

*Disruptive Cartographers: Doing Theology Latinamente*

REVELATION IN THE  
VERNACULAR

JEAN-PIERRE RUIZ

ORBIS  BOOKS  
Maryknoll, New York 10545

## INTRODUCTION

### Revelation a Long Way from Patmos

When friends and colleagues learned that I was working on a book on the theology of revelation, many of them assumed almost automatically that I was writing about the last book of the New Testament canon, the Apocalypse, the Revelation to John. Theirs was a fair enough assumption, because I have devoted considerable attention to the interpretation of the book of Revelation.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Ezekiel in the Apocalypse: The Transformation of Prophetic Language in Revelation 16, 17–19, 10* (European University Studies; Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1989); idem, “Taking a Stand on the Sand of the Seashore: A Postcolonial Exploration of Revelation 13,” in *Reading the Book of Revelation: A Resource for Students*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 2003), 119–136; idem, “Hearing and Seeing but Not Saying: A Rhetoric of Authority in Revelation 10:2 and 2 Corinthians 12:4,” in *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation*, ed. David L. Barr (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 91–111; idem, “The Bible and the Exegesis of Empire: Reading Christopher Columbus’s *El libro de las profecias*,” in Jean-Pierre Ruiz, *Readings from the Edges: The Bible & People on the Move* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 123–139; idem, “The Mighty City and the Holy City: John’s Apocalypse at the Intersections of Power and Praise,” *The Living Pulpit*, August 17, 2015, <http://www.pulpit.org/the-mighty-city-and-the-holy-city-johns-apocalypse-at-the-intersections-of-power-and-praise/>. Also see Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “The Revelation to John,” in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, Marc Z. Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and Pheme Perkins (Fifth Edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2203–2205.

The trajectory of my work on the Revelation to John has become more and more explicitly and deliberately a matter of biblical interpretation done *latinamente*, an approach I have characterized as collaborative, connected, and committed.<sup>2</sup> While I admit that the long shadow (or is it light?) cast by the Apocalypse and my work on that rich and perplexing text has influenced the thinking that informs this book, this project takes up a challenge to which I made reference in an earlier publication, where I identified a significant and persistent lacuna. As I observed, “Surprisingly enough, while passing mention has been made here and there in U.S. Latino/a Christian theology of what we assume we mean when we speak of revelation, there has been very little sustained exploration of this foundational notion.”<sup>3</sup> As I also noted, in the pages of the very first issue of the *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology*, published in 1993, Sixto J. Garcia wrote:

We hold, as a foundational belief, that the Scriptures are the Word of God. To even attempt to engage ourselves in a discussion concerning the interpretation of this statement would be to open a can of hermeneutical worms quite peripheral to our discussion. It is legitimate to say, however, that regardless of the different theological contours that different people might draw concerning “Scriptures as Word of God,” we hold in common the normative dimension of the Scriptures (the Scriptures

---

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “The Bible and Latino/a Theology,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 111–127.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “The Word became Flesh and the Flesh Becomes Word: Notes Toward a U.S. Latino/a Theology of Revelation,” in *Building Bridges, Doing Justice: Constructing a Latino/a Ecumenical Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 51.

are the soul of all theology) for theological reflection on God's self-communication.<sup>4</sup>

In my earlier essay, I very modestly took it upon myself to begin to open the can of hermeneutical worms about which García sagely warned. The limited scope of that essay allowed me only to sketch some very preliminary notes toward a U.S. Latin@ theology of revelation.<sup>5</sup> This book represents an effort to take another step or two in that direction. I do so while gratefully aware that the lacuna in Latin@ theology to which I drew attention has been addressed very capably both in an essay by biblical scholar Efraín Agosto that was published in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology* and in *Dogmatics after Babel*, an important book by theologian Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, both fellow Puerto Ricans.<sup>6</sup>

Agosto begins with definitions, starting with Rosemary Carbine's succinct "divine self-disclosure," then Jaroslav Pelikan's

---

<sup>4</sup> Ruiz, "The Word Became Flesh and the Flesh Becomes Word," 51, citing Sixto J. García, "Sources and Loci of Hispanic Theology," *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology* 1, no. 1 (November 1993): 22–43; reprinted in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective*, ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 108.

