando Cathedral, he helped the cathedral congregation revivify and further develop their devotional and ritual traditions. His conviction was that

> a theologian's task is not the canonization or rejection of the religious symbols of the people, but a continuous reinterpretation of them in relation to the whole Gospel. In this way popular religion will not be alienating but will help to lead people to a deeper knowledge of the saving God. It will not be alienating or enslaving, but salvific and liberating.[10]

His Christology is thus rooted in the Jesus Christ encountered and revealed in poor, marginalized communities, in their lived faith as embodied in popular religious practices. Elizondo reads the gospels through the eyes of this Christ, through the eyes of the lived faith of the poor as a locus of revelation. When he reads the gospels through this lens, he discovers that this "popular religion" is not just *a* locus but the *privileged* locus of theological reflection.

The result of this epistemological insight is the Galilee principle. God's preferential love for the "rejects" of our world is the first principle of the divine pedagogy. This principle is the cornerstone of Elizondo's Christology: the Jesus who accompanies US Latino/a communities today is the same Jesus who lived, preached, ministered, and ultimately appeared after his resurrection in Galilee—that rebellious borderland backwater from where the Jerusalem establishment assumed nothing good can come (John 1:46). That entrenched political and religious establishment distrusted the Galilean Jews whose distance from the center in Jerusalem and consequent exposure to corrupting influences from the other side of the border made them immediately suspect. The "purity" of Jerusalem was threatened by the "impurity" of Galilee stemming from the latter's proximity to the border and, hence, susceptibility to foreign influences.

As incarnated in the popular religion of today's Galilean borderlands, such as the religious practices of Holy Week, the *pastorela*, the *posadas*, and domestic rituals, the lived faith of US Latinos/as reveals a Jesus who continues to act in the world today by accompanying the poor, empowering them, and providing hope in the midst of their suffering. In the dramatic reenactment of Christ's Way of the Cross, for example—a ritual we both experienced powerfully at San Fernando Cathedral when Virgilio served there as rector—the poor become identified with Christ in his suffering; his suffering becomes theirs and, more importantly, theirs become his. In that shared suffering, or that *compassion*, the poor experience the possibility of hope, liberation, and resurrection; *shared* struggle and suffering conquers death, together with its definitive isolation.

The divine Word is made credible by his abiding presence and liberating deeds. Thus, the Galilee principle has as its corollaries what Elizondo calls the Jerusalem

10. Virgilio Elizondo, "Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Cultural Symbol: 'The Power of the Powerless,'" in *Liturgy and Cultural Religious Traditions*, ed. Herman Schmidt and David Power (New York: Seabury, 1977) 25–33 at 32.

principle and the Resurrection principle: the Christ who accompanies the world's rejects in Galilee also empowers them to march into Jerusalem to confront established power and offers the hope of resurrection in the face of crucifixion. These divine deeds, or "theopraxis" of accompaniment, empowerment, and liberation/salvation are revealed in the gospels and throughout salvation history. They continue to be revealed today in the lives of the poor as they join Jesus on his Way of the Cross and, therefore, in his resurrection. Drawing specifically on the experience of Mexican Americans, Elizondo points to that theopraxis as the key to interpreting the divine pedagogy. (The term "theopraxis"—or "Christopraxis"—conveys more accurately, we think, the unified and consistent character of God's "deeds," since this plural noun form connotes discrete acts rather than one continuous activity.) Thus, the experience of living with Christ today in the borderlands becomes a hermeneutical key for interpreting the words and deeds of that same Christ as they appear in the gospels. Indeed, Christ's deeds today provide new insight into his words and deeds in the Scriptures, which in turn help to elucidate his deeds today.

In the light of his experience as a Mexican-American pastor in the borderland of San Antonio, Elizondo thus gains new insight into the theological significance of Jesus's identity as a Galilean Jew and his ministry in Galilee. The Jesus who accompanies his people, and whom they accompany on the Good Friday *Via Crucis* in the streets of San Antonio and numerous other locales, is the same Jesus who carried his cross on the streets of Jerusalem on the way to Calvary; it is the same Jesus who was himself rejected for his ministry in Galilee among the impure rejects of his world, those who lived on the borders of "civilized" society in Roman imperial Jerusalem; it is the same Jesus who appeared in Galilee after his resurrection.

