

Church in the Americas in the Past 500 Years

(draft)

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The logo for AETH (Asia, Europe, The Americas, and Theology) features a stylized 'A' composed of multiple overlapping, semi-transparent triangles in shades of yellow and orange. Below the 'A' is the acronym 'AETH' in a light, sans-serif font.

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It is not easy to know what to speak about, in a setting such as this. Dr. Chen has suggested...

But I have chosen to speak on a subject that is very much debated these days in the Western Hemisphere. Spain ... ships ... cathedral in Mexico City....

The debate is not just about Spain or about Catholics. It is about the entire colonial enterprise and its connection with the missionary enterprise. About me... and about you... It is about us, the entire church of Jesus Christ.

As I look at the history of the church in the Americas in the past 500 years, I see two images of Christ, or two Christologies, and I see these Christologies functioning in the entire missionary and colonial enterprises and in the debate about their connection. It is for that reason that I have decided to speak about the two Christs who called people to conversion in the Americas 500 years ago, and who still call people to conversion throughout the world.

On the one hand, there was the Christology of power. This lies at the root of the entire colonial enterprise, and in particular of the manner in which it was supposed that the Pope could grant lands to monarchs such as Ferdinand and Isabella. This Christology saw Christ first and foremost as King. It was - closely connected with earlier medieval theories according to which

Christ was the possessor of both the "temporal sword" and the "spiritual sword," and had granted one to the emperor and secular rulers, and the other to Peter and his successors. Long before the time of Columbus, Innocent III and others had argued that this was the case and that the spiritual sword, having to do with souls rather than with bodies, was above the temporal one as the Sun is above the Moon or the day above the night.

This Christology sees Christ as the King who sits at the right hand of God, and who has and uses the power to distribute kingdoms. It became the dominant view in the church after the Roman Emperors, beginning with Constantine, declared themselves to be Christian. At that point it became customary to depict Christ as the ruler of all --the *pantokrator*-- sitting on a heavenly throne and holding the globe in his hands. The tacit presupposition of this Christology of power is that, since the emperor and the kings are the most powerful human beings, Christ must be like one of them. And its obvious corollary was that, since the Pope is Christ's representative on earth, he must be like an emperor or a king --only more so.

This Christology obviously played into the hands of those who wished to justify their power on theological grounds. It was expressed succinctly by Palacio Rubios, one of the most respected jurists of the Spanish court at the time of the Conquest:

With the advent of Christ, all power and jurisdiction were made void, since they all became His. . . He thus had, not only spiritual power over things spiritual, but also temporal power over things temporal, and He received from His Father both scepters.

Christ the King is thus the arbiter of kings, and he performs this function through his representative on earth, the Pope. Since all things belong to Christ, all things are the Pope's to give, including lands and kingdoms. Thus, the Conquest and colonization of the Americas had a legitimate basis, since the Pope had granted these lands to the rulers of Spain (and, when it was discovered that the New World extended further East than was originally thought, also of Portugal).

[It should be noted in passing that this was one of the reasons why Spain and Portugal became such ardent defenders of papal temporal authority, precisely at a time when rising nationalism led many to question that authority. As long as the Pope had the right to distribute lands and kingdoms in the name of Christ, the Iberian possessions in the New World and elsewhere were safe.]

The task of the servants of Christ the heavenly King is not only to announce his Gospel and his power but also to make that power effective. This is to be done partly by preaching and persuasion but also by force. On this basis, the Pope was fully justified in granting these lands to the crowns of Spain and Portugal.

Such a grant was much more than a matter of political expediency, as we might think today. By assigning these lands to specific Christian monarchs, the Pope was taking steps to extend the

effective power of Christ the King, which was clearly part of the Pope's task as the King's representative on earth.

The same Christology is the basis for Spain's understanding of herself and her historical mission. In defeating the Moors, she had not only attained a nationalistic goal; she had also served the King of all. Moors, Turks, Indians, and other assorted unbelievers are in fact, even though they may not know it, rebel subjects of the heavenly King. The lands they hold should be part of Christendom, and it is the proper task of Christian princes and armies to make them such.

