

Not a clergyman, just a man

by Neto Leão

Preamble

I remember the day I opened my apartment's door and found David Cayley's latest book on Illich sitting on my doorstep – *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (2021). It was a gift from my friend and teacher Sajay Samuel. On the first page, I read the marks of a simple and objective dedication: “To my dear friend Neto, for reading! Cheers, Sajay!” I believe that says it all. It is a book to be read, unlike many among those infamous lists of most read. I opened the package and began reading it right away.

At that time, around March 2021, I was writing, from an Illichian perspective, the first chapter of my doctoral thesis on political ecology. This book opened a path for clarifying much of my own investigations on Illich's first writings, those which are openly theological. David Cayley writes with clarity and depth. *Ivan Illich: an Intellectual Journey* is one of the finest seeds sprouting out of the garden of Illich's life and thought. Nourished by Cayley's own questions and propositions, it is perhaps the most thorough analysis stitched to the theological line of force that characterizes the written word in Illich.

One of Cayley's discoveries in writing this book, as he says, was Illich's standpoint as “a philosopher of complementarity.” Being-in-the-world, according to Cayley, means the awareness of its duality. In Illich, “this philosophy begins with a clear understanding that ‘the kingdom of God’ or ‘the kingdom of heaven’ that Jesus preached was to be found in

the world but that it was not ‘of the world’ (Cayley, 2021).”

I have argued for something similar in my last article for *Conspiratio*, titled *How to read Ivan Illich*. After analyzing Illich’s short essay *Puerto Ricans in New York: Not Foreigners, Yet Foreign* (1959) and his response to Cayley that, for him, home was Puerto Rico (Cayley, 1992), I suggested that Illich maintained a distance to the world to which he is nevertheless attached. He acknowledged feeling a kinship to Puerto Rico (“...in Puerto Rico, *we...*”) but did not dissolve the distance between him and Puerto Ricans (“I could not say ‘we Puerto Ricans’”). “The theological depth of his personal response to a call can be gauged by the fidelity of his stance to be in the world and not of it (Leão, 2021).”

The purpose of this short article is to corroborate and deepen Cayley’s discovery of Illich as a ‘philosopher of complementarity.’ I suggest that Illich’s *Vanishing Clergyman* (1959/1967) is a pivotal essay in which to discover a germ of what will later appear as ‘complementarity’ in *Gender*. Specifically, as Cayley recognizes (p.63-64), Illich extends a traditional Catholic distinction between Church understood as a *She* and the church understood as an *it*. Even if this distinction is only implicit in the *Vanishing Clergyman*, the essay does not make sense without it. I suggest that Illich’s argument for declericalizing the church does not only depend on the authority of tradition (Tyconius) but more significantly on the experience of truth among the faithful during his pilgrimage through Latin America. I believe that this essay also prefigures the journey of Illich vanishing as clergyman to become just a man.

The soil and the seed

In one of his conversations with David Cayley, Illich said that the experience in Latin America brought back to him the trust in his intuition as a way of thinking, that is,

in flesh as a constitutive part of deliberation and reflection. I sniff something of foundational significance to his work and life when Illich says he recouped his faith in intuition during these years. Trusting one senses forms one of the pillars for a convivial society, especially when one thinks of what Illich calls “finding a natural threshold”. Moreover, in his later years, Illich would delve into the historicity of the senses. It is a plausible guess that it was in Latin America, when Illich was first exposed to communities not yet homogenized by industrial modes of production and service institutions, that Illich germinates his interest in the senses as a fundamental historical category. Illich left Puerto Rico in 1960, and since then, as one can see throughout his life, has distanced himself and avoided taking on bureaucratic positions in institutions. In doing so, he avoided the deadening comfort of bureaucratic roles and exposes himself more directly to concrete ways of living.

Young Ivan Illich left Ponce and embarked on a pilgrimage that began in Santiago Chile and extended to Caracas, Venezuela in 1959. Kaller-Dietrich says that the author made his pilgrimage on foot or hitchhiking. Illich told Cayley that it is only by walking on his own feet that the distances, cultural universes, and particularities of each region are experienced. According to Martina Kaller-Dietrich Illich pilgrimage took four months. Although we have very little information about the events of this pilgrimage, it is likely that it would have resembled his later sojourns in Latin America, typically filled by meetings with notable figures in favor of a more organic Church. Such figures included Dom Hélder Câmara and the priests of *Petrópolis*, Francisco Julião and the peasant leagues in the Northeast – a very important activist group that first initiated the struggle for agrarian reformation in Brazil – as well as Paulo Freire and other intellectuals whether they were linked to the church or not.