<sup>5</sup> I use "Latin@" throughout this book, while remaining acutely conscious of the enormous challenges that are involved in considering the many diverse communities and individuals "whose cultural and historical roots are to be found in Latin America" (Orlando O. Espín, "Introduction," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, 1, and see Espín's helpful overview of the expression "Latinos/as" on pages 1–3). Also see Carmen Nanko-Fernández, *Theologizing en Espanglish: Context, Community, and Ministry* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), xv–xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Efraín Agosto, "Revelation," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 91–109; Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, *Dogmatics after Babel: Beyond the Theologies of Word and Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2018).

description of revelation as “the self-disclosure of God and the communication of the truth about [God’s] nature and will,” and then Gerhard Sauter’s invocation of *apokalypsis* in his description of revelation as a matter of “unveiling what was hidden.”<sup>7</sup> Agosto then goes on to survey the landscape of Latin@ Roman Catholic and Protestant theological reflection on revelation. He concludes, though not surprisingly, given the deliberately ecumenical practice of *teología en* and *de conjunto* that characterizes the work of Latin@ theologians and biblical scholars, that Latin@ Roman Catholic and Protestant reflections on revelation “have much more in common than not.”<sup>8</sup>

Gathering together the insights of the Latin@ thinkers whose contributions to theologies of revelation he considers, Agosto identifies several noteworthy common threads among them. The first is an emphasis on “the importance of culture, in this case Latino/a culture, as a vehicle of divine revelation.”<sup>9</sup> Second, Agosto correctly understands that for many Latin@ biblical scholars and theologians, “revelation must be described as a contextual act, not a matter of universality. God chooses to reveal God-self in particularities, not absolute abstraction.”<sup>10</sup> For the Latin@ scholars whose contributions Agosto reviews, “The experience of divine transcendence in human life—indeed, daily life, *lo cotidiano*—counts more than a delineation of the attributes of God that tend to distance God from human experience.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Agosto, “Revelation,” 91.

<sup>8</sup> Agosto, “Revelation,” 106.

<sup>9</sup> Agosto, “Revelation,” 106. See Miguel H. Díaz, ed., *The Word Became Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: 2020), the first volume in the series, *Disruptive Cartographers: Doing Theology Latinamente*.

<sup>10</sup> Agosto, 106.

<sup>11</sup> Agosto, 106. On the place of *lo cotidiano*, lived daily experience, in Latin@ theologies, see Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, “Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 15–33.

Third, Agosto emphasizes that, for Latin@ theologians, “the incarnation of Christ, the ultimate statement of divine revelation in Christian theology and Scripture, is about embodiment.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, embodiment figures prominently in Latin@ theologies, including theologies of revelation: “Any theology, including a theology of revelation, which incorporates *latinidad* engages matters of Latino/a identity, whether social, political, religious, national / ethnic, or the physical realities of gender and corporality, including *mestizaje* and *mulatez*.”<sup>13</sup> Theologies that take embodiment seriously, Agosto goes on to say, must also involve ethical parameters. “We care about theology,” he insists, “because theology moves us—or should move us—to action.”<sup>14</sup>

Although Agosto begins his essay on revelation by stating, “The starting point for a Latino/a theology of revelation is defining the expressions,” and while the thumbnail definitions he cites come from non-Latin@ authors, in the end he makes it amply clear that the starting point is not a matter of trickle-down thinking from above, from the general to the more specific, but that quite the opposite is in fact the case when it comes to Latin@ approaches to revelation. Grounded in carefully nuanced understandings of *lo cotidiano* because they take the Incarnation seriously, Latin@ theologies underscore the significance of the particular without allowing this concern to lose its edge either by dissolving into individualism or by ascending beyond the clouds into ungrounded, inaccessible, and irrelevant abstraction.

While it would be hard to do justice to the carefully crafted argument of Rosario’s *Dogmatics after Babel* here, this must-read book leads theology beyond the tension between what he calls the revelational approach associated with Karl Barth’s “critical retrieval

---

<sup>12</sup> Agosto, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Agosto, 107.

