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EVANGELIZATION IN TERMS OF INDIGENOUS LATIN-AMERICAN THEOLOGY

Abstract. Indigenous theology, which appeared in Latin America in the mid-1980s, practiced by the followers of Christ, wants to serve the dialogue between native religions and Christianity. It has its method, its subject is the faithful people, and the main object of reflection is the spiritual experience accumulated in native cultures since pre-Columbian times. Indigenous theology wants to contribute to evangelization attracting people and to the authentic inculturation of the faith in areas inhabited by native Amerindians. An analysis of the texts written by Indigenous theologians leads to the discovery of how this theology is practiced, and especially what its view of evangelization is. Despite its shortcomings and doubtful approaches from the perspective of Catholic orthodoxy, indigenous theology can enliven the Church-wide discussion on evangelization and contribute to its dynamism in modern times.

Keywords: Latin America; pastoral ministry; interreligious dialogue; culture; Christianity; Church.

Since the 1980's, a movement in Latin America has been developing which, in time, was called "indigenous theology." The factors that led to the formation of this theological movement include the reflection initiated on the anniversary of the arrival of Europeans to the New World, the resistance of the indigenous peoples to external pressures, and the struggle to preserve their historical identity. No less important impulse came from the dynamism generated by the Second Vatican Council towards inculturated evangelization and dialogue with other religions.²

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² Juan E. Gorski, "El desarrollo histórico de la 'teología india' y su aporte a la inculturación del evangelio," in *Desarrollo histórico de la teología India*, ed. Pablo Suess, Juan F. Gorski, M.M., Beat Dietschy, Fernando Mires, José Luis Gómez Martínez (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1998), 9; Octavio Ruiz Arenas, "Teología India, una reflexión cristiana desde la sabiduría indígena," *Theologica Xaveriana* 145 (2003): 113.

The congregations of Latin American bishops in Medellín (1968) and Puebla (1979) also contributed to the emergence of indigenous theology, promoting the concept of mission and evangelization adapted to the social context. Interest in indigenous theology was also shown by Catholic hierarchs gathered in Santo Domingo (1992), where the Church committed itself to the indigenous peoples to accompany them in their theological reflection, respecting the cultural traditions that help them justify their faith and find perspectives for the future. In turn, during the conference in Aparecida (2007), indigenous theology was the subject of many debates that gave rise to hope for its development and popularization in the Church.³

Indigenous theology was born out of criticism of the historical forms of Christianization of Latin American peoples. It is opposed to the disregard for local cultures and religions of native tribes. It is a theology conducive to such pastoral activity of the Church as will contribute to giving the Christian faith a new expression, specific to a concrete culture. Its promoters postulate that everything that is against the Gospel should be removed from Church practice, and thus that its proclamation should be an expression of opposition to all forms of aggression, enslavement and colonization.⁴

Because the thought of her evangelizing mission is vivid in the Church in the post-conciliar period, it seems useful to look at the ideas propagated by the followers of this Latin American theological trend, without forgetting that is highly controversial on some points and therefore criticized in light of orthodox Catholic doctrine.⁵ Due to the pastoral theological approach to indigenous theology, attention will be focused mainly on the practical issues presented in it, concerning evangelization. For this reason, this article first presents the main tenets of Native American theology, and then its appropriate approach to evangelization. This will allow us to take a critical look at this concept to extract its elements that correlate with the Church's teaching

³ Victor Madrigal Sánchez, "Teología india. Interpelaciones desde las teologías originarias a la teología cristiana," in *La teología de la liberación en perspectiva*, vol. I, ed. Congreso Continental de Teología (Montevideo: Fundación Amerindia, 2012), 132; Eleazar Hernández López, "La Teología India en la Iglesia. Un balance después de Aparecida," *Ribet* 6 (2008): 89.

⁴ Faustino Teixeira, "O desafio das teologias índias," *Horizonte* 14 (2009): 18; Gorski, "El desarrollo histórico," 9; López, "La Teología India en la Iglesia," 98.

⁵ Problems with indigenous theology result, among others, from the fact that it believes that revealed truth is hidden in Indian beliefs, that practicing non-Christian religious customs and traditions is enough for salvation, and that pagan rites have the same value and meaning as the liturgy of the sacraments. See more on this in: Ryszard Hajduk, *Teologia latynoamerykańska i jej praktyczne implikacje* (Olsztyn: Uniwersytet Warmińsko-Mazurski, Wydział Teologii, 2020), 50-54.

on her salvific mission and can enrich and enliven the evangelizing activity of Catholics.

1. CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF INDIGENOUS THEOLOGY

Indigenous theology is a set of religious experiences and views, owned by Amerindian peoples, thanks to which they have been explaining their faith for millennia. This theology includes religious practice and folk theological wisdom. It is an expression of the freedom to express faith according to the culture of each people. There is room for Christian testimony, intellectual reflection and religious practices expressed in rites.⁶

The term theology is not used here in the sense of striving to show the rationality of faith or explicating the content of Revelation in view of man's intellectual needs. Indigenous theology does not refer to great philosophical systems, nor does it pretend to be universal. It shows how Amerindian peoples believe in God. This theology does not use a discursive or philosophical language, but a mythical-symbolic one, which makes it difficult to perceive it in a strictly scientific perspective.⁷

Indian theology exposes the knowledge of God who is present among peoples and their approach to supernatural matters. It thus leads to the discovery of what has been marginalized since the Christianization of Latin America; therefore, indigenous theology appears as a protest against disregard for native traditions, as well as a demonstration of openness to ancient cultures. It is a theological project that expresses the struggle for the dignity and rights of oppressed and enslaved peoples, which makes it closely related to the theology of liberation.⁸

Indigenous theology is either exploratory or searching theology. It is modeled on the Fathers of the Church or St. Thomas, who looked for a dialogue with pagan culture and philosophy. In its area, reflection is undertaken on faith in Jesus Christ from the perspective of a specific cultural identity to

⁶ Eleazar López Hernández, "Teologías indias en la Iglesia, métodos y propuestas," in *Teología india. Emergencia indígena: desafío para la pastoral de la Iglesia*, vol. I, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2006), 65; Nicanor Sarmiento Tupayupanqui, *Caminos de la Teología India* (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000), 120.

⁷ López Hernández, "Teologías indias en la Iglesia, métodos y propuestas," 67.

⁸ Octavio Ruiz Arenas, "Reflexiones sobre el método teológico, ante de surgimiento de la teología india," in *Teología india. Simposio-diálogo entre obispos y expertos*, vol. II, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2006), 121.

justify religious convictions typical for a culture, as well as to revive faith in other cultures in Latin America and around the world. It promotes dialogue between native religions and Christianity, which contributes to a more appealing evangelization and an authentic inculturation of the faith. It wants to be faithful to God's revelation in Christ and to full ecclesial communion. It should be noted, however, that in indigenous theology there is also a current affirming primitive religions as opposed to Christianity.⁹

The subject of Native American theology is not an individual – researcher or thinker, but a people or community, that is, the indigenous peoples themselves who, by telling their religious experiences, create “theology.” Such theology has important existential significance due to its starting point – the experience of God, captured in metaphors, songs and rites, and as a goal – to seek answers to questions that arise in life and to support communication of the experience of God in the community. Due to their deep religious sense and vivid contemplative experience, indigenous peoples are aware that theology is created by a community that lives and thinks about its experience of God.¹⁰

Since the subject of Native American theology is the people, this means that it is about the poor suffering from exploitation and deprivation and sharing their religious experiences with others in community gatherings. In their lives, everything – customs, objects, traditions – has a theological meaning. The entire culture they create is subject to sacralization and constitutes a living “record” of religious beliefs.¹¹

In its reflection, indigenous theology takes into account not only the basic sources of Christian faith, but also local traditions, which are incorporated in rites and myths passed down from generation to generation. Myths are truth told that are not subject to intellectual reflection. According to indigenous theologians, they are true because they contain wisdom. They help to de-

⁹ Nicanor Sarmiento, “La teología india es verdadera teología?” in *Teología india. III Simposio Latinoamericano de teología india*, vol. III, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2009), 130; Juan F. Gorski, “Las ‘semillas del Verbo,’ la revelación bíblica y las Iglesias autóctonas inculturadas,” in *Teología india. III Simposio Latinoamericano de teología india*, vol. III, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2009), 93-95.

¹⁰ Ruiz Arenas, “Teología India, una reflexión cristiana desde la sabiduría indígena,” 133; Gorski, “El desarrollo histórico,” 16.

¹¹ Gerardo Flores Reyes, “Aspectos importantes de la Teología India,” in *Sabiduría indígena. Fuente de esperanza. Teología India. II parte Aportes* (Cusco: Grafisol, 1998), 238; Héctor González Martínez, “Método para una teología inculturada,” in *Teología india. Simposio-diálogo entre obispos y expertos*, vol. II, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2006), 176.

scribe reality, understand it and interpret human existence. They teach how to relate to reality and strengthen the group's identity.¹²

Indigenous theology is concrete and doesn't waste energy creating abstracts. It accompanies the lives of peoples. It is rooted in the past, sheds light on the present and looks to the future. Its cultivation is associated with contemplating life and admiring its mysteries. It not only focuses on God in the strict sense, but takes into account the whole life of the people, to look for answers to problems that arise in everyday life. It consists in contemplating the nature and wisdom of the people. For this purpose, it uses songs, rituals, stories, metaphors that talk about God and allow people to talk to God. It is therefore something empirical that enables the sharing of life experiences.¹³