The main hypothesis here is that Illich’s *Vanishing*

Clergyman, although published in 1967 in the *Critic* of Chicago – the first draft is from 1959 – reflects and is shaped by Illich’s immersive years in the deep heart of Latin America. Illich’s arguments for vanishing as a clergyman to become, once again, just a man, and for belonging to a Church where the dinner table could be the altar, resonate the diverse practices of faith he personally experienced during his sojourn among Puerto Ricans, once in New York and later in Ponce, and his pilgrimage through villages, communities, peoples, and slums across Latin America. Illich said he would not discuss the matter of being a clergyman in “abstract terms”. It is reasonable to surmise that Illich’s witness of the living Church in Latin America informed his ideas for the “shape of the future ministry”.

The incipit of *The Vanishing Clergyman* points at the target to which Illich is aiming his argument: “the Roman church is the world’s largest non-governmental bureaucracy” which, at the time, employed about 1,800,000 employees. The red thread animating his argument is this: how can it be that the Roman church, which wants to be the sign of Christ’s presence in the world, rely on a bureaucratic structure of faith? Are there possible paths towards a much more communal Church? Illich was obviously not arguing for the complete dismantling of the Roman church structure. He was not encouraging abandoning the stone build church or parish. The point here is less about destroying something and more about embracing a practice that already exists (how the church ‘it’ could make room for the Church ‘She’ to flourish. He was attempting to fathom the shape of a church that renounces control over the mystery of Christ within us.

On reading *The Vanishing Clergyman* one sees how thoroughly Illich was considering the possible paths to be taken towards a more communal Church. He describes in detail how such a Church was a possibility even according to the canon law of the time. For instance, he mentions the

sacramental ministry of marriage performed by a layperson is permissible by church law when a priest cannot attend a community within thirty days. Similarly, he imagines the recognition of a layman/woman as unfit for sacramental symbolic unity under the umbrella of the canon law of 'suspension'. Most priests acquire a bureaucratic mentality that keeps them away from the consuming fire that is the love of Christ. The training of priests and dioceses management were increasingly under the influence and teaching of business consultants. The clergy-as-manager desired for more of it even as they needed less. In contrast to such a managerial clerisy, Illich had a life-long waking dream of sowing what he called the "Christian community of tomorrow": of ministry as a work of leisure and not a job for professionals; of a 'lay' adult and not ordained priest to preside at meetings of the faithful; of periodic contact among friends to take the place of Sunday meetings between unknown strangers; of the accountant or plumber who was authorized by the assent of the local community and not papal dispensation to conduct the reading of the Word.

One must also take this essay as a cornerstone for Illich's own life and thinking. A thorough investigation of his intellectual trajectory would lead to the conclusion that the household table is a fundamental place of meeting for ideas to flourish, for the encounter with the other, for hospitality. In the words of Illich, "I foresee the face-to-face meeting of families around the table, rather than the impersonal attendance of a crowd around an altar". Is not this the very condition, the soil from which sprouted all Illich's later books? Did not "celebrations [that] sanctify the dining room" underwrite Illich's arguments against counterproductivity, his recognition of the loss of gender, and his recovery of the hesitant gaze which find in the face of the other the possibility for ethics in the 21st century? To reiterate, I am suggesting that Illich glimpsed the

shape of the Christian community of tomorrow in the conduct of the many Christic communities he witnessed during his pilgrimage between 1951 and 1967 into the depths of faith in Latin America.¹

I am not saying that the Christian faith was lived in the southern tropics in such a way that anyone would obviously come to Illich's conclusions and ideas. Nor do I mean to say that these communities are paradisaical, where joy and freedom are celebrated daily. The brutal legacy of slavery is just one example of some of the enduring social structures of these countries. Nevertheless, I believe that Illich's sojourn among the Latin American communities gave content to his imagination of cultivating a way of living that renounced as much of the apparatus – services and 'canned' solutions – as feasible. I suggest that Illich's recognition that "the current ecclesiastical imagination is still inadequate for defining this new synthesis" for the Church to come was sparked by and rooted in his time in Latin America during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Of course, this texture of a communal Church was not the reality of all communities in Mexico City or São Paulo, for example, where the industrial mode of production was rapidly changing the fabric of society. However, in that epoch most of the countries in Latin America had an open window towards a society that was neither capitalist nor socialist – though we know how much the CIA took care of that openness! I think Illich saw a terrain for something completely different from the bipolar world. In his essay *Planned Poverty: the end result of technical assistance, Celebration of Awareness*, Illich argued as much writing, "we must seek survival in a Third World in which human ingenuity can peacefully outwit ma-

1 One is not saying that these conditions could not be verified elsewhere in the world. However, Illich was living and wandering, at this point of his life, across Latin America, the soil from where his ideas sprout out.