Consistent with the strong emphasis in Latino/a popular Catholicism on Jesus when he is most vulnerable—in the crib and on the cross—Elizondo emphasizes the importance of Jesus's humanity, not just as encountered in the gospels, but as encountered today, especially in the lives of the marginalized. The defining characteristic of God's divine pedagogy is the identification of divine love with human rejection, such that this becomes the mediator of divine love in the world. Consequently, Elizondo's Galilee principle provides the key to understanding Jesus's words and deeds as divine revelation. God's liberating deeds and words (of accompaniment, empowerment, and liberation/salvation) among the nobodies of the world are what define who God is; that was as true two millennia ago as it is today. In Elizondo's words, "At no time is [Jesus's] divinity more apparent to us than during our popular rituals of Good Friday. It is in his very ability to endure suffering, even to the extreme of scourging, thorns, and crucifixion, that he most reveals his divinity."[11] This is simply another way of articulating the inseparable humanity and divinity in the person of Jesus, and that the crucifixion is the seedbed of the resurrection.

Dei Verbum states that "through divine revelation . . . He chose to share with [human beings] those divine treasures which totally transcend the understanding of the human

11. Elizondo, *God of Incredible Surprises* 13.

mind" (*DV* 6). Reading that document through the lens of a preferential option for the poor, or the Galilee principle, Elizondo would add that: (1) it is in God's identification with the world's outcasts (specifically) that the transcendent nature of divine revelation is most clearly revealed, and therefore (2) our ability to receive that revelation presupposes our willingness to walk with the outcasts. It is there that we will find the One whom Elizondo calls "a God of incredible surprises." When *Dei Verbum* asserts that "He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness" (*DV* 13), Elizondo will specify *whose* flesh and *whose* weakness. Such concreteness will ultimately preserve the transcendence of divine revelation against a reductionism that, implicitly identifying revelation with the status quo, is scandalized by the "incredible surprises" of revelation.

Elizondo's christological divine pedagogy abjures any easy dichotomies. Indeed, it is its very both/and epistemology that represents, for him, the radical message of the Gospel as embodied in the most fundamental of all both/and figures, the words *and* deeds of the crucified *and* risen Christ. The God who becomes incarnate in a Galilean Jew privileges the borderland itself as a locus of divine revelation—not one side or the other, but the border itself. The words and deeds of Christ are not theological concepts to be balanced but concrete personal realities that can only be known in concrete, flesh-and-blood relationships—where crucifixion and resurrection, death and life, can be encountered not as theoretical opposites but as two sides of the same coin.

Furthermore, because of its *mestizo*, both/and character, Elizondo's interpretation of the Scriptures and tradition cannot easily be reduced to either conservative or progressive categories. Indeed, here we see the very clear connection between his *mestizo* worldview and a Catholic sacramental worldview, both of which resist any reductionist resolution of epistemological or theological "opposites" (e.g., natural and supernatural). If, as *Dei Verbum* avows, divine revelation is fundamentally mediated interpersonally (words and deeds) rather than purely conceptually, then Elizondo's *mestizo* reading of Catholic tradition is simply a specification, or concretization of that tradition; the both/and borderland worldview provides a privileged lens through which to understand the both/and Catholic worldview. The radicalness of each derives from their common, intrinsically borderland character—and, therefore, from their ability to resist reducing divine revelation to either/or (e.g., human or divine, crucifixion or resurrection). When this latter happens, for instance, "*mestizaje*" can itself become an instrument of oppression and exclusion, as *mestizaje* becomes established and identified with the status quo, and indigenous peoples are in turn ostracized as "impure." Or "Catholicism" is reduced to a natural institution identified with established power structures.

Elizondo's *mestizo* epistemology is thus particularly useful for understanding the divine pedagogy that speaks through the Scriptures and Catholic tradition, since that pedagogy of words and deeds presupposes the same "bifocal" epistemology. At the same time, Elizondo's method—rooted as it is in the Galilee principle—will resist any reductionism within the reading of Scripture and tradition itself. For instance, Elizondo resists reducing biblical interpretation either to a historical-critical reading of the biblical text or to a naïve, fundamentalist reading. Rather, he depends on the research of biblical scholars such as Sean Freyne, but always in the service of the lived faith of the poor. Historical-critical exegesis is necessary as a way to understand the divine words

