

Children of the Visible and Unfaithful Mother

Response to José Antonio Ullate by Renee Uribe

I am deeply grateful to José Antonio Ullate for reading my essay, “*Beyond the ‘It’: Mutuality, Maternal-Thinking, and the ‘She’ in Illich’s Thought*.” His note is a gift. As someone newly writing within the Illichian conversation, I regard his engagement as a privilege, an act of friendship that continues the practice Illich most valued: listening, questioning, and pruning one another’s understanding in the search for truth.

Mr. Ullate and I seem to approach Illich from different horizons of faith. His reflections draw on the theological grammar in which Illich was first formed, one deeply shaped by the Roman Catholic imagination. My own reading, as I stated in the essay, comes from the Stone-Campbell tradition, one of the many Christian movements branching from the long stream of Catholic faith.¹ I connect with Illich in his teaching and practice of *conspiratio*, inspired by the early Jesus Movement, which shows a path of faith beyond institutional belonging, where mutuality and the lived practice of the Gospel take precedence.

I have learned much from the long and reflective tradition that shaped Illich’s thought. As a missiologist and theologian, I have drawn on his insights throughout much of my work. Illich has taught me that faithfulness is not found in purity or detachment, but in remaining within one’s own faith community, even if it is in a place of resistance. In many newer denominations, including my own, there is a recurring temptation to start anew whenever conflict arises. I have

1 Renee Uribe, “Beyond the It,” *Conspiratio*, Fall 2024, p. 45.

come to see this impulse to leave rather than to remain as a refusal to acknowledge ecclesiastical inheritance, a theological disavowal of the Christian mother-tradition that gave it birth. This is what I identify as “theological motherlessness.” For Illich, and increasingly for me, love matures only through fidelity to this visible, adulterous Mother.

Many Protestant communities have not generally spoken of the Church as “Mother,” though they affirm her femininity as the Bride of Christ, drawing on Ephesians 5:23–33. I have found Illich’s maternal imagery deeply useful precisely because it extends this familiar bridal symbolism into the realm of nurture, embodiment, and endurance. To speak of the Church as Mother, even when unworthy, allows one to acknowledge dependence and formation as well as love. For me, Illich’s language of maternity offers a way for those outside the Roman tradition to recover a more embodied sense of belonging, one that keeps the Church visible, vulnerable, alive, and intergenerational.

These last few days, rereading the essay “*How Will We Pass on Christianity?*”, I was struck by Illich’s words:

“It seems as if we sought the visibility of the Church either in new political forms, or as if we wanted to renounce a visible Church in order to be able, like so many Protestants, to imagine that we could belong to a Church of our own choosing in order not to have to admit that we are sons of a visible bitch. (This is a theological statement and I wish I had time to elaborate it. But I strongly recommend the reading of the Urs von Balthazar’s *Casta Meretrix*, which cost me an awful lot when I got into trouble asking someone to translate it six years ago)”²

Illich exposes, in characteristically Roman Catholic language,

2 Ivan Illich, *The Powerless Church and Other Selected Writings, 1955–1985* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018), 161.

what many of us in the Protestant world have been reluctant to admit. His audacious phrase, echoing von Balthasar's *Casta Meretrix*, expresses the paradox that also animates my work: how to love the Church as *She* while discerning the corruption that turns her into *It*. For me, this recognition is not cynical but liberating: it allows love to remain amid disillusionment, hurt, and potentially in Illich's words, a "nesting place for evil"³.

1. The *She/It* distinction

In my essay, I treated the *She/It* distinction as an assumption rather than a hypothesis to be proved. For me, it is so deeply woven into Illich's theological imagination that it did not require elaborate demonstration. My intent was not to establish the distinction as a discovery but to work with it as Illich's own interpretive grammar, tracing how it unfolds in his later reflections on friendship, mutuality, and the corruption of service.

Mr. Ullate rightly notes that the explicit pronouns *She* and *It* do not appear in Illich's earliest writings and that, as far as we can document, the first clear instance occurs in Francine du Plessix Gray's 1970 *New Yorker* profile. I did not intend to imply that Illich used these pronouns before that moment or that he formulated them as systematic concepts.

Even so, the intuition those pronouns name—the tension between a living communion and the institutional form that bears it—predates their explicit appearance. As David Cayley shows in his review of Todd Hartch, Illich's formation in the sociology of religion during the 1950s already enabled him to see how much of what passes for Christianity can be bound up with cultural accretions and civic religion, and to warn that American missionaries might confuse the Gospel with "the particular form of their church" and become "ec-

3 Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich, as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 61.

clesiastic conquistadors.”⁴ Illich may not yet speak of *She* and *It* in those years, but he is already distinguishing sharply between the Gospel as mystery and the Church as a historically conditioned power.

For this reason, later interpreters (including David Cayley, Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Jon Igelmo Zaldivar, and more recently Neto Leão) use the *She/It* contrast as a shorthand for a pattern evident across Illich’s work. My use of it reflects not an anachronistic projection but a participation in this interpretive lineage.⁵ From within that lineage, and through the lens of maternal thinking, I read *She* as the living communion that continues to nurture life amid the ruins of *It*.

2. The 1972 interview and the “unworthy mother”

His second objection concerns my rendering of Illich’s statement from the 1972 interview in Paris. My translation was undertaken with care. I consulted both the official English version on the recording and an independent translation, and I later confirmed my understanding with David Cayley, who accepted it. I acknowledge that nuances shift between French and English, yet I believe the spirit of Illich’s remark, his acceptance of ambiguity and his sorrowful love for the Church as Mother, resonates clearly across versions. My phrasing was never meant to dissolve the paradox he cherished but to con-

4 David Cayley, “A Review of Todd Hartch’s *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the Modern West*,” *davidcayley.com*, April 20, 2015.

5 As David Cayley writes, “Ivan Illich, from the beginning of his priesthood, had distinguished two forms of the Church, which he called the Church as *she* and the Church as *it*. To the first, the Church as the repository of tradition and the living embodiment of Christian community, he was, and always remained, deeply committed.... But to the second, the Church as self-serving, worldly power, he was, and remained, a thorn. (Cayley 2005, 4). “This distinction is fundamental to understanding Illich’s work in Cuernavaca, Mexico” write Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Jon Igelmo Zaldivar, “Ivan Illich, the Critique of the Church as It: From a Vision of the Missionary to a Critique of Schooling,” in *Catholic Education in the Wake of Vatican II*, edited by Rosa Bruno-Jofré and Jon Igelmo Zaldivar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 135–152, p. 135.

vey the estrangement he saw when institutions claiming to serve love end up alienating it. Illich's maternal imagery gives us courage to remain her children even as we lament her failures. To call her unworthy is not to disown or disavow her; it is to acknowledge the drama of faith that binds us tighter still.

Before closing, I would like to ask Mr. Ullate for clarification on one phrase that I found particularly striking. He writes that my interpretation risks "returning us to the old paths of ideology." I would be grateful to understand more fully what he means by this. If by "ideology" he refers to the systematizing spirit Illich resisted, the transformation of paradox into program, then I share that concern. My intent was not to conceptualize Illich's insight but to explore how his living tension between love and critique might speak to those of us who inhabit different ecclesial worlds. For me, the *She/It* language is not a schema but a way of remaining attentive to that same living tension.

I remain thankful for Mr. Ullate's response, which has helped me revisit Illich's words with renewed attentiveness. Such exchange is, I believe, the truest way to honor Illich's legacy, the continuing conversation among friends who refuse both ideology and indifference, and who remain, despite our different tongues and traditions, children a visible and unfaithful Mother.