On the other hand, there was another Christology operating in Spain and Portugal at the time of the conquest. This Christology emphasized, not Christ the King, but Christ the servant, Christ the poor, the one who, "though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (II Cor. 8:9); the one who "though he was in the form of God emptied himself, taking the form of a slave" (Phil. 2:6-7). This was the Christ who did not have where to lay his head and was therefore poorer than the foxes, who have their caves, and the birds, who have their nests.

Clearly, in the New Testament Jesus is depicted as both poor and kingly. Christian orthodoxy had always affirmed both that Jesus was meek and poor and that he was Lord of the universe. In the New Testament and in the early church, however, this did not mean that as poor he is in solidarity with the poor, and as king he hobnobs with the rulers of this world. In the earliest

church, the combination of these two elements, the poverty and kingship of Jesus, was a powerful message of consolation for people who were sorely tried by poverty as well as by persecution. In a church where many were slaves, poor artisans, and relatively powerless women, the message that God had become one of us in Jesus Christ and that this one who is like us is still ruler of the universe, gave people the possibility to look beyond their present state, and even beyond the present order of the world, to a time when God's will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven and when the poor and persecuted will no longer be so. In such a context, it was indeed important to affirm that Christ is the ruler of all --as the early Christians said, *Christos Kyrios*. But it was important precisely because he was also the one who did not have where to lay his head. The kingship of Jesus did not mean that he was ready to take the side of rulers against the oppressed but rather that he would take the common folk who formed the early church, and make them "kings and priests," or, as another text says, a "royal priesthood."

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Then the Empire became Christian, and people, both rich and poor, began flocking into the church. Soon a "division of labor" arose: Those Christians who wished to do so, could give their wealth to the poor and imitate the poverty of Jesus. Others were free to keep their possessions, as long as they practiced charity, mostly through almsgiving. Theologically, this was based on a distinction between the "commandments" and the "counsels of perfection": all Christians must obey the commandments, but only those who "wish to be perfect" are to follow the counsels of perfection, one of which is to sell what one has and give it to the poor.

It was only natural that eventually each of these two types of Christians would begin to underscore a different aspect of Christology. For those who followed the "counsels of perfection," what was most important was that Jesus was poor, and it was in this poverty that one should imitate and serve him. For many of the others, what was important was that Jesus was King, and it was by wielding power in his name that one served him. As was to be expected, these two positions clashed frequently, sometimes openly and sometimes more subtly. At the time of the crusades, for instance, when kings and popes were seeking to serve Christ by taking land from the Moslems by force, Saint Francis of Assisi, who had declared himself married to "Lady Poverty," went unarmed to preach to the Sultan. Many criticized him and his followers as unrealistic dreamers. In return, many of his followers criticized the popes who lived in opulence as faithless Christians.

Both of these Christologies were operational in the religious life of the Iberian Peninsula long before the conquest of the Americas. In a harsh land and a harsh time, the suffering, poor Christ had great appeal and power. Whatever sufferings might befall his followers, he had suffered even more. The bleeding, gory Christ of many an Iberian painting and sculpture, which has been so criticized by Protestants from northern climes, was a Christ who could understand the suffering of the people. He was also a Christ worthy of love, not because he was powerful or because he gave so much but because he was one of us, because his love was such that he became as one of us.

On the other hand, the powerful, kingly Christ, wielding the swords of both spiritual and political rule, was also important to a nation involved in a prolonged war of the *Reconquista*. The more Spain came to read her earlier history as a protracted war against the infidel, the more she came to rely on this Christ who sent his apostle St. James to fight for his side and his armies.

Both of these Christologies were also operational in the conquest of the Americas --at least as far as Spain and Portugal were concerned. It was Christ the King, supreme ruler of all, who, through his representative the Pope, had commissioned Christian rulers and Christian armies to make these lands his. It was Christ the poor and friend of the needy who had called Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits to follow his way of poverty and to present him to the native inhabitants of these lands primarily by imitating him.

In order to understand the church of Christ the King, we must remember that, through a series of bulls, the popes had granted the Spanish and Portuguese crowns enormous powers over the church to be founded in the new colonies. [Patronato.]