chined might.”²

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I believe Illich might have been confused as a liberation theologian by his contemporaries, not to mention by the Doctrine of the Faith. As Cayley points out, this confusion persists to this day when one considers Hartch’s book, *The Prophet of Cuernavaca*. In Hartch’s own words: Illich “camouflaged his theology” because he “had a hidden purpose.” Illich never wrote about Theology of Liberation in any of his writings while he was a priest. He might have known Gustavo Gutiérrez³ in Lima, Peru. Gutiérrez’s book aims to confront social injustice and centuries of violent domination in Latin America through the light of the Gospel.⁴ One of the few, if not unique, appearance of the idea of liberation in Illich, *Lima Discourse* – precisely at the epicenter of Theology of Liberation – point toward something quite different: “liberation can come only from those who choose the desert because they have been set free.”

Illich might have cultivated relationships with grassroots ecclesial communities and theologians of liberation. The ‘use’ of the Gospel for social change is not a hidden purpose in Illich’s early writings as a priest. Negative theology is a much different thing than camouflage. One cannot say that his writings are under the methodological frame of histori-

2 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, the Portuguese philosopher – who was also part of CIDOC (*Law Against Law*) – has intensely written, on his own way, about what Illich called “Third World ingenuity” and how the “hope comes from the South”. For example, *Toward a New Legal Common Sense* (1995), *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (2014) and *The End of Cognitive Empire: the coming of age of epistemologies of the South* (2018). Curiously enough, I cannot find a single reference to Ivan Illich in any of these famous books.

3 See *Teología de la Liberación* (1972), by Gustavo Gutiérrez.

4 For Illich’s perspective on the role of the church on social change and development, see the essay *The Powerless Church*, also in *Celebration of Awareness*.

cal materialism either. Illich's own words clarify this issue: "I want to celebrate my faith for no purpose at all."

The timing of this essay is coeval with a Brazilian document of the Bishops and Superiors of the Northeast – of which Dom Hélder Câmara was the general secretary – titled *Eu ouvi os clamores do meu povo* (I heard the cries of my people). This document was part of the effort by some clergy to think the future of the Church. According to Luis Alberto Gomez de Souza, Dom Camara and Illich had even explored the possibility of preparing a Vatican III, to give content to the Church of tomorrow.⁵ Roberto Romano brilliantly explains the presuppositions of this document in his *Brasil, Igreja contra Estado: crítica ao populismo católico*⁶ (Brazil, Church against State: criticism of Catholic populism, my translation). The document ostensibly defended the thesis that '*Deus está comprometido*' (God is committed). In Portuguese however, differently than in English and depending exclusively on the context, to be committed also means to be compromised.

Roberto Romano will play on the double meaning of the word in Portuguese (God is committed or compromised) in his interpretation of the Brazilian document. Romano discusses four ways that, during the 1960's, one could exemplify God as committed to or compromised by his people. Each of

5 Luis Alberto Gomez de Souza, D. Helder, Irmão dos pobres (*Um testemunho no ano de seu Centenário*), 2009.

6 This book is a pearl among the literature of history and philosophy of the Roman Church in Brazil and its relation to the State. Because it is the doctoral dissertation of Prof. Roberto Romano, one can find the original in French or his own translation to Portuguese: ROMANO, Roberto. *Brasil, Igreja contra Estado: crítica ao populismo católico*. São Paulo: Kairós, 1979. We remind the reader that this book was written during the horrendous Brazilian dictatorship, during which the author, who had been a Dominican priest, was arrested and tortured. The church's choice of populism over communal life can give a historical perspective on the rise and establishment of evangelical churches throughout Brazil and South America due to the void left by the Roman church. The evangelicals are the fraction of society who helped electing Jair Bolsonaro as president (2018).

these efforts to decipher the times entailed reading the gospel conscientiously. The first way would be through the relationship between man and God, intimately established by a divine commitment within history. The second, divine commitment would be subject to a kind of reactive judgment, especially when the official church sacralizes transient economic and social orders. The third would emphasize God being compromised by his people, in the sense that the residual existence of the church would completely disappear in the long run. Finally, the fourth form would be that which recognizes the discredited condition of the church and, therefore “takes as a historical task to shape the de-Christianized culture”. Accordingly, the first “proposes development as an ideal policy”; the second as exemplified by the theology of liberation wants to “detach Christian values from positively established orders”; the third dissolves the church into industrial societies as when it is used as a theater or an art museum; the fourth and last, believes in the need to “defend Christian doctrine through modern means of communication” including rock bands and Instagram (Romano, 1979). All these four positions reflect different stances of the church, none of which imagined a vanished clergyman, which Ivan Illich proposed from the standpoint of the Church to which he remained committed without compromise.