and deeds in the past, but insufficient to understand the divine words and deeds in the present. Likewise, Elizondo's reading of Catholic tradition resists either a depreciation of tradition or a fundamentalist objectification of tradition. Indeed, the Galilee principle is very "traditional" in that it is rooted in the lived traditions of the poor, who continue to live out their Catholic faith through their many everyday rituals and devotions. In so doing, the Galilee principle actually deepens our understanding of tradition by broadening our understanding of God's words and deeds beyond the official sacramental traditions of the church to include the everyday traditions found not just in parishes put in people's homes. The Galilee principle locates Christ's presence not just in the sacramental church but also in the domestic church, thereby retrieving the importance of this often forgotten concept for Catholic theology; for the majority of Christians, Christ's words and deeds are encountered in the home before they are encountered in the parish. The Galilean starting point of Elizondo's theology impels us to seek the living presence of Jesus Christ wherever people meet him in their daily existence.

Guadalupe: The Gospel on Native Cloth

Jesus of Galilee and Our Lady of Guadalupe are integrally related as expressions of God's ongoing revelation, especially among the poor. Moreover, their very interdependence indicates the character of divine revelation; what is revealed is a God who is love, that is, a God characterized and defined by relationality. The very character of revelation is thus fundamentally intersubjective or interpersonal; revelation is not primarily a "thing" but a "Who." Furthermore, Jesus Christ, the one who fully manifests this God, is also characterized and defined by his relationships, not only his divine relationships with the Father and the Spirit but also his human relationships, especially with his mother, Mary. As a locus of divine revelation, therefore, Latino/a popular Catholicism emphasizes the relational, interpersonal character of that revelation. The major instance Elizondo identifies of this ongoing revelation in the American hemisphere is the Guadalupan encounter, both with the indigenous neophyte Juan Diego (whom Pope John Paul II canonized in 2002) and with millions of her faithful devotees ever since.

Elizondo avows that ultimately Guadalupe is "nothing less than an original American gospel, a narrative of a birth/resurrection experience at the very beginning of the crucifixion of the natives, the Africans, and their mestizo and mulatto children." The Guadalupe story is, in other words, deeply intertwined with the Gospel story or, as Virgilio liked to put it, Guadalupe presents "the Gospel on native cloth." She announces both the teachings of the Gospel and its divine pedagogy. Like the words and deeds of Jesus, those of Guadalupe have an inner unity that mutually reinforce one another. Virgilio often underscored this inner unity in his theological reflection on Guadalupe. For example, he notes that "Humans communicate not just through words but also through the way they say those words. The very manner in which we speak to people reveals our inner attitude toward them." Thus "the first revelation of La Virgen's identity comes through the very way she addresses Juan Diego . . . [He] is addressed

not as *Indio* or with the generic *tu* (you) but by name. Rather than being put down, he is dignified by the very way in which he is addressed." Moreover, Guadalupe's message and action among her people are ongoing: we cannot grasp the significance of the original Guadalupe event without knowing her compassionate presence among her faithful today, especially the most vulnerable. As Virgilio avowed, "it is in the memory of the events surrounding Our Lady of Guadalupe at the beginning of the New World that we will find the key to our task" of engaging Guadalupe as a font of revelation and evangelization today.[12]

The Guadalupe tradition affirms that the divine presence abided among the native peoples even before the arrival of the Iberian Catholic missioners. Through his examination of the particular case of the Nahua peoples of central Mexico, Elizondo repeatedly underscores the pervasive presence of God; in so doing he echoes the Vatican II teaching about the "seeds of the Word" sown in human cultures and lives (*AG* 11). Seeking these seeds in the pre-conquest cultures of Mexico, he read and frequently cited the scholarship of Nahua experts like Miguel León Portilla and Davíd Carrasco.[13] Elizondo notes, for example, that the hill on which Guadalupe appeared, Tepeyac, was a Nahua sacred site long before the arrival of Christian missioners. Guadalupe's appearance at this site linked her to its familiarity as "a place of both continuity and transformation . . . where the human is touched by the divine."[14] Elizondo's most frequent reference to pre-Columbian religion was that, for the Nahuas, God was not primarily known through rational discourse but through the beauty of "flor y canto" (flower and song). Thus it was primarily through poetry that the Nahua wise ones spoke of the mysteries of God and of life beyond our present earthly existence.