What this meant in practice was that the bishops and other leaders of the church were, in fact, functionaries of the crown. Their interests were religious, and most saw themselves as faithful servants of Christ the King and of his representatives on earth, the Pope and the Crown. Such bishops in turn named those who were to serve as priests in the centers of power. Such bishops

and such priests saw the bright side of the conquest: churches going up, cities being founded and built (always according to the plan of a typically Spanish town. [To this day...]) They saw little of the misery and pain that the conquest was causing. They saw that the natives were poor and admired the European masters who fed and clothed them. They saw that the natives were not terribly eager to work and supported the European masters who sought to teach them good working habits. They had no idea that the natives were better fed and better clothed before the arrival of the European invaders, or that they were hard-working people until the product of their labor was stolen from them. As they saw it, the conquest and so-called evangelization of America was the best thing that ever happened to these benighted lands and people.

But that was not the entire picture, for there were others who came for other reasons and with a different Christ, and who, therefore, sought to build a different sort of church. These were mostly friars --Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, and others-- who had vows of poverty, and who on that basis were able to share more of their lives with the natives. Some of them went to villages where scarcely another Spaniard had arrived --and many paid dearly with their lives. Many of them learned the languages of the people or at least found interpreters through whom they could communicate. They saw native life as it was before it was destroyed by the invaders and learned to appreciate its values.

It was some of these friars who soon became the defenders of the native inhabitants of these lands, the prophetic voices denouncing what was taking place. By 1511, the Dominicans on

Hispaniola were disgusted by what they saw and commissioned Friar Antonio de Montesinos to speak on their behalf. On the Sunday before Christmas, and referring to the "voice crying in the wilderness" of John the Baptist, Montesinos thundered:

This voice says that you are in mortal sin, that you live and die in it, for the cruelty and tyranny you use in dealing with these innocent people. Tell me, by what right or justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? On what authority have you waged a detestable war against these people, who dwelt quietly and peaceably on their own land? . . . Why do you keep them so oppressed and weary, not giving them enough to eat nor taking care of them in their illnesses? For with the excessive work you demand of them they fall ill and die, or rather you kill them with your desire to extract and acquire gold every day. . . Be certain that in such a state as this you can no more be saved than Moors or Turks.

Soon another Dominican, a man who himself had received an *encomienda* [explain] and who then renounced it in order to devote his life to the defense of the Indians, came to the foreground. His name was Bartolomé de Las Casas. He wrote extensively about the abuses perpetrated by the Spanish in the colonies, arguing that this was no proper way to proclaim the Gospel and that the natives could best be brought to faith in Jesus Christ by peaceful and loving means. He travelled repeatedly to Spain in order to advocate for laws defending the native inhabitants of these lands. When such laws were passed, he would travel back to the colonies to see them enforced, only to be disappointed in that there were always loopholes or excuses that the colonizers could adduce. He lived to be almost a century old, and until his very last days he remained a staunch defender of the Indians and a prophetic voice denouncing what the Spanish *conquistadors* and settlers were doing in the Western Hemisphere.

Those whose theological outlook and humane concerns were similar to Las Casas are too many to even list here. However, a few examples may give some indication as to the scope of their concerns and activity.

St. Luis Beltrán was the first of the missionaries to the New World to be canonized. Although he did much work among the Indians, it is his words to the Spaniards that are most remarkable, for he repeatedly rebuked them for their cruelty and exploitation. One of the most popular legends about him states that on one occasion, when dining at the table of an *encomendero*, he commented that the Spanish in the colonies were living off the blood of the Indians. When his host took offense and began arguing that, on the contrary, the Indians owed much to the Spanish, Beltrán, instead of answering, silenced his host by taking a tortilla and squeezing blood from it. Whatever the truth may be behind this legend, it certainly indicates that there was at least among some of the early friars an often-unspoken view of the conquest as founded on injustice and exploitation.