All those who create indigenous theology are convinced that the wisdom of God is contained in myths and rites, and that His existence is revealed in creation.¹⁴ The salvation history of the Merindian peoples (Maya, Quechua and others) begins with their appearance. From the beginning, they are guided by the presence of God and the "seeds of the Word"¹⁵ active in their cultural traditions, which they treat as a kind of Old Testament preparing them for an encounter with Christ and his Gospel.¹⁶

Indigenous theology not only recognizes the presence of God in pagan cultures, but also sees an authentic revelation in them. Then such theology can be practiced without Christianity. This is evidenced by the experience of native peoples who, even before Christianization, practiced their theology, enlivening their way of life and giving it direction, showing life ideals always following God's plan. Then also the rites and myths are treated as the "Bible of the people" in which God reveals himself and shows the history of salvation and liberation.¹⁷

¹² Sarmiento Tupayupanqui, *Caminos de la Teología India*, 63-75.

¹³ González Martínez, "Método para una teología inculturada," 175; López Hernández, "Teologías indias en la Iglesia, métodos y propuestas," 78; Ruiz Arenas, "Teología India, una reflexión cristiana desde la sabiduría indígena," 133; Flores Reyes, "Aspectos importantes de la Teología India," 238; Sarmiento Tupayupanqui, *Caminos de la Teología India*, 73-75.

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): no. 3.

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, "Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church *Ad gentes*," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): no. 11, 15, 18.

¹⁶ Flores Reyes, "Aspectos importantes de la Teología India," 234; Sarmiento, "La teología india es verdadera teología?" 133-134; Gorski, "Las 'semillas del Verbo'" 121.

¹⁷ Eleazar López Hernández, "La teología indígena en el Istmo de Tehuantepec," in *Teología india. Antología*, ed. Eleazar López Hernández (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000), 87; Roberto Tomichá Charupá, "Revelación y Pueblos Originarios. Algunas consideraciones," in *Teología india. V Teología india. Revelación de Dios y Pueblos Originarios*, vol. V, ed. Consejo Episcopal

The basic goal of practicing indigenous theology is to “justify hope,” that is, to understand the meaning of life always subjected to God’s action. Due to its relevance to history, it is a dynamic, progressive and ever-changing theology. Thanks to it, God’s truth can be freed from stereotypes of thought, thus enriching dialogue within the Church. Its purpose is to strengthen both the cultural identity of indigenous peoples and the Christian identity. It aims to shape the spirit of solidarity in the community, as well as awaken love for the God of life present in the culture of the people.¹⁸

For Native American theology, an essential goal is to support the work of evangelization by helping people discover how close to God they are and how He has accompanied them along the paths of history. It is to support the community of believers in achieving even greater awareness, freedom and joy in participating in the paschal mystery of Christ, because of the Gospel they have accepted. Thanks to indigenous theology, the community of believers is also to become more missionary, i.e., able to share its faith with other cultures that make up the universal Church.¹⁹

Indigenous theology itself wants to be a means of implementing the new evangelization thanks to the dialogue that takes place in its womb between indigenous cultures and Christianity. This dialogue inspires people to lead a spiritual life and not to give up hope for a better future. Its fruits can be used not only by its immediate participants, but by all the inhabitants of the earth who long for true life.²⁰

There is an integral method in practicing indigenous theology that consists in analyzing the sources, meaning the word of God and local beliefs and customs described as the “ancient word.” Its transmission from generation to generation in native cultures leads to a dialogue in which one recognizes the

Latinoamericano, (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2015), 147; Octavio Ruiz Arenas, “Teología india, revelación cristiana e inculturación. Prolegómenos para un diálogo,” in *Teología india. Emergencia indígena: desafío para la pastoral de la Iglesia*, vol. I, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2006), 141.

¹⁸ Teixeira, “O desafio das teologias índias,” 13; Sarmiento Tupayupanqui, *Caminos de la Teología India*, 117-118; Madrigal Sánchez, “Teología india,” 137; Franz Van der Hoff, “Religiosidad popular indígena en una sociedad que excluye indígenas, pequeños productores del campo,” in *Sabiduría indígena. Fuente de esperanza. Teología India. II parte Aportes* (Cusco: Grafisol 1998), 255; Diego Irarrázaval, “El saber indígena sopesa la modernidad,” in *Sabiduría indígena. Fuente de esperanza. Teología India. II parte Aportes* (Cusco: Grafisol 1998), 299.

¹⁹ López, “La Teología India en la Iglesia,” 78.