<sup>14</sup> Agosto, 107.

of orthodoxy” and the anthropological approach associated with Paul Tillich’s correlational approach.<sup>15</sup> Rosario correctly recognizes the thinking of Barth and Tillich on the doctrine of revelation as representing “two sides of the same coin, distinct in their methodologies, yet united in their overarching goal of resisting atheism and secularization by providing uniquely Christian answers to Europe’s postwar woes.”<sup>16</sup> Rosario goes on to offer a way past the impasse by proposing a rich pneumatologically informed understanding of revelation as sacramental encounter, an encounter with God that is not restricted to the reading of sacred texts, but which is accessible in all of the places and all of the circumstances in which the Spirit of God is active. Not only does Rosario argue that it is time to move past narrow theologies of Word and Culture; the liberationist pneumatological perspective that he offers demonstrates convincingly how this is possible, yielding an understanding of divine self-disclosure that is broad and deep.<sup>17</sup>

In his own contribution to *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, an essay entitled “Sources and *En Conjunto*

<sup>15</sup> Rosario, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 31–32.

<sup>16</sup> Rosario, *Dogmatics after Babel*, 38.

<sup>17</sup> Rosario writes: “A focus on the work of the Spirit in human history—especially through works of compassion and liberation—indicates a possible strategy for moving past the impasse between the *theologies of the Word* that take a fideistic stance on Scripture as God’s self-revelation without subjecting their dogmatic claims to external criticism, and the *theologies of culture* that contend God can only be known through the medium of culture but lack criteria for differentiating revelation from the cultural status quo.” Exploring the sacred texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, Rosario finds that “there exists a theological affirmation *within* all three faiths that *wherever* the work of establishing justice, extending compassion, and facilitating human liberation occurs, *there* is the true Spirit of God. In effect, these emancipatory movements in history share in this revelatory sacramental dimension because they embody the divine will for all humankind regardless of confessional or creedal origin” (*Dogmatics after Babel*, 175–76).

Methodologies of Latino/a Theologizing,” Rosario understands that Latin@ theologians have managed to “avoid the dominant dichotomy between anthropological and revelational approaches” that he outlines in detail in *Dogmatics after Babel*. He also explains, first, that Latin@ theology

identifies *revelation*—understood as God’s self-revelation—as the primary sources of Christian theology. Specifically, the ultimate source of Christian faith and Christian doctrine is the man named Jesus, and what is known about him through the witness of the New Testament. Implied in this affirmation, however, is the recognition that the Scriptures are not the *unmediated* Word of God, but a *human* witness to the revelation of God in the man Jesus, called the Christ of God.<sup>18</sup>

Second, Rosario recognizes how Latin@ theologies affirm the role of culture as a source, explaining that revelation does not stand outside of or apart from culture, but that it takes place *within* culture. In that way, “there is no irreconcilable gap between God’s act of self-revelation and humanity’s capacity to understand and obey this revelation.”<sup>19</sup> He cites with approval Orlando Espín’s assertion that revelation, “in order to be claimed as revelation, must also be a human cultural event,” noting that this makes the doctrine of the Incarnation central to Latin@ theology.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Rubén Rosario Rodríguez, “Sources and *En Conjunto* Methodologies of Latino/a Theologizing,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 56.

<sup>19</sup> Rosario, “Sources,” 56.

<sup>20</sup> Orlando O. Espín, *Idol and Grace: On Traditioning and Subversive Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 19, as quoted in Rosario, “Sources,” 56. On incarnation, see Mayra Rivera, *The Poetics of the Flesh* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

By recommending the work of Agosto and Rosario on revelation in Latin@ theology, I can address what this book is not, and what this book does not attempt to do. Simply put: these pages do not attempt to outline a comprehensive theology of revelation. As I write these words, my eyes are drawn to the place on my bookshelf that is occupied by my well-worn copy of *Theology of Revelation* by René Latourelle, S.J., who was my professor in my first year of the first cycle in theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University. Originally published in French as *Théologie de la Révélation*, the English translation appeared in 1966, less than a year after the promulgation (on November 18, 1965) of the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*).<sup>21</sup> Grateful as I am for what Latourelle taught me, it is not my intention to follow his example in this book.