In Chile, the Dominican Gil González de San Nicolás came to the conclusion that wars against the Indians, wars whose real reason was the desire to take their lands, were unjust. On that basis, he decided that people who profited from such wars, and especially those holding lands taken in such wars, should not receive absolution until they made proper restitution. He convinced many of his fellow Dominicans as well as a number of Franciscans that they, too, should withhold absolution from such sinners. Soon the entire region was in turmoil, for

González' stance meant that very few among the colonizers could take communion while their Indian charges could freely approach the altar. Eventually, González was accused of heresy, and he and his supporters were silenced by the authorities.

This other face of the Church also found opportunity to express itself with the coming of Black slaves. As in many other parts of the world, ecclesiastical authorities found very little wrong with the institution of slavery. There were among the friars, however, many who disagreed with the authorities. Since there was not much they could do to end the institution, they did all they could to change it and to expose its opposition to the Gospel. Most notable on this score was St. Peter Claver. A Catalan Jesuit who arrived at Cartagena while still a novice, young Pedro was considered a bit of a dimwit by his fellow Jesuits. Yet he, more than any of his companions, was deeply disturbed by what he saw of the treatment of Blacks in Cartagena. He was determined to do something about it. It is said that when the time came to make his vows, he added a fourth to the traditional three of poverty, obedience and chastity: *Petrus Claver, aethiopum semper servus* --Peter Claver, forever a slave to the Blacks. In fulfillment of that vow, he made it a point to meet every slave ship that arrived in Cartagena, if possible, to meet the slaves in the ships, even before they were washed from all the filth of their voyage, and in every possible way to assuage their suffering. He did not hide his contempt for slave owners, and he would often ostentatiously cross the street in order not to greet them while he would be most deferential in the presence of slaves, freed Blacks, and the poor in general. With the support of some Spaniards of goodwill and the work of the freed slaves in the city, he organized banquets

in which the guests of honor were the poor and the slaves. He is also said to have declared that, when it came to hearing confession, he would follow the order that he thought Jesus would follow: First he would listen to the slaves, then the poor, then the children. After that, he probably would have run out of time, and therefore it would be best if the rich slave-owners found someone else to hear their confession.

Many other similar stories could be cited to illustrate the same point: even though the hierarchy and many of the lower clergy were fully supportive of the conquest and of colonial practices thereafter, there was a sizable party within the church, most of them members of orders such as the Dominicans and Jesuits, who felt compelled to speak a word of judgment against what was taking place and to take upon themselves the task of defending both the original inhabitants of these lands and those who were brought later as slaves.

And so, we come to the subject that is of most interest to us today, for these two Christologies, which led to two faces of the same church, also led to two different views of evangelization. To some in the sixteenth century --and even to this day-- to evangelize meant to make people subjects of Christ the King --and, by extension, of those who represented his power on earth.

That is the evangelization of the *Requerimiento*. The *Requerimiento* was a document to be read to the native inhabitants of these lands, giving them the good news that there is only one God, who has granted power over all the world to a man called the Pope; and the further good news that the Pope has in turn granted these lands to another man called the King of Spain; and the

still further good news that if you do not accept this arrangement your lands and freedom are forfeit, and the Spanish will make war on you.

These two Christologies, and these two views of the mission of the church, have continued existing in Latin America side-by-side for 500 years. At times, such as today, the contrast has become quite open and even divisive. One can see this even in the way various groups in the church speak of the quincentennial. Some speak of "500 years of the evangelization of the Americas," meaning by that 500 years of the subjugation of the Americas to Christ the King and to His European representatives. Others insist that the evangelization is still to be done, because the poor still do not know that God is with them, that God is on the side of justice and peace --which is to say that God is on their side.