This Nahua notion of revelation is profoundly evident in the *Nican mopohua* (literally, "here is related"), the Nahua-language account of the Guadalupan apparitions to St. Juan Diego. As Elizondo avers,

> Through the beauty of the image (flowers) and the melodious sounds (poetic words) the divine could be gradually experienced, and one could gradually come to share in the divine wisdom. Thus the Guadalupe event marks the opening of a divine–human encounter and of a divine communication. This harmony, this symmetry, was an essential element of the Nahuatl vision and hence of this revelatory poem.

12. Virgilio Elizondo, *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) 61, 134; Elizondo, "*La Virgen de Guadalupe* as Mother and Master Icon for the New Evangelization," in *To All the World: Preaching and the New Evangelization*, ed. Michael E. Connors (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016) 12–21 at 21. *Guadalupe: Mother of the New Creation* is Elizondo's major work on Our Lady of Guadalupe. His first book-length examination of Guadalupe was *La Morenita: Evangelizer of the Americas* (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1980).
13. See, e.g., Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture*, trans. Jack Emory Davis (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1963); Davíd Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica*, 2nd ed. (Long Grove, IL: Waveland, 2014).
14. Elizondo, *Guadalupe* 43.

The *Nican mopohua* begins with the beautiful music Juan Diego heard that attracted him to ascend the hill of Tepeyac, where he encountered Guadalupe. It ends with Juan Diego receiving from Guadalupe exquisite flowers that had grown despite the cold winter season and then presenting them to Bishop Juan de Zumárraga. The bracketing of flower and song, Elizondo states, "assured the native people that what happened at Tepeyac was of God. God had spoken through flower and song." Moreover, "In the context of this divine revelation, the image of Our Lady appeared painted on the mantle of Juan Diego. This marks the birth of the new church of the Americas, born out of the womb of the native soil impregnated by the word of God."[15]

And what did God say? Like Jesus who accompanied and lifted up the marginal people of Galilee, Guadalupe manifests God's preferential love for the poor. She chose the lowly Juan Diego as her confidant and messenger. Her option to elect "a simple and dignified Indian *campesino*" as the "main protagonist"[16] of the Guadalupan event is merely the first way that the revelation in Guadalupe and in Jesus of Galilee reflect and mutually enrich one another. Elizondo is one of the most prominent interpreters of the Gospel messages expounded in the Guadalupe narrative and image. The message most frequently annunciated in his work and in contemporary Guadalupan theologies more generally is justice or liberation, the breaking in of God's reign that uplifts the poor and upends the status quo of the world: in the words of Mary's Magnificat, the way God has "thrown down the rulers from their thrones and lifted up the lowly" (Luke 1:52). Elizondo sees the Guadalupe event as a counternarrative to the complete defeat of the native peoples of central Mexico. She calls Juan Diego to inform Bishop Zumárraga of her desire that a temple be built on the hill of Tepeyac where she "will show and give to all people all my love, my compassion, my help, and my protection."[17] Guadalupe reveals a new vision for the colonial world, one in which the lowly are entrusted with a mission and the powerful are instructed to accompany them.

Her words to Juan Diego are given effect in the dramatic reversals Elizondo underscores in his reading of the apparitions narrative. At the beginning of the story only Guadalupe has trust in Juan Diego; by the end the bishop and his assistants believe he is truly her messenger. At the outset of the account Juan Diego stands meekly before the bishop; in the end the stooped *indio* stands erect while the bishop and his household kneel before him and venerate the image on his *tilma* (cloak). Throughout the account Juan Diego must journey to the center of the city from Tepeyac some three miles to the north; at the end of the narration the bishop and his entourage accompany Juan Diego to Tepeyac, where they will build the temple that Guadalupe requested. Symbolically, the presence of the ecclesial leadership and the church they are constructing are thus moved from the center of their capital city out to the periphery among the indigenous people. Thus in Elizondo's rendering the *Nican mopohua*

15. Ibid. 35, 75; Elizondo, "*La Virgen de Guadalupe*" 18.
16. Elizondo, *Guadalupe* 48.
17. This citation from the *Nican mopohua* is taken from the translation provided in ibid. 5–22 at 8.

underscores the margins of our world as places to encounter and serve the living God. In his words:

> Into that setting [of violence and conquest] comes an incredible eruption of God's goodness. It always happens that way. The God of the Bible, as Raymond Brown has said so beautifully, is always the God of unexpected surprises—the God who comes through in a way that we could only begin to suspect or imagine. It was an incredible surprise that the Son of God would become flesh as a Galilean. Everyone knew that nothing good could come out of Galilee. The God of the Bible is always the God who acts in ways that you and I can only begin to imagine or suspect. And once again, in the midst of this incredible hell of suffering created through our own efforts to conquer and become great at the cost of others, the God of goodness, the God of the Bible, the God who hears the cries of the poor, the God of the exodus, the God who sees the suffering of the afflicted, and the God who says, "I am going to save my people"—that God made an eruption.[18]

The Gospel and theological themes that Elizondo unveils from the Guadalupan encounter and tradition could easily be multiplied: conversion, reconciliation, evangelization, inculturation, the nature of truth, the understanding of our humanity, and more. Citing *Dei Verbum* 8, his ultimate claim in this regard is that through Guadalupe "the New World makes a major contribution to the 'growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down.'" In other words, the Guadalupe tradition embodies the divine pedagogy and helps unveil the ongoing revelation of God. It is

> not just a gift for the people of that time [the sixteenth century]. It is a gift to all of us at every moment of our collective earthly pilgrimage, while equally a very personal gift to each one of us. A loving mother loves all her children, but the "all" does not replace the very special love and concern she has for each one in particular.[19]

Thus, as with the Galilean Jesus, in his engagement of Guadalupe, Elizondo presumes that discerning how God spoke to Juan Diego through the words and deeds of Guadalupe enables us to grasp more deeply how revelation is operative in the lives of Guadalupe's faithful today. Indeed, attending to the lives of the faithful is the starting point of this discernment. For Elizondo the divine pedagogy enacted through Guadalupe is most evident in the faith of her loyal daughters and sons. As he acknowledged on numerous occasions, "Today devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe continues to grow, to be explored, and to be rediscovered. Our [theological] explanations do not make it powerful. It is powerful because it lives in the minds and hearts of the people."[20] Like

18. Elizondo, "Mary and Evangelization in the Americas," in *Mary, Woman of Nazareth*, ed. Doris Donnelly (New York: Paulist, 1989) 146–60 at 152.
19. Elizondo, *Guadalupe* 130; Elizondo, "Converted by Beauty," in *The Treasure of Guadalupe*, ed. Virgilio Elizondo, Allan Figueroa Deck, and Timothy Matovina (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006) 73–80 at 73.
20. Elizondo, "Mary and Evangelization" 160.

the Galilean Jesus, the pastoral theological engagement of Guadalupe necessarily begins and ends with the engagement of people's relationship with her.

One way that Virgilio enabled devotees to encounter Guadalupe at San Fernando Cathedral lay in his efforts to help establish an attractive devotional space where anyone can approach their celestial mother. In this he tried to emulate the Guadalupe sanctuary at Tepeyac, which he deemed "the most sacred space of the Americas . . . because everyone is welcomed there and experiences a sense of belonging, is listened to with compassion and senses the energy of true universal fellowship, the face of God is clearly seen while the heart of God is experienced intimately and tenderly."[21] For the Guadalupe feast, he further fostered such encounters by enhancing the traditional practice of a communal procession—often at the conclusion of the Eucharist—during which congregants present themselves to Guadalupe and offer roses with their prayers.

One of Virgilio's favorite anecdotes regarding the importance of Guadalupe to her faithful came from Jeanette Rodriguez's study of Guadalupe in the lives of Mexican-American women. When Rodriguez asked an indigenous woman in Mexico what makes Guadalupe different from other images of Mary, the woman simply responded "se quedó" (she stayed).[22] Like this woman, Elizondo maintained, numerous devotees are attracted to Guadalupe because they see someone who has ever been with them and with their people. They see a mother who will never let them down and to whom they can freely pour out their hearts' concerns. What matters most is not that their prayers are always answered in the manner desired, but that they see in Guadalupe's face someone who cares about them, someone who is ever willing to listen. In a word, what they see in Guadalupe's face is faithfulness, a mother and a presence that never abandons them. For many, the core experience of Guadalupe is the replication of Juan Diego's intimate, mystical encounter with their celestial mother. In innumerable conversations, prayers, and sustained gazes at her image, devotees relive this mystical encounter. Virgilio's lifelong efforts to foster such encounters were rooted in his conviction that a theologian should not just teach what God has revealed, but also enable people to come face to face with the embodied sources of revelation.