²⁰ José Cabrera, “Informe y análisis de los esfuerzos de la teología india,” in *Teología india. Emergencia indígena: desafío para la pastoral de la Iglesia*, vol. I, ed. Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano (Bogotá: Publicaciones CELAM, 2006), 121.

polyphony of voices with which the people express their religious experiences. In this context, the hermeneutic method of updating myths is used. It is about reinterpreting them in the context of the contemporary situation in which many elements contradict genuine values and do not promote human dignity. This methodological approach is critical, prophetic and liberating, which corresponds to the fundamental orientation of liberation theology – with the difference, however, that in indigenous theology it is not economic issues that come to the fore, but the struggle to preserve ethnic identity and culture.²¹

Indigenous theology cultivated in this way is practical. It is an integral activity related to everyday life, the life of people, because the whole existence of people speaks of their relationship with God. It is also a folk theology, because both its object and subject are related to a specific culture and wisdom (theology), which has been shaped in the lives of peoples for centuries. It also has a pastoral and evangelizing dimension, as it wants to announce the Good News of Christ and shape reality following the ideal of God's kingdom. Moreover, promoters of Native American theology emphasize its social and liberating character, seeing it as an option for the poor and a source of impulses to make such changes in society, thanks to which the poor, the oppressed and the excluded will find their rightful place in it.²²

This kind of approach to theological reflection is often met with opposition. When approaching indigenous theology critically, one must pay attention to a certain regressive way of theological thinking. The focus on finding and exposing the “seeds of the Word” in pagan cultures is evidence of a return to the pre-Christian era, while the fullness of Revelation was accomplished in Christ. There is also resistance to tendencies to equate the Old Testament with pagan myths, which in the Christian perspective are people's reactions to existential fears and an expression of their longing for the light of truth.²³ Moreover, an exaggerated emphasis on pagan cultures and traditions carries the danger of equating them with Christianity, which is no longer considered the universal and ultimate truth²⁴ but is one of many religious systems equal to each other. It also seems dangerous to attribute to Christianity the misfortunes that have affected the indigenous people of Latin America over the centuries. Such views reveal, on the one hand, the ideal-

²¹ López, “La Teología India en la Iglesia,” 100; Madrigal Sánchez, “Teología india,” 139.

²² López, “La Teología India en la Iglesia,” 88-99; Madrigal Sánchez, “Teología india,” 138.

²³ Benedict XVI, “Encyclical Letter *Spes Salvi*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 99 (2007): no. 2.

²⁴ John Paul II, “Encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 91 (1999): no. 38.

ization of the life of Merindian tribes in pre-Columbian times, and, on the other hand, the inability to distinguish the truth of Christ from the actions of his followers that are not always consistent with it.²⁵

2. NATIVE THEOLOGIANS ON THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

Indigenous theology strongly emphasizes that the proclamation of the Gospel never takes place in a “vacuum,” for “the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, is present and active among the hearers of the Good News even before the Church’s missionary action comes into operation.”²⁶ Before evangelizers appear among people, God comes to meet them with His grace, helping them to create history and culture. In this perspective, the evangelizing ministry of the Church consists in revealing and proclaiming the presence of God to build communion, including new nations in God’s people consisting of many peoples.²⁷

Evangelization is about discovering values in culture. Hospitality, respect for creation and care for the natural environment have always played an important role in the life of indigenous communities, which was helped by a healthy, balanced relationship with Mother Nature and the use of wisdom inherited from ancestors. It all adds up to the so-called good life in which both the needs of individuals and entire communities find their satisfaction. A “good life” means a holistic and integrating vision of a human being included in the great earthly society, which includes – apart from human beings – air, water, soil, mountains, trees and animals. This concept is synonymous with man’s deep communion with Pacha Mama (Mother – Earth), with the energies of the universe and with God.²⁸

The proclamation of the Gospel requires recognizing the values present in the lives of indigenous peoples. Only then will evangelization not be a de-

²⁵ Teixeira, “O desafio das teologias índias,” 15; López, “La Teología India en la Iglesia,” 92; Hajduk, *Teologia latynoamerykańska i jej praktyczne implikacje*, 52-53.

²⁶ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, *Dialogue and Proclamation, Reflection and Orientations On Interreligious Dialogue and the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ*, Rome 1991, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/interelg/documents/rc_pc_intereleg_doc_19051991_dialogue-and-proclamatio_en.html, no. 68, accessed: February 10, 2022.

²⁷ Clodomiro Siller, “El punto de partida de la teología india,” in *Teología india. Primer encuentro taller latinoamericano México* (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 1992), 56; Teixeira, “O desafio das teologias índias,” 14; López, “La Teología India en la Iglesia,” 92.