As would be expected of a textbook by a professor at the Gregorian University of that era, Latourelle's five-hundred-page tome begins with a treatment of the biblical notion of revelation. Following that, he surveys revelation in the writings of the patristic period. Latourelle then goes on to treat revelation in the "theological tradition," a fairly selective presentation that includes the scholastics of the thirteenth century, scholastics after Trent, the scholastic "renewal" of the nineteenth century, and then the theology of revelation in the twentieth century. It is not surprising, given the vintage of the book, that Latourelle's treatment of "Protestant theology" in his historical survey is limited to a little more than one full page in his chapter on the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> "Protestantism" receives just a bit more attention in the first chapter of part four of the book, which focuses on revelation and church magisterium. That chapter, entitled "The Council of Trent and

---

<sup>21</sup> René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation, Including a Commentary on the Constitution "Dei Verbum" of Vatican II* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 213–215.

Protestantism,” occupies less than six pages.<sup>23</sup> That is followed by treatments of the First Vatican Council and its Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (*Dei Filius*), a chapter on the Modernist Crisis, and a chapter on revelation during the pontificates of Pius XI and Pius XII.

The most valuable pages of Latourelle’s *Theology of Revelation* are those he devotes to commentary on *Dei Verbum* only months after its promulgation, where, as a matter of considerable understatement, he observes that “the Constitution of Vatican II on revelation has not had a simple history.”<sup>24</sup> At the safe distance of many years, I can confess with all due respect to the memory of my late professor, that it is only this section of the book, and in fact only the last two pages of text, that have remained as fresh in my recollection as the first day that I read them. There Latourelle points out the dramatic difference between the theocentric orientation of the First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (*Dei Filius*) and the christocentric focus of *Dei Verbum*. At the beginning of chapter two of *Dei Filius*, we read, “It pleased his [*God’s*] wisdom and goodness to reveal himself and the eternal decrees of his will in another and a supernatural way.”<sup>25</sup> Chapter one of *Dei Verbum*, focused on revelation itself, begins, “In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will by which *through Christ, the word made flesh*, man might in the Holy Spirit have

<sup>23</sup> Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 249–254.

<sup>24</sup> Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation*, 484.

<sup>25</sup> First Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (*Dei Filius*), 2, as found in Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, revised, enlarged, and, in collaboration with Helmut Hoping, ed. Peter Hünermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash (43d edition; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), §3004: “placuisse eius sapientiae et bonitatis, alia eaque supernaturali via se ipsum ac aeternae voluntatis suae decreta humano generi revelare.”

access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature” (*Dei Verbum* 2).<sup>26</sup> Though these portions of the two conciliar decrees both begin with similar references to God’s goodness and wisdom, their differences could hardly be more dramatic. The narrowly propositional character of revelation in *Dei Filius* gives way to a relational understanding in *Dei Verbum*, where the goal of divine self-disclosure is to offer human beings access to the Father and a share in the divine nature. This is mediated, *Dei Verbum* explains, “through Christ, the Word made flesh.” The importance of the Incarnation in Latin@ theologies, together with an understanding of divine self-disclosure as relational, very clearly reflects the emphases of *Dei Verbum*.

While reflection on the incarnation of the Word is a unifying thread throughout this book, the scope of my work in these pages is considerably less ambitious than Latourelle’s.<sup>27</sup> I write as a biblical scholar and not as a systematic theologian, and my concern for theologies of revelation flows from a long-standing interest in translation.<sup>28</sup> Without setting aside my long-standing interest in the Revelation to John and the preoccupation with *apokalypsis* which that entails, I have long been fascinated by the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, and so it should come as no surprise that I

---

<sup>26</sup> “Placuit Deo in sua bonitate et sapientia seipsum relevare et notum facere sacramentum voluntatis suae, quo homines, *per Christum, Verbum carnem factum*, in Spiritu Sancto accessum habent ad Patrem et divinae naturae consortes efficiuntur” (Denzinger, §4202).