Illich conceived the metamorphosis of the altar into the dining table that can receive friends and celebrate life in Christ among others sharing love and joy. In this way, the anonymous crowd around the altar would become personal. Illich knew that this could have been a possible reality in the tropics, not necessarily the whole of Roman Christianity. The grassroots ecclesial communities had already cultivated certain aspects that shaped this ministry of tomorrow of which Illich spoke. One could argue that the ecclesiastical reality of the Christian communities in the first century was similar to

what Illich was seeing in Latin America of the mid-twentieth century⁷ and that the Church to come is always already a historical/theological reality. However, to invoke the reality of a communal Christic gathering is not to force upon men a pure and true form of Christianity. Instead, it is to trust that there were and are concrete symbolic and material conditions for such Christic communities to thrive organically. It is not because one intends to propagate right living under an orthodoxy that one points to the existence of the communal Church. Rather, it is to recall and summon the Word back to a place where it can fit in the world again, because the Word is written in hearts of men.

But what would then happen to sacramental ministry and theological education? Was Illich promoting a shallow and compromised teaching, that is, distant from centuries of tradition and trapped in imprecision? Quite the contrary. He reminds the reader that, beyond personal maturity, theological precision, contemplative prayer, and charity, the “specific result of Christian education is the *sensus ecclesiae*”. The sense of the Church is the root nourished by the soil of authentic Christian tradition. The fruit germinates in “the imaginative inventiveness of the faith” expressed “in terms of the gifts of the Spirit”. These gifts (without reason, no causes) are only possible to stream out of someone who lives a distinct way of living, whose wisdom comes not from the seminar room, but from the “prayerful celebration of liturgy”. Illich had spoken before on the question of deschooling the church on two different occasions: *Lima Discourse*, a lecture directed to an au-

7 The book of Acts – the continuation of the Gospel of St. Luke – for instance, which narrates the deeds of the Apostles and the history of the primitive Church after the death and resurrection of Christ, suggests this way of living among first Christians: “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved”.

ditorium of priests in Lima, Peru; and *School: The Sacred Cow*.

He is not underrating the importance of rigorous theological study (he definitely appreciated it – I can only imagine how much he could delight himself with such readings). His position is to “put it in its proper place”. That means, for Illich, to use theology as the tool to verify the fidelity of one’s experience of savoring the revealed truth (*lectio divina*, for instance), which is ultimately the result of Church’s faith. Theology is not necessarily the result of faith, often it is not. In this sense, theology should bow before faith and aid its imaginative enrichment in obedience to the Word. The minister of the Church to come is not one who is trained for “professional competence to teach the public” but one who seeks “prophetic humility to moderate a Christian group.”

By inserting faith back into the heart of the church, Illich was opening room for the Spirit to continually re-create the Church. A direct definition of faith is found in the New Testament letter of *Hebrews*: “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”. Only the Spirit can unfold and unveil the evidence of things not seen. Illich was creatively celebrating his faith nourished by what he saw during his pilgrimage through Latin America. The question remained if church authorities and his superiors could also see the unseen, could have faith.

As Illich once said, “utopia is neither prophecy nor planning, it is a humorous way of looking at the present, which makes faith transparent”. Illich saw evidence for the ministry of tomorrow, in which he did not put himself in the position of a priest who stands in the place of God or of a manager who is seated on a throne of bureaucratic power setting the pace of changes. The theological line of force of his writings meets at the place where Illich himself stands: on contingency. His stance is that of one who walks the tightrope, always aware of the necessary balance, gazing towards what he hopes because

he sees it. If Illich is to be taken as a prophet, I can only fathom it as a gift of seeing with sharp clarity his own present. The gift of the prophet is to see deeply into the today, to discern what is evident in the unseen.

The words are from Stephen, minutes before he was stoned to death, but are coeval with Illich's condition within the church: "Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which shewed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers...". The posture of the religious – the priestly type of Stephen's time – is very much similar to those during Illich's time – these too covered their ears and yelled at the top of their voices. And like the Great Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, Illich was told to leave the church and never come back for standing up to them.

The Spirit, as Illich said because he lived it, is the manifestation in history of "hope, the foolishness of Christ and sometimes utopia".⁸ Illich became a man by vanishing as a clergyman, it was his irreligiosity that allowed him to celebrate the powerless Church. He was the vanished clergyman, he renounced priestly power to live in the silent eloquence of a mission. According to some of his friends, whom I have the privilege to meet and befriend, he would simply light a candle on the table.

8 For more on Illich and utopia, see the article Leonídio, A., & Leão Neto, E. P. de S. (2019). *A utopia de Ivan Illich*. *Diálogos Latinoamericanos*.