²⁸ Teixeira, “O desafio das teologias índias,” 17.

structive process, but build on the existing culture. Concerning Merindian cultures, the Church should act as with the Greek and Latin cultures in which Christianity first developed. The Church's task is to foster cultures so that they may reach their fullness and bear fruit.²⁹

In emphasizing the need to show respect for traditional cultures, indigenous theology places a strong emphasis on inculturated evangelization. Such evangelization does not destroy culture, but purifies it and raises it to a higher level. At the same time, the Gospel itself is enriched with new elements present in culture. Evangelization becomes authentic and fruitful when the specific character of a given people is taken into account in the process of transmitting the Good News.³⁰

The inculturation of the Gospel cannot be limited to the verbal sphere and the transmission of intellectual content, as it should be holistic. Therefore, in the process of communicating the message of salvation, one must keep in mind the whole person – his daily life, dignity and freedom. An inculturation that does not liberate cannot be an inculturation of the Gospel. Moreover, true inculturated evangelization can provoke conflicts, because the Gospel is good news for the poor and bad for the rich.³¹

The inculturation of the Gospel is essentially a dialogue of the Christian message of salvation with cultures. It is never a monologue. If this happened, and evangelization consisted in “transplanting” foreign forms of Christian life into a culture, a local Church would not be born, capable of expressing its own experience of Christ in the language and symbols of its specific culture. The result of the lack of dialogue is a kind of syncretism, i.e., the reinterpretation of the manifestations of Christian life taken over from the outside, based on one's worldview and values, and combining them with one's religious cosmivision. Another effect of the lack of dialogue may be the clandestine practice of rituals – for centuries essential in the life of the community, and for some time superseded by others.³²

Thus, for the Church to avoid the negative effects of a monologue, it must listen to the voice of indigenous peoples and learn from their experience of the living God. We should also remember the other pole of dialogue: the voice of the Church, the community of Christ's disciples who experience the

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 58 (1966): no. 58; López Hernández, “Teologías indias en la Iglesia, métodos y propuestas,” 71; Siller, “El punto de partida de la teología india,” 55.

³⁰ Vicente Zaruma Quizpilema, *Wakanmay (Aliento Sagrado). Perspectivas de Teología India. Una Propuesta desde la cultura Cañari* (Quito: Ediciones Abya-Yala, 2006), 277-278.

³¹ Hoff, “Religiosidad popular indígena,” 250.

³² Gorski, “El desarrollo histórico,” 21.

gift of the Spirit constantly and participate in His paschal mystery. Indigenous theology draws attention to this, emphasizing two dimensions of the religious and cultural experience of the people: fidelity to tradition, which preserves the memory of the encounter with the living God in the past, and fidelity to universal ecclesial communion, i.e., participation in the faith experience of all of Jesus' disciples living in different places and times.³³

Evangelization must not violate the identity of the peoples among which it is taking place. Therefore, the work of evangelization cannot end with the founding of local communities or Churches. The sign that Christianity has penetrated culture is the birth of native theologies, as well as the formation of specific liturgical rites. Indian theology emphasizes that their appearance will be a clear sign of recognition of the richness of local cultural forms.³⁴

Accepting the uniqueness of the spirituality of primitive peoples and the greatness of their culture is closely related to giving them the role of subjects in the work of evangelization. Native American theology assigns a special responsibility in this regard to pastors who come from a cultural environment in which evangelization takes place. Properly formed pastors who use the support of lay faithful strive to preserve the cultural values and identity of the people, and engage in the struggle for the rights of the natives to land ownership, autonomy and the protection of natural resources in the territories they inhabit. Evangelization then takes the form of an integral process deeply connected with the promotion of man and his social and political liberation.³⁵

Thanks to the involvement of pastors and indigenous people in the transmission of the Christian message, evangelization activity can be carried out according to the principle of incarnation. In this way, the Church becomes the Merindian Church in solidarity with the peoples to whom she was sent. Indigenous theology postulates that the principle of incarnation should guide the whole activity of the Church, especially her ministry among the primitive peoples.³⁶

The conversion of human hearts, which takes place by opening them up to Transcendence, leads to the transformation of reality. People desire to live in

³³ López Hernández, "Teologías indias en la Iglesia, métodos y propuestas," 66; Gorski, "El desarrollo histórico," 19.

³⁴ Zaruma Quizhpilema, *Wakanmay*, 356; Madrigal Sánchez, "Teología india," 135.

³⁵ Zaruma Quizhpilema, *Wakanmay*, 277; Madrigal Sánchez, "Teología india," 132-133.

³⁶ Karina Sandoval Zapata, Hugo Lasso Otaya, "Evangelización, encubrimiento y resistencia indígena en el valle de sibundoy putumayo," *Historia y Espacio* 43 (2014): 33-56; Madrigal Sánchez, "Teología india," 133.

a world where people can develop integrally. The Good News bears fruit when humanity is transformed and renewed. Social structures in which different ethnic groups experience oppression are changed under the influence of the Gospel. It is also then that the poor are freed from poverty and regain their dignity. It is important not to focus too much on the improvement of social conditions; involvement in political issues does not guide all human activity. Where the Gospel is proclaimed integrally, liberation cannot be seen only horizontally.³⁷