<sup>27</sup> The scope of this book is also considerably more modest than the work of Gerald O’Collins, S.J., another professor of mine at the Gregorian. See Gerald O’Collins, *Revelation: Towards a Christian Interpretation of God’s Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016); idem, *Incarnation* (London, UK: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> On the relationship between biblical scholars and theologians, see Jean-Pierre Ruiz, “Good Fences and Good Neighbors: Biblical Scholars and Theologians,” in *Readings from the Edges*, 13–23.

began my initial foray into a Latin@ theology of revelation with two quotations, one from Václav Havel's acceptance speech on receiving the 1989 Peace Prize of the German Booksellers' Association, "Words about Words," and a second from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>29</sup> The latter is worth a reprise as I begin this more extended consideration of revelation in these pages, insofar as it helps to begin unpacking what I mean by entitling this book *Revelation in the Vernacular*:

For things above the earth we learn to pine,  
 Our spirits yearn for revelation,  
 Which nowhere burns with purer beauty blent,  
 Than here in the New Testament.  
 To ope the ancient text an impulse strong  
 Impels me, and its sacred lore,  
 With honest purpose to explore,  
 And render into my loved German tongue.  
 (*He opens a volume and applies himself to it.*)  
 'Tis writ, "In the beginning was the Word!"  
 I pause, perplex'd! Who now will help afford?  
 I cannot the mere Word so highly prize;  
 I must translate it otherwise,  
 If by the spirit guided as I read.  
 "In the beginning was the Sense!" Take heed,  
 The import of this primal sentence weigh,  
 Lest thy too hasty pen be led astray!  
 Is force creative then of Sense the dower?  
 "In the beginning was the Power!"  
 Thus should it stand: yet, while the line I trace

---

<sup>29</sup> Václav Havel, "Words on Words," Václav Havel Library Foundation, <https://www.vhlf.org/havel-archives/words-on-words/>.

A something warns me, once more to efface.  
 The spirit aids! From anxious scruples freed,  
 I write, "In the beginning was the Deed!"<sup>30</sup>

Here Goethe's protagonist "wrestles mightily with the translation of the first verse of the first chapter of John's Gospel. . . . 'In the beginning was the Word' fails to satisfy. Likewise, 'In the beginning was the Sense' (German *Sinn*, which can be rendered as 'sense' or 'meaning') falls short. . . . Finally, it is only 'In the beginning was the Deed' that constitutes a satisfying rendering."<sup>31</sup> Although theologians take considerable pains to distinguish between "general" and "special" revelation, I would argue that revelation is always particular, that divine self-disclosure takes place in the vernacular, even in the complex particularities of countless vernaculars.

"Vernacular" is a strange word. I first heard it in elementary school, when one day the wonderful Sister of Charity who was my teacher explained that henceforth the Mass would be celebrated "in the vernacular" rather than in Latin, and that something called "Vatican II" was somehow to blame for this. Good little Catholic boy though I was, at the time I had no clue about what she meant by "Vatican II," and "vernacular" was even more perplexing. It did not help at all when, only a few weeks later, Sister told us that we should no longer refer to the third person of the Trinity as the "Holy Ghost," and that we should use "Holy Spirit" instead. That was no big deal in my household though, because we were accustomed to invoking *el Espiritu Santo* or *le Saint-Esprit* and "Holy Ghost" had always sounded a little strange to us. As for "vernacular," we soon learned that this simply meant that Mass would be celebrated in English. It would be several more years before my mother very easily convinced our newly assigned Korean immi-

---

<sup>30</sup> As quoted in Ruiz, "The Word Became Flesh," 48.

<sup>31</sup> Ruiz, "The Word Became Flesh," 61.

grant associate pastor that our parish needed a Mass in Spanish and that he should be the presider and homilist!

Digging a bit deeper, according to Merriam-Webster, “vernacular” is a noun that means “an expression or mode of expression that occurs in ordinary speech rather than formal writing,” or “the mode of expression of a group or class,” or “a common name of a plant or animal as distinguished from the Latin nomenclature of scientific classification: a vernacular name of a plant or animal.” Etymologically, it comes from the Latin *vernaculus*, “belonging to the household, domestic, native.”<sup>32</sup> As for where my elementary school teacher found the word, only much later did I learn that it was used in the Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*).<sup>33</sup>

Curiously, though, “vernacular” is not used at all in the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*).<sup>34</sup> The word does appear (twice) in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*,

---

<sup>32</sup> “Vernacular.” *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>.

<sup>33</sup> The document states that “the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites. But since the use of the mother tongue, whether in the Mass, the administration of the sacraments, or other parts of the liturgy, frequently may be of great advantage to the people, the limits of its employment may be extended. This will apply in the first place to the readings and directives, and to some of the prayers and chants, according to the regulations on this matter to be laid down separately in subsequent chapters. These norms being observed, it is for the competent territorial ecclesiastical authority . . . to decide whether, and to what extent, the *vernacular language* [*linguae vernaculae*] is to be used.” Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), No. 36, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html).

