

A Response to Virgilio Elizondo

I must begin by saying that I am honored to be here. I am particularly honored to respond to Fr. Elizondo, who some time ago made me the honor of declaring that, while he is a Protestant Catholic, I am a Catholic Protestant. But I am particularly honored by someone's assumption that my mind is so sharp, my powers of synthesis so acute, that I could respond to five hundred years of history, and another five hundred years of foresight, in ten minutes!

Now seriously, allow me first of all to express my gratitude and my admiration to Virgilio, who has so well outlined the scope and breadth of the various options open to Hispanic Christians in this part of the world. I generally agree with his analysis and his conclusions, and this is not the place nor the time to attempt to footnote and to nuance what he has said. His analysis is basically correct. Theologians and Churches refuse to listen to it at their own peril, and I do not wish to be part of the academic game of taking away from its fundamental challenge by seeking to nuance it before it has been heard.

Therefore, rather than seek to nuance or to correct details in Virgilio's analysis, what I will try to do is to strengthen what he is saying from a different approach.

Fr. Elizondo has correctly summarized the various waves of Christian mission of which we have been the object: Catholic Iberian, Irish-German Catholic, mainline U.S. Protestant, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals. All these various Christian missionaries who came and keep coming to us, came and keep coming to us on the basis of the Great Commission: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." And certainly, we needed the message of the Gospel, and for that we are grateful. What those missionaries usually missed, however, is that if it is true that all power in heaven and on earth is given unto Jesus, that means that when Christians go anywhere their task is also to discover how that power is already present where they go. If all power has been given to him in heaven and on earth, that means that, wherever we go, in heaven and on earth, there is something to learn about that power, about the One who holds that power, and about how that power operates. In a strange, paradoxical way, to make someone a disciple of the One who has all authority in heaven and on earth is immediately to make ourselves a disciple of that person, who has something to tell us about how that power and that authority have manifested themselves on that piece of earth, even before the arrival of the missionaries. Not to see that, and therefore to insist on our being constantly the teachers, the missionaries, those who make disciples, is to deny the very foundation of the mission, that all power and authority in heaven and on earth have been given to the One whose witnesses we are.

As I look at what Virgil is telling us, I hear it as a call to catholicity.

Let me explain: by its etymology, "catholic" is that which is according to the whole. This clearly means that what is sectarian is by definition not catholic. I suppose we are all agreed on that. But I also submit to you that there is a sense in which the word "universal," rather than being an adequate translation of "catholic" is its opposite.

I am thinking, for instance, of the oft quoted passage from Irenaeus, where he argues that, just as there are four winds, there must also be four gospels. My professors of patristics ridiculed the passage, as if Irenaeus were simply arguing that, because there are four winds, and four covenants, and four of this, and four of that, there must also be four gospels. But Irenaeus is saying much more than that. The four winds he calls "catholic" winds. Since the phrase, "catholic wind" makes no sense in English, the usual translations say "four universal winds." But that misses the point. What Irenaeus is saying is, not just that there are four winds, but that the totality and the interplay of these winds makes wind catholic. The north wind, for instance, is one of these winds. If, for some strange reason, all the other winds were to disappear, and only the north wind were to remain, that would make the north wind a universal wind; but the catholicity of wind would be lost.

Let me give another example. If through a series of conquests someone were to establish rule over the entire earth, that rule would be universal, but it would not be catholic.

That is the basis for Irenaeus' argument that there must be these different four gospels: because the four of them together, in their difference, constitute the catholic witness to the Gospel, the witness "according to the whole."

Actually, the Church knew full well, in developing the canon of the New Testament, that the four gospels were different, that they did not agree on many matters. And that is precisely why all four were included in the canon: to counter the sectarians who had it all in place through the imagined witness of a single Gospel, and to counter them with these four different gospels which however testify to the same truth. The canon is catholic, not because it has extended its power over all the world as a sort of universal rule, but because it makes room for the multiform witness to the Gospel from the various perspectives of four different evangelists.

It would have been much simpler to have only one gospel. Then we would not have to deal with the vexing questions of conflicting chronologies, divergent genealogies, and even distinct theologies in the various documents. It would have been easier, but it would not have been catholic; it would have been partial, sectarian, not "according to the whole."

If you then apply this understanding of catholicity to Virgilio's analysis, what Virgilio is actually saying is that no form of Christianity among us—not Protestant fundamentalism, not mainline Protestantism, not Irish-German Catholicism, and not Iberian Catholicism—has given us the opportunity to be catho-

lic—to make our contribution to the whole. Everyone of them has said to us: “welcome . . . but only so far.” “Welcome, but do not even dream of making an impact on the way we understand the Gospel. Welcome, join *our* theology and *our* Church. You can be part of them, as long as you remember that they are *ours*.”

And the counterpart of that is also true: that by not allowing us to be ourselves, to bring our own gifts to the table, to read the Gospel from our own perspective, every form of Christianity that has come to us has somehow deprived itself of the full dimension of its catholicity.

What this means to me is that, if I were a Roman Catholic, even though initially Fr. Elizondo's proposal might strike me as dangerously uncatholic, I would wish to take a second look at it, for it may be, it just may be, that Fr. Elizondo, far from being noncatholic, is inviting us to a radical catholicity that goes far beyond what most of us have experienced or dreamed.

For that, as well as for a dozen other things, and especially for a lifetime of ministry among our people, we are deeply in debt to Fr. Elizondo.

JUSTO GONZALES

Decatur, Georgia