Like indigenous theology itself, its approach to evangelization raises some doubts. First, its very need may be questioned, and this is because the religions of the Merindian tribes are treated as a source of divine revelation, parallel to Christianity. In this view, preaching the Gospel no longer seems necessary, since the same truth flows from pre-Columbian myths and customs as from Christianity. This tendency can be seen as a symptom of relativism that deprives the Church's evangelizing activity of its proper meaning and dynamism.³⁸

In the Christian tradition, cultic practices and the manner of their fulfillment influence the understanding of the truths of faith and determine the shape of everyday existence according to the rules of *lex credendi*, *lex orandi*, and *lex vivendi*.³⁹ Equating pagan rites and the Catholic liturgy, in a sense, undermines the unique meaning of the salvific mystery of Christ, which is realized in Christian worship. Promoting the so-called pluralist sacramentality, according to which pagan rites can be treated as signs of God's grace, undermines the meaning of mystagogical catechesis and the unique role of the sacraments in the life of the Church and its members, and thus the Church's ministry of proclaiming the Gospel.⁴⁰

³⁷ López, "La Teología India en la Iglesia," 98; Ruiz Arenas, "Reflexiones sobre el método teológico," 119.

³⁸ Teixeira, "O desafio das teologias índias," 14; Eleazar López Hernández, "La teología india en la globalización actual," in *Teología india. Antología*, ed. Eleazar López Hernández (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2000), 139.

³⁹ Alexander Saberschinsky, *Einführung in die Feier der Eucharistie. Historisch – Systematisch – Praktisch* (Freiburg i. B.: Herder, 2009), 11; Hajduk, *Teologia latynoamerykańska i jej praktyczne implikacje*, 53.

⁴⁰ Christine Lisa Perrier, "Explorando la evolución de la evangelización y la misión," in *Caminos de Herradura*, ed. Christine Lisa Perrier (Cochabamba: Verbo Divino, 2015), 210.

3. IMPULSES FOR REFLECTING ON THE CHURCH'S EVANGELIZING ACTIVITY

Despite its shortcomings and threats to Catholic orthodoxy, indigenous theology enlivens the discussion on evangelization, its importance and character in modern times, and contributes to a better understanding of the needs and indications of the Church. It attaches great importance to the context in which the Gospel is proclaimed, and exerts a significant influence on the behavior and thinking of people. Also, to a large extent, it determines the Church's actions. Knowing the cultural context allows us not only to discover problems occurring in it, but also provides an impulse to change pastoral practice. This process should be permanent, as no context is a static reality. Even traditional cultures are subject to change, and with them the needs, values, customs and interpersonal relationships, and thus the lives of people whom the Church, according to God's will, wants to support in achieving salvation and holiness.⁴¹

Indigenous theology itself pretends to be an instrument of evangelization. For this reason, it is necessary to reflect on the meaning and shape of theological research, which, in addition to learning, should take into account the Church's practices, including evangelization.⁴² Indigenous theology challenges theologians, appealing to them to join people's lives and engage in pastoral activity. This will not only strengthen their motivation for scientific and research work, but also avoid the temptation to practice theology detached from reality, uninvolved and leading to the formulation of harsh judgments at the desk.⁴³

The promoters of indigenous theology pay attention to the necessity to dialogue with reality. This corresponds to the concept of in- or intercultural evangelization, according to which there is no "supra-cultural," "pure" Gospel, and cultures must be open to each other in order to conduct a dialogue in

⁴¹ Francis George, "Evangelizing Our Culture," in *The New Evangelization. Overcoming the Obstacles*, ed. Steven Boguslawski, Ralph Martin (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2008), 57; Emmanuel Y. Lartey, *Pastoral Theology in an Intercultural World* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 11; Stephen Bevans, Ricky Manalo, "Contextual Preaching," in *A Handbook for Catholic Preaching*, ed. Edward Foley (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 236.

⁴² Francis, *Veritatis Gaudium. Costituzione Apostolica circa le Università e le Facoltà Ecclesiastiche* (Vatican: LEV, 2020), no. 1.

⁴³ Francis, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, Acta Apostolicae Sedis 108 (2016): no. 296, 312; Manfred Scheuer, "Barmherzigkeit will ich ... Zum Jahr der Barmherzigkeit," *Klerusblatt* 1 (2016): 6.

search of truth.⁴⁴ It is not only about some virtual dialogue in which an attempt is made to find in the Gospel answers to social calls and questions from contemporaries. What is needed is a real and personal dialogue in which “the other person speaks and shares his or her joys, hopes and concerns for loved ones, or so many other heartfelt needs.”⁴⁵ Then, evangelization ceases to be treated as a one-way transmission of the Christian message and becomes the practice of listening to specific people and contributes to the realization of “the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.”⁴⁶