<sup>34</sup> In chapter six, which attends to the place of Sacred Scripture in the life of the Church, we find: “Easy access to Sacred Scripture should be provided for all the Christian faithful. That is why the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of

the 1943 encyclical of Pius XII on promoting biblical studies that set into motion the trajectory that led to *Dei Verbum*.<sup>35</sup> The first occurrence is a reference to Pius X, who in a January 1907 letter to Cardinal Francesco di Paola Cassetta praised the Society of St. Jerome's practice of promoting reading of and meditation on the Gospels, "proclaiming it 'a most useful undertaking, as well as most suited to the times,' seeing that it helps in no small way 'to dissipate the idea that the Church is opposed to or in any way impedes the reading of the Scriptures in the vernacular'" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, No. 9). The second occurrence is in the context of the pope's words of praise for the work of biblical scholars: "Many of them also, by the written word, have promoted and do still promote, far and wide, the study of the Bible; as when they edit the sacred text corrected in accordance with the rules of textual criticism or expound, explain, and translate it into the vernacular" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu*, No. 10).

### Charting This Book

Maps are never neutral, and the making of maps is always a task that says as much about the cartographer as it does about the terrain that is charted, as Carmen Nanko-Fernández, Gary Riebele-Estrella, and Miguel H. Díaz suggest in their preface to this series.

---

the Old Testament which is called the septuagint; and she has always given a place of honor to other Eastern translations and Latin ones especially the Latin translation known as the vulgate. But since the word of God should be accessible at all times, the Church by her authority and with maternal concern sees to it that suitable and correct translations are made into different languages, especially from the original texts of the sacred books." *Dei Verbum* No. 22, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html).

<sup>35</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, September 30, 1943, [http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_30091943\\_divino-afflante-spiritu.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_30091943_divino-afflante-spiritu.html).

The chapters of this book reflect the cardinal points of the series, with its charge to the disruptive cartographers involved in this project, first, to retrieve sources from a historical tradition that is complex, sources for theologizing that have too often been overlooked and that have therefore remained untapped. Second, and also in keeping with the spirit of this series, this work seeks to understand and contextualize these sources through distinctively Latin@ optics. It incorporates insights of present-day scholars within and beyond the disciplinary borders of theology, as well as from the legacy of theological reflection from the Iberian Peninsula and from the Americas that is bound up with the long and non-innocent history of colonization. Third, because doing theology *latinamente* privileges lived daily experience in its concreteness, this book considers what differences the understanding of revelation articulated in these pages might make in advancing a genuinely catholic understanding of divine self-disclosure in the present day.

The first chapter begins not on Patmos, the island in the Aegean Sea not far from the Turkish coast that toward the end of the first century CE provided a vantage point from which a seer named John addressed his Apocalypse to Jesus followers who lived in cities of what was the Roman province of Asia. It begins instead on another island with more than five centuries of colonial entanglements, Mona Island in the Caribbean, located east of the Dominican Republic and west of Puerto Rico. Now uninhabited, it was the site of important encounters at the end of the fifteenth century between the indigenous Taíno population and the Spanish colonizers. This chapter, entitled "*Plura Fecit Deus*," explores what happened when Spanish colonizers made their way deep into the island's many caves and found there an abundance of indigenous images and symbols carved into the stone. Remarkably, they did not deface or destroy them, as so many of their contemporaries did when they encountered indigenous texts throughout the Americas. Instead, recognizing the importance of these markings, they added

Christian symbols of their own, along with inscriptions in Latin and in Spanish that succinctly express what they thought of what they beheld in the caves. Among these inscriptions is “*Plura Fecit Deus*,” “God made many,” a remarkable expression of their recognition of the breadth of the Creator’s activity to which the Taíno glyphs provided vivid testimony, even if they did not fully grasp the symbolism of what they saw.