Most of what I have said so far seems to apply primarily to the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly to the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. But those of us who are Protestant, let us not be too quick to point to the mote in another's eye, for, if the truth is to be told, Protestant missions, even more than Roman Catholic ones, have been guided by the Christology of Christ the King. It was Christ the King who led those who called themselves "pilgrims" and "settlers" to establish themselves on Indian lands in North America and then gave them leave to destroy the "Canaanites" that hindered their progress. It was Christ the King who gave the descendants of those early invaders a "manifest destiny" to continue their westward invasion and to remove from the land all nations weaker than themselves. It was Christ the King who laid

the "white man's burden" on the white man's back, therefore commanding him to go out into the world and preach to every creature, making them all subjects of Christ the King and his white representatives. It was Christ the King who in 1893 led Josiah Strong, the president of the Evangelical Alliance in the United States, to pen these words, worthy of the worst of the conquistadors or the sixteenth century:

... this [Anglo-Saxon] race of unequalled with all the majesty of numbers and the might of wealth behind it --the representative, let us hope, of the largest liberty, the purest Christianity, the highest civilization-- having developed peculiarly aggressive traits calculated to impress its institutions upon mankind, will spread itself over the earth. ... Is it not reasonable to believe that this race is destined to dispossess many weaker ones, assimilate others, and mould the remainder, until in a very true and important sense, it has Anglo Saxonized mankind?

This Strong said as a call to mission!

We find it ridiculous. But let us not laugh too hard, for in many ways much of the Protestant missionary enterprise was based on a similar view of Jesus and his Kingdom. One of the popular hymns that I heard missionaries singing when I was young proclaimed that "Jesus shall reign where'r the sun doth its successive journeys run." Jesus was the King, the ruler almighty, and any who did not know him and follow him must be brought to such obedience. This was the "white man's burden" that stood behind much of the missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century. Because Jesus is King, it is the white man's obligation to make that kingship obeyed everywhere. And, since the white man is Jesus' representative, it is also our Christian duty to make sure that the white man is obeyed.

Then there is the Christology of Christ the poor --and this Christology was also present among those who brought the Gospel to us. It is not a Christology that denies the power of Christ, nor his reign in glory. It is rather a Christology that remembers that, according to Philippians, the reason why Jesus has a name that is above any other name is not simply, nor primarily, that he was in the form of God but rather than "humbling himself, he took the form of a slave." It is also a Christology that remembers that, according to Jesus himself, he who for our sakes became poor now comes to us in the poor, in the hungry, in the naked, in the imprisoned. This Jesus never said, "inasmuch as you served Pope, or King, or nation, or church, or president, or bishop, or seminary." He said, "inasmuch as you did it to one of the least..."

From this perspective, the good news to the poor is something different altogether. It is not, "I come to announce to you that there is a great King who demands your obedience --and by the way, your obedience to his church and to me." It is rather, "I come to you because the great Ruler of the universe is in you, and it is by serving you that I serve that Ruler."

In the United States, we also, at least those of us who belong to denominations such as mine, prefer to serve Christ the King rather than Christ who is among the poor. We talk about "mainline denominations," and we deplore the decline of mainline Christianity. And we give all kinds of reasons. But we never ask the crucial question, what Christology is it that finds expression in the idea itself of a "mainline denomination"? Is it not the oppressive Christology of Christ the King? Or, to put it another way, in a world in which the vast majority are pushed

aside and marginalized, how can a church be proud of calling itself "mainline" and still claim to serve the Christ of the poor, the Christ who had not where to lay his head, the Christ who said, "inasmuch..."?

It is at this point that many of the so-called younger churches may have a crucial contribution to make to the church at large. There are churches throughout the world, many of them founded in the time of the great colonial expansion of the West, but still churches that no longer share in the power and wealth of the centers of empire. Churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America that have learned to subsist and to grow, not because they are supported by political or economic powers but because they are with the people, because they have learned through their own experience that Jesus is to be found, not in Jerusalem in Herod's palace, but in the manger in Bethlehem; not where power is manifest, but where need is manifest; not under the high steeples of rich churches, but in the quiet corners where witness is given in spite of all the powers of the world. And so, we come to you today, our sisters and our brothers, we who come from churches that are still relatively wealthy and relatively powerful, we come not with words of wisdom nor with material riches, but with one plea: Help us! Help us once again to see the Christ who comes to us in the poor and the naked; help us once again to see the Christ who is most manifest in the most difficult times; help us once again to serve the Christ who said, "inasmuch as you did it to one of these, the least, you did it unto me." Help us!