An important characteristic of the evangelization promoted by native theologians is its grassroots character. For the Church, this means, on the one hand, the necessity to prepare evangelizers in such a way that they would not only convincingly and competently communicate to others Christ’s message, but also that they not hastily reject certain religious customs as pagan superstitions and be able to discover in non-Christian cultures “seeds of the Word”, i.e., God’s gifts scattered in all peoples and nations.⁴⁷ On the other hand, the Church should take care that among evangelizers, there will be no shortage of properly formed Christians coming from concrete cultures, who, thanks to their deep understanding of native traditions, will pass the Gospel on to their countrymen in a way that they understand it. It is always a question of evangelizers trying to “discover the legitimate needs and concerns that seek an outlet in at times imperfect, partial or mistaken religious expressions, and will attempt to respond to them with an inculturated spirituality.”⁴⁸

Evangelization in line with the ideas of indigenous theologians clearly recognizes in it the subjectivity of the people. The ideal is that the people themselves should evangelize the people.⁴⁹ Such a situation presupposes that the life of the people is shaped by the truth of Christ, and that their culture is based on values consistent with the Gospel. For that to be the case, the Church must ensure that Christ’s followers have access to the sources of

⁴⁴ Medard Kehl, *Die Kirche. Eine katholische Ekklesiologie* (Würzburg: Echter, 1992), 254; Hans Waldenfels, “Fünfzig Jahre später,” in *Evangelium und Kultur. Begegnungen und Brüche. Festschrift für Michael Sievernich*, ed. Mariano Delgado, Hans Waldenfels (Fribourg – Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2010), 266-267; Roberto Tomichá Charupa, “Eucaristía, Misión y Realidad Nacional. Primer Simposio Boliviano de Misionología,” *Yachay* 42 (2005): 172.

⁴⁵ Francis, “Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 105 (2013): no. 128.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 31.

⁴⁷ John Paul II, “Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*,” *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 83 (1991): no. 29.

⁴⁸ Francis, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Querida Amazonia* (Vatican: LEV, 2020), no. 79.

⁴⁹ Rafael Luciani, “La opción teológico-pastoral del pontificado de Francisco,” *Razón y Fe* 1411-1412 (2016): 464.

Christian formation. Appropriate structures serve this purpose. Wherever there is a lack of clergy, living Christian communities play an important role, radiating sacrificial love and evangelical brotherhood to their surroundings. They are “a source of enrichment for the Church, raised up by the Spirit for evangelizing different areas and sectors.”⁵⁰ These include the basic ecclesial communities which gather the lay faithful around the word of God in order to learn in its light to see reality and act in accordance with the Creator's will. Their activities contribute to “the defense of social rights with missionary proclamation and spirituality.”⁵¹ As active sectors of parish life, they contribute to bringing the truth of the Gospel into people's daily lives and to transforming the social environment into a civilization of love.

Indigenous theology encourages the use of all the spiritual riches of the Church in the work of evangelization. It is also the wisdom accumulated in the lives of individual peoples for centuries, as well as their specific experience of the closeness of God and His presence in their history. This wisdom is the fruit of the action of God's Spirit who makes that God works in the lives of the people and guides them towards Himself. This wisdom is embodied in a lifestyle and therefore tested in practice. Therefore, it can be passed on to others not as a theory, but as a living Christian model.⁵²

Christian religious practices, which express the people's piety, play an important role in the evangelization promoted by native Merindian theologians. They are often expressions of faith that have developed over the centuries and are of great value in the eyes of people as part of their spiritual treasure. Since customs and religious rites are part of their everyday life, they are useful tools for communicating the Christian truth. Faith always reaches man through the language appropriate for a given culture, including symbolic language and ritual activities. Indigenous theologians are convinced that the experience of Christ, expressed in language and with the help of symbols specific to a culture, enlivens individual communities of believers, and also enriches the life of the entire Church and the entire human community.⁵³

Native American theology sees in the work of evangelization a path to the humanization of social reality. Although preaching the Gospel always means being concerned for the salvation of humankind, conversion and a life of

⁵⁰ Francis, “Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,” no. 29.

⁵¹ Francis, *Post-synodal apostolic exhortation Querida Amazonia*, no. 96.

⁵² *Ibid.*, no. 22; Fabricio Forcat, “El Cristianismo popular, la ley y el bien común según Rafael Tello,” *Stromata 2* (2017): 213.