Chapter two is entitled “*Verbum Caro Factum Est: The Vernacular and the Incarnation*,” quoting Vulgate translation of the first words of John 1:14, which is another of the inscriptions left behind by the sixteenth-century Spanish visitors to the caves deep below the then-inhabited surface of Mona Island. Inscribed anonymously in the stone of the cave wall, these words might be understood, on the one hand, as a Christian counterclaim over against the Taíno glyphs that its author beheld. They can also be understood, on the other hand, as a commentary on the catholicity of the Incarnation of the Word, a reflection on what the Spanish visitor may even have recognized not as idolatry but perhaps even as testimony to divine self-disclosure in an indigenous idiom found in a most unexpected location. This chapter, which also involves retrieval, turns to the life and the writings of the Augustinian Fray Luis de León (1527–1597), the eminent poet, humanist, and theologian who was a luminary of the *Siglo de Oro*, the Golden Age of Spanish literature. His translation of portions of the Bible (the Song of Songs in particular) into Spanish got him into trouble with the Inquisition, resulting in his imprisonment from March 1572 until December 1576. When he was finally acquitted of the charges against him, it is said that he returned to the podium at the University of Salamanca and began his lecture with, “As we were saying yesterday.”

Fray Luis de León is important for this study because, as Colin P. Thompson explains, in the prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs, “Fray Luis makes clear his incarnational view of

the language of the Bible.”<sup>36</sup> There the learned Augustinian writes that “the care the Holy Spirit takes to be conformed to our style by copying our language and by imitating the whole range of our mind and our condition is a wonderful thing.”<sup>37</sup> I am not by any means claiming that Luis de León’s thinking about the Incarnation of the Word influenced the anonymous Spanish author of the Johannine inscription on Mona Island either directly or even remotely. What I do suggest in chapter two is that Luis de León’s work as a translator and the prominence of the Incarnation of the Word in his thinking offer the beginnings of a theology of the vernacular in sixteenth-century Spain. His understanding of revelation as a matter of divine communication that is conformed to the “whole range of our mind and our condition” (“*toda la variedad de nuestro ingenio e condiciones*”) offers a suggestive set of optics from sixteenth-century Spain through which to consider the two Latin-language inscriptions I have mentioned, which archaeologists have dated to the sixteenth century, as richly theological responses to the indigenous glyphs. The two Latin-language inscriptions, “*plura fecit Deus*,” and “*Verbum caro factum est*,” frame the Taíno cave petroglyphs in positive terms that are drawn from the distinctively Christian language of the Spaniards who visited the caves, in terms of a hermeneutical vocabulary that was current—though highly controversial—in sixteenth-century Spain. In 1907 Pope Pius X may have wanted “to dissipate the idea that the Church is opposed to or in any way impedes the reading of the Scriptures in the vernacular,” yet that intention reflects his embarrassment by

---

<sup>36</sup> Colin P. Thompson, *The Strife of Tongues: Fray Luis de León and the Golden Age of Spain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 27.

<sup>37</sup> “Es cosa maravillosa el cuidado que pone el Espíritu Santo en conformarse con nuestro estilo, remedando nuestro lenguaje, e imitando en sí toda la variedad de nuestro ingenio e condiciones.” As cited in and translated by Thompson, *The Strife of Tongues*, 27. On the Incarnation in the thought of Fray Luis, see Thompson, *The Strife of Tongues*, 172–176.

regretful historical hindsight that such opposition had often been vigorously enforced in the past.

Like chapter one, chapter two of this book involves a retrieval of sources that have not typically informed thinking around theologies of revelation even in Latin@ theologies. Both chapters would run the risk of being relegated to the sidelines as esoteric but ultimately irrelevant academic exercises in sixteenth-century historical theology if it were not for the “So what?” component that is integral to this series. Taking up the mapping metaphor, this study would remain an antiquarian exercise in sixteenth-century Iberian and colonial cartography if it did not also aim to take advantage of insights that these sources offer to remap—even if only in part—a theology of revelation that is relevant for the twenty-first century.

