

*L'ambiguïté d'être des fils d'une mère
indigne, mais pas de nous*

A comment by José Antonio Ullate

Issue 6 of *Conspiratio* included an article by Renée Uribe, entitled *Beyond the 'It': Mutuality, Maternal-Thinking, and the 'She' in Illich's Thought*. I believe that this text is full of errors “regarding things about which I understand so little, but which I enthusiastically believe” (Illich). Like Illich, I too “claim the right not to have to defend” such things.

This note, thus, is not an apology but a testimony: *ut testimonium perhibeam veritati*.

Illich had no reservations about anyone being inspired by his thoughts and doing so according to each one's genius. He was, however, very demanding when a fragment of his writings was torn from its context or even distorted in the service of a different intention.

I will not go into the underlying ideas of Ms. Uribe's text. To support these ideas, the author invokes the authority and authorship of Ivan Illich, but she does so by seriously distorting his thinking. I will limit myself to showing that the author radically distorts what Illich says about the Church on two decisive points. The first is illustrated by the second.

1. The Church 'it' and the Church 'She'

Ms. Uribe's text begins with a showy statement: “Ivan Illich's critique of the church is founded on the distinction between the institutional church ('it') and the mystical body of Christ ('She').” If such a distinction were fundamental to something the author calls “Illich's critique of the church,” one would expect a convincing set of references to Illich's work

or conclusive testimonies to that effect. None of that happens. There is one reference to a much more nuanced quotation from Neto Leao and a vague reference to *The Powerless Church*, where “the distinction, not the way I apply it, between the Church ‘it’ and the Church ‘She’ can also be seen.”

There is only one source that refers to this distinction in Illich, which is not referenced by Ms. Uribe. It is Francine du Plessix Gray’s portrait of Illich in the *New Yorker* in 1970 (“The Rules of the Game”, collected in her work *Divine Disobedience*). In the context of a long conversation, du Plessix records this fragment:

I make a scrupulous distinction,” Illich once said, “between the Church as She and the Church as It.” (“That one can only say in English,” he noted with a smile.) “She is that surprise in the net, the pearl. She is the mystery, the kingdom among us. The identity of the Church as She will remain through whatever changes She’s currently undergoing, which are no greater than the changes She underwent under Constantine, or in Abelard’s time. Those who believe in Her, believe in something that cannot be said in words. No pronouncements, however stupid, be they on birth control or on clerical celibacy, can lessen my love for Her and my faith in Her mystery. People who leave the Church because of what She says don’t understand love. It, however, is the institution, the temporary incarnational form. I can talk about It only in sociological terms. I’ve never had trouble creating factions and dissent toward the Church as It.

All subsequent references draw from this single source. The occasional example Illich comes up with only serves well in the context of a journalistic conversation with someone interested in Illich’s thought. In this context, it serves to point in a direction. It does not attempt to account for the complex

ambivalence of the Church or the internal relations within that Church that is the kingdom and, at the same time, the apparatus of control and power. The error is to decontextualize, to make obvious what has a deictic value and to grant the figure a scope it does not intend. But this error, placed at the beginning as a key —without qualification—to developments openly contradictory to those of Illich, is a ‘small error at the beginning of the road’ that becomes a ‘big error at the finish line.’ That is, it leads us to the wrong place.

2. Children of an unworthy mother that *is not one of us*?

The above distortion is better understood when we consider a much more significant deformation. In 1972, the former editor of *Esprit* magazine, Jean-Marie Domenach, spoke with Ivan Illich in Paris. In that conversation, Ivan makes a statement of great ecclesiological and ethical significance:

Let's accept the ambiguity of being the sons of an unworthy mother, but not of us. And in a certain sense, it also makes you see what our attitude toward the institution should perhaps be.

Ms. Uribe's translation is unfaithful, destroys the bold meaning of what Illich said, and furthermore, turns the phrase into an anacoluthon. According to the author, Illich says: “Let's accept the ambiguity of being sons of a mother who is unworthy, *but not one of us*.” What Illich is actually saying is that accepting that we are sons of a mother who, in herself—in her conduct (*quoad se*)—is unworthy, while at the same time not becoming unworthy of us (*quoad nos*), her children, entails an “ambiguity,” a paradox. A tension that we must accept.

Ms. Uribe dissolves the paradox, for if the Church is unworthy, but “is not one of us,” two unconnected fields are thus established; there is no constitutive tension or confusion pos-

sible between the Church and us [each knows easily in which field is], and for that very reason, it makes no sense to begin by saying “let us accept the ambiguity of...” If Illich had said that he would have absurdly insisted on a nonexistent ambiguity.

In fact, what Illich says is drastically contradictory to what Ms. Uribe attributes to him: the fact that we are conceived by a mother whose behavior is unworthy does not separate us from her, although it imposes on us a dramatic existential condition, that of being permanently in an ambiguous situation (we are both inside and outside at the same time, we feel like children, and this imposes on us an entirely mysterious condition, one that cannot be enclosed within a pre-established code, within a clear demarcation between her and us. An intimate tension, inside of which no ideology or rule can offer us respite). What follows from this initial error (not a small one!) is fatally undermined, like a building founded on sand. Ms. Uribe makes extensive use of our supposed ‘alienation’ from the Church, which makes it not ‘one of us’.

The children of the Church can denounce the Church’s falsehood with a virulence far more radical than that available to those who judge her from the outside. But we, as her children, can never contemplate this evil as if we were radically outside, detached, from this ambiguous vortex.

What Illich actually said opens a door to a new, adventurous, and hopeful world, but Ms. Uribe’s distortion overwhelms that crack with weeds, returning us to the old paths of ideology.

My testimony cannot be detailed further. It is about taking a friend at his word and speaking out against a falsification of that word: to restore, in some measure, what he actually said. I have not crossed the threshold of the door that Ivan half-opened, but I hope I have contributed to pruning some of the weeds that obstruct it.