The most influential annual ritual that Virgilio helped promote for the Guadalupe feast was the dramatic representation of the apparitions narrative, which also embodies both the content of revelation and the personal encounter at its core. Indeed, the notion of divine pedagogy permeates this devotional tradition: while theological reflection helps unveil the themes of faith and discipleship in the apparitions narrative, publicly proclaiming it in ritual allows people to accompany Juan Diego in the encounter at the heart of the Guadalupan experience. For Virgilio, the narrative in the *Nican mopohua* is not an end in itself, but derives its meaning and significance from the way it is lived out among the poor today.

We have witnessed this ritual at various locales, including at San Fernando when Virgilio served as rector there. On one Guadalupe feast, for example, the congregation

21. Elizondo, *Guadalupe* 112–13.

22. Jeanette Rodriguez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Faith and Empowerment among Mexican-American Women* (Austin: University of Texas, 1994) 128.

observed with hushed reverence at the climactic moment when Juan Diego dropped roses that grew out of season and presented the image of Guadalupe that miraculously appeared on his tilma. As the previously unbelieving bishop and his assistants fell to their knees in veneration, applause erupted throughout the cathedral.

The congregation was predominantly composed of ethnic Mexican worshipers. What Virgilio articulates as the painful historical process of their double *mestizaje*—the dynamic and often violent mixing of cultures, religious systems, and races[23]—is echoed in many San Fernando congregants' stinging memories of the polite disdain or outright hostility they meet in their dealings with sales clerks, coworkers, teachers, police officers, social workers, government employees, professional colleagues, and civic and church leaders. Thus it is not surprising that they resonate with the liturgical drama of the lowly Juan Diego's rejection, his encounter with a loving mother, and his final vindication before the ecclesiastical leader of the Spanish conquistadores.

Like the Gospel stories of Jesus, celebrating the story of Guadalupe's maternal care and Juan Diego's struggle and triumph does not obliterate the painful daily realities of San Fernando congregants. But devotees at San Fernando and elsewhere find solace in Guadalupe's election of the unexpected hero Juan Diego, as well as hope in his unwavering faith and *aguante* (unyielding endurance). Though they recognize that their Guadalupan devotion does not eliminate all the *rechazos* (rejections) and social ills which beset them, most congregants do not consider themselves a dominated people and they ardently attest that Guadalupe uplifts them as she did Juan Diego, strengthening them in the trials and difficulties of their daily lives. In a word, they confess that the Guadalupe narrative is true: it reveals the deep truth of their human dignity and exposes the lie of social inequalities and experiences that diminish their fundamental sense of worth. Virgilio's reverence for the people's Guadalupan traditions was rooted in the power of those traditions to mediate such immediate experiences of God's revelation, especially among the rejected and lowly.

Divine Pedagogy

Dei Verbum has been called "the Catholic Church's most important teaching on revelation and Scripture in the twentieth century," a document that "remains one of the great successes of Vatican II in the sense that its impact was widespread and is still ongoing."[24] In the years following the Council, *Dei Verbum*'s understanding of revelation fostered a renewed appreciation of both Scripture and pastoral praxis as central to the theological task. In their retrieval of biblical exegesis as a necessary theological task, post-Vatican II Catholic scholars drew increasingly on modern methods of interpretation, including historical-critical studies (work that had been going on prior to the Council

23. Elizondo, *La Morenita*; Elizondo, *Galilean Journey*; Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*, rev. ed. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2000); Elizondo, *Guadalupe*.

24. Ronald D. Witherup, *The Word of God at Vatican II: Exploring* Dei Verbum (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014) 62, 63.

but which now gained a new impetus). Yet the danger of reducing biblical interpretation to historical-critical analyses alone demanded that such scholarship be rooted in and serve the pastoral ends of the biblical text as a living, ecclesial document. Decades later, for instance, Pope Benedict XVI drew on *Dei Verbum* to argue that historical criticism is "the 'indispensable' starting point for biblical interpretation" while, at the same time, insisting that such scholarly methods were not sufficient, but must be complemented by methods of interpretation derived from spiritual and pastoral praxis.[25] By reminding Catholics that the words of the biblical text are central to revelation but are, at the same time, grounded in and illumine God's ongoing deeds in history, *Dei Verbum* affirmed the centrality of both Scripture and pastoral praxis to the divine pedagogy, as well as the centrality of their relationship as the locus of divine revelation and, thus, theological reflection.