In the light of that concern, chapter three, “From the Amazon to the Tiber: Words Incarnate in the World,” begins with a discussion of the YouTube video in which Alexander Tschugguel explains “why we threw the Pachamama idols into the Tiber river.”<sup>38</sup> In this well-publicized incident during the October 2019 Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazonian Region, wooden images that had been used in the October 4, 2019, consecration of the Synod to Saint Francis of Assisi in the Vatican Gardens and subsequently enshrined in the church of Santa Maria in Traspontina, were thrown into the Tiber, only to be recovered later by the *carabinieri*. Drawing on the final report of the 2019 Synod, this chapter maps the implications of a theology of revelation that takes the particularity of the Incarnation seriously not only as a singular and defining christological event but in terms not unlike those articulated by Fray Luis de León centuries ago. Quoting the 1992 *Santo Domingo Document* that was the result of the Fourth General Meeting of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate, Pope Francis wrote,

---

<sup>38</sup> “Why we threw the Pachamama idols into the Tiber river,” [https://youtu.be/1p74CEA1\\_go](https://youtu.be/1p74CEA1_go).

For the Church to achieve a renewed inculturation of the Gospel in the Amazon region, she needs to listen to its ancestral wisdom, listen once more to the voice of its elders, recognize the values present in the way of life of the original communities, and recover the rich stories of its peoples. In the Amazon region, we have inherited great riches from the pre-Columbian cultures. These include “openness to the action of God, a sense of gratitude for the fruits of the earth, the sacred character of human life and esteem for the family, a sense of solidarity and shared responsibility in common work, the importance of worship, belief in a life beyond this earth, and many other values.” (*Querida Amazonia*, No. 70)<sup>39</sup>

Chapter four, “‘Seeds of the Word’: A Latin American Cartography,” begins by tracing the expression “seeds of the word” through the final documents of the General Conferences of CELAM from Aparecida in 2007, back to Santo Domingo in 1992, then back to Puebla in 1979, and to Medellín in 1968 where the expression was first employed by the Latin American bishops. Then I turn to consider the use of this expression in the documents of the Second Vatican Council from which the Latin American bishops drew their inspiration, and then to Justin Martyr, who coined the expression in the second century. Finally, I turn to consider the Postsynodal Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia*.

During the pontificate of the first bishop of Rome from the Americas, and despite the misguided efforts of those who threw the Amazonian carvings into the Tiber, it can be said that the Amazon flowed into the Tiber, with the richness of the Amazonian

---

<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation *Querida Amazonia*, February 2, 2020, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html#\\_ftnref100](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html#_ftnref100).

vernaculars informing, enriching, and challenging the global church. Pope Francis wrote that:

Everything that the Church has to offer must become incarnate in a distinctive way in each part of the world, so that the Bride of Christ can take on a variety of faces that better manifest the inexhaustible riches of God's grace. Preaching must become incarnate, spirituality must become incarnate, ecclesial structures must become incarnate. (*Querida Amazonia*, No. 6)

This repeated insistence on incarnation, I suggest, involves a significant rethinking of the notion of inculturation to the extent that we can say not only that the Word *became* culture but that the Word continues to *become* culture, revealed in countless vernaculars.<sup>40</sup> What is articulated in view of evangelization and inculturation opens up even more broadly and deeply in the direction of multilateral dialogue and *encuentro* that moves toward genuine *convivencia*. In the words of the final document of the Amazonian Synod, "The logic of the incarnation teaches that God, in Christ, is linked to human beings who belong to 'cultures peculiar to various peoples' (*Ad Gentes*, No. 9), and the Church, the People of God present among the peoples, has the beauty of a pluriform face rooted in many different cultures (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, No. 116)."<sup>41</sup> The words left behind by the anonymous

---

<sup>40</sup> Gerald O'Collins, among others, makes a distinction between "past (foundational) revelation and ongoing (dependent) revelation" (Gerald O'Collins, "Revelation Past and Present," in *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives Twenty-Five Years After (1962–1987)*, ed. René Latourelle [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988], 134).

<sup>41</sup> Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region, *The Amazon: New Paths for the Church and for an Integral Ecology, Final Document*, October 26, 2019, No. 91, <http://www.vatican.va/>

Spanish visitor(s) to the caves of Mona Island, “*Plura fecit deus*” and “*Verbum caro factum est*,” together with the incarnational theology and the appreciation for the vernacular that nourished the efforts of Fray Luis de León as a translator of the Scriptures, echo insistently from the sixteenth century into the twenty-first in these words of the bishops of Amazonia. In this way the cartography of retrieval in which this book engages points forward in the direction of an expansive, open-ended, and still-developing mapping of divine self-disclosure in the many vernaculars of the twenty-first century. *Plura fecit Deus!*