⁵³ Gorski, “El desarrollo histórico,” 21.

faith should be reflected in relationships and social structures. Noting that the Church cannot be indifferent to the violent processes of decay and dehumanization taking place in society, Merindian theologians remind the Church that it is her duty to take into account all dimensions of human life in her activities. Thus, they confirm the truth about Christianity as the source of true humanism.⁵⁴

Being a variant of Latin American liberation theology, indigenous theology strongly emphasizes the redemptive nature of evangelization. It would be a mistake to reduce Christian liberation to lifting the poorest people of Latin America out of a situation of unjust and inhuman poverty caused by the world's economic powers, making it difficult for developing countries to attain a higher standard of living. However, it must not be forgotten that the center of the Church's mission is proclaiming redemption accomplished in the person of Jesus, that is, love that restores the dignity of God's children to people.⁵⁵ This love wants to reach the human heart and transform it so that people's lives are filled with good, and every human being in union with God will find joy, peace and happiness.⁵⁶ Christ's redemption gives man the freedom to distance himself from evil and to pursue full personal development, learning from Jesus "who man truly is and what a man must do in order to be truly human."⁵⁷ Evangelization cannot begin with the proclamation of lofty ideals or ethical principles, but with the person of Jesus, in whom everything speaks about God's mercy. A person becomes a Christian not as a result of some ethical decision or a fascination with a great idea, but as a result of an encounter "with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction."⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jens Zimmermann, *Humanism and Religion. A Call for the Renewal of Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 38-39; María Eugenia Celli, "«El Evangelio puede matar». Análisis del preámbulo hermenéutico de la anti-cristología de Juan Luis Segundo," *Veritas* 28 (2013): 151.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, "Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 98 (2006): no. 10; Anselm Grün, *Biblische Bilder von Erlösung* (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag, 1994), 19.

⁵⁶ Francis, "Bulla *Misericordiae vultus*," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 107 (2015): no. 9; Wojciech Zagrodzki, "Kościół w służbie odkupieniu w świetle encykliki *Redemptor Hominis* Jana Pawła II," in *Ogarnięci tajemnicą Chrystusowego Odkupienia. W poszukiwaniu inspiracji pastoralnych w „ośrodku wszechświata i historii*," ed. Ryszard Hajduk, Marek Kotyński (Kraków: Homo Dei, 2006), 102.

⁵⁷ Benedict XVI, "Encyclical Letter *Spes Salvi*," no. 6.

⁵⁸ Benedict XVI, "Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*," no. 1.3.

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The reflection of indigenous theologians is a vivid expression of the universal Church's interest in her call to evangelization. This Latin-American theology refers directly to the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, as well as to the teachings of the last popes from St. Paul VI to Francis, calling the followers of Christ to bear witness to the Gospel. It also takes into account the unique religious experience of indigenous peoples, their history and current problems that Latin-American bishops (CELAM) help them to discern. Therefore, it can be considered a kind of an attempt to accommodate the general indications of the universal Church to the local needs of the Church in Latin America.

Indigenous theology wants to serve the native peoples of Latin America. It takes up the challenges arising from a specific socio-cultural situation and follows the same path as liberation theology. It also expresses the principle of *sentire cum ecclesia*, because its promoters develop ideas present in the post-conciliar texts of the Magisterium of the Church: respect for human dignity, inculturation and humanization. Indigenous theology affirms that at the center of the Church's mission is redemption – liberation, and it concerns both the human heart and spirit, as well as the material sphere and social relations.

Native American theology promoters take into account not only the needs of indigenous peoples and local Churches. Its supporters desire to revive universal dialogue within the Church, which is to serve the faithful fulfillment of her salvific mission, and thus contribute to the growth of evangelical favor among believers and their readiness to commit themselves to transforming the world into the kingdom of God. Such dialogue allows the Disciples of Christ to come closer to the truth, strengthens their love and creates a community ready to bring the Gospel to the world. Despite the deficiencies and doubts raised by some of the views expressed by representatives of indigenous theology, it is certainly a valuable source of inspiration for the renewal of Church's evangelizing activity.

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EWANGELIZACJA W UJĘCIU TEOLOGII INDYGENISTYCZNEJ

Streszczenie

Teologia indygenistyczna, która pojawiła się w Ameryce Łacińskiej w połowie lat osiemdziesiątych, uprawiana przez wyznawców Chrystusa chce służyć dialogowi pomiędzy religiami antycznymi i chrześcijaństwem. Ma ona swoją własną metodę, jej podmiotem jest lud wierny, a głównym przedmiotem refleksji jest doświadczenie duchowe gromadzone w rdzennych kulturach od czasów prekolumbijskich. Teologia indiańska chce przyczynić się do prowadzenia ewangelizacji bardziej poruszającej ludzi i do autentycznej inkulturacji wiary w rejonach zamieszkałych przez rdzenną ludność latynoamerykańską. Analiza tekstów pisanych przez teologów indygenistycznych prowadzi do odkrycia sposobu uprawiania tej teologii, a także jej specyficznego podejścia do ewangelizacji. Mimo swoich braków i ujęć budzących wątpliwości w perspektywie katolickiej ortodoksji teologia indiańska może ożywić ogólnokościelną dyskusję na temat ewangelizacji i przyczynić się do jej zdynamizowania w czasach współczesnych.

Słowa kluczowe: Ameryka Łacińska; duszpasterstwo; dialog międzyreligijny; kultura; chrześcijaństwo; Kościół.