Inspired by *Dei Verbum*'s notion of the divine pedagogy, Elizondo's theology deepens and advances our understanding of that notion by reading it through the lens of a preferential option for the poor; pastoral praxis as accompaniment of the poor, specifically, becomes the privileged locus for reading Scripture and doing theology. Elizondo thus calls for us to interpret *Dei Verbum* in light of the general principle enunciated by Pope John XXIII prior to the council's opening: "Confronted with the underdeveloped countries, the Church presents itself as it is and wishes to be, the Church of all, and *particularly the Church of the poor*."[26] In the divine pedagogy, the church of the poor is both the *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem*; it is the privileged starting point and the goal of pastoral praxis and scriptural exegesis. Because it is "particularly the Church of the poor," we can rest assured that it is indeed the church of all. Because San Antonio, the Galilean borderlands, and Tepeyac are the privileged places of God's self-revelation, they are the guarantees of God's universal love. So it is there that Virgilio went to seek the One for whom he was looking.

By reading divine revelation through the eyes of the poor, moreover, Elizondo's interpretation of Vatican II avoids overly simplistic, polarizing interpretations of the Council. Significantly, Virgilio's understanding of *Dei Verbum* and of Vatican II more broadly unites—as integrally related—the Council as both a *ressourcement* (retrieval of tradition) and *aggiornamento* (that retrieval in the service of contemporary life). Neither can exist without the other. That is, when interpreted through the eyes of the lived faith of the poor, through the lens of popular Catholicism, these two sometimes opposed interpretations are revealed as, in fact, complicit. When we understand the Christian sources to be not just texts (words) but also God's ongoing deeds in the church and in the world, then a

25. Ibid. 69.

26. Pope John XXIII, "Radio Message Inaugurating the Second Vatican Council" (September 11, 1962), emphasis added. Cited in Hilari Raguer, "An Initial Profile of the Assembly," Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *The History of Vatican II*, vol. 2, The *Formation of the Council's Identity, First Period and Intersession, October 1962–September 1963* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998) 200.

retrieval of the sources demands a grounding in popular religion as a privileged historical embodiment of those sources (after all, the texts themselves are the product of Christian communities' lived faith).[27] The lived faith of the poor thus reflects both a retrieval of the tradition and an openness to the often surprising, indeed radical ways in which the Christ present in that tradition is also present in the church and world today.

Thus we come to see that the sources themselves demand *aggiornamento*. Conversely, any attempt at a*ggiornamento* predicated upon a presumed rejection or ignorance of the tradition and sources will sacrifice the subversive, prophetic character of the divine pedagogy, which derives from the integral connection between *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento*; any such supposed *aggiornamento* would be susceptible to an easy cooptation by the status quo. When read in the borderlands, the tradition and sources can help reveal how Christ continues to accompany, empower, and liberate its inhabitants there today, since it is the same Christ who did so in Galilee, in the early Christian centuries, and throughout salvation history.

Thus Elizondo's theological contribution underscores that today the sources of Christian revelation do not provide us with ready-made answers for our issues and questions, but guidance for discovering Gospel-based responses. To echo Virgilio's language, we must not be content with "simply canonizing the specific deeds and words of Jesus."[28] Rather, we must discern their meaning in light of contemporary concerns, as the evangelists did. Scripture and tradition provide us with information about God and, more importantly, a way of discerning and encountering God in the present. In the end, then, today we are called to participate in the inner unity of Jesus's words and deeds as a divine pedagogy that makes it possible for us to discern, not just who Jesus was historically, but who Jesus is today. Hence, Jesus is not merely a historical figure who serves as a model for us to emulate, but a living person in whose words and deeds we participate as the Body of Christ. If *Dei Verbum* retrieved that fundamental Christian belief, Virgilio reminded us that the guarantee of its credibility is God's preferential love for the poor: "There you will see him."

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27. In a number of his writings, Orlando Espín has elaborated with great insight upon the distinction and interrelationship between the content of tradition and the form in which tradition is lived out. See, e.g., Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997); Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014).
28. Elizondo, "Biblical Pedagogy of Evangelization" 537.

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