

## The pope and La Curandera, the Healer

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estés | Aug. 9, 2010 | El Rio Debajo del Rio

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Oh do not be too exuberant, for as you know, we'll have to tie down those leaping bones, cramming them into a much smaller carapace. As in foot binding, we'll let the true spirit ache under man-made strictures, and force the children to forget or else pretend that they cannot see what they truly see, hear what they truly hear, know what they truly know.

Thus the world will be made safe from inventive souls for another generation or two. And all the ill-made plans of the stick people would be satisfying to them, save for one thing...

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Old women.  
Old women who say,  
"I'm here...  
to interfere."

**Certainly the overculture claims one ought not dare, nor presume to call oneself artist, poet, or knower.**

One ought agree to agree, to subdue sparkle, bow to others, pretend to not sense the fiery meaning inside meaning, the extra-sensing within all the senses.

But, in Latino healing practices called *curanderismo*, it is just the opposite. *Curanderismo*, which is often taught under the guidance and protection of the older women, is the spiritual practice, most often devoted to intercession through *Jesús y María*, toward the healing of spirit, soul, mind and body.

This spiritual discipline is specific and varied in each locality. It can be said that in parts of Mexico, it is a combination of the ancient Nahua people's (the original tribal name which Spaniards overlaid with their word, Aztec) spiritual understandings, blended with very old Sephardic traditions that had entered the Catholicism of the 16th century Conquistadores, and sometimes merging further with spiritual practices from 15th century Africa, via slave women and men forced to the east coast of Mexico and Central America.

**In *curanderismo*, the old people teach there is to be no shyness or false modesty about artfulness, for the mother tongue in every person's bloodline, is a sacred poetics.** The healer is thus considered from day one, an *artesaño* of the soul. The invisible world is acknowledged easily, and without undue eeriness or superstition. What is sometimes called *"la primera,"* first reality, is fully acknowledged directly along with consensual reality.

No *curandera* worth her *herbias* will take on students who are hyperfascinated, egotistic, or thrill seekers. As in

the priesthood, in the convents across the world, selection tries to avoid the passive-dependent personality as well as the one seeking deference from others without having earned it in spades.

*Curanderismo*'s practices are steeped in holiness and in sacred prayer, in hands-on healing touch, and *platicas*, talking as spiritual companions... the very same attributes prized by monks, priests, nuns, brothers and other consecrated persons, whether avowed, or not.

**Old women surrounded me as a child**, and some of those were my beloved 'madwomen in black,' my nuns, who often fresh from Pakistani or African missions, or having spent nights reading ancient pages, or like live wires just having come completely undone via the Holy Spirit after studying theology at university somewhere in the far away ... these older women sometimes came to visit us little noodle heads at our out-back school surrounded by cornfields and factories and precious few books of any kind. The nuns often cut windows in walls where one could not previously see out at all.

Thus, when I was still a child, one visitor-sister brought a part of an encyclical that made me think there might be a respected place for all my immigrant, refugee, deportee, and non-literate people after all. For she told me about Pope Pius XII. I knew him by his picture on our school wall, a man in little steel eyeglasses who always looked like he had just eaten a nice lemon. I thought he was almost handsome if only he would smile.

**So, when Sister told me, this pope, a very bejeweled of heavy gold crowned man in robes that were, and I mean no disrespect, fully using up at least five whole bolts of flowing cloth in his skirt and cape alone, like a magnificent Dracula...** that he had written something that showed love for my people, I was heart-warmed.... I could paraphrase the passage to you, but here I have looked it up and placed it for you to read... this fellow who was born in the late 1800s. This is from Pius XII's 1951 encyclical, *Evangelii Praecones*.

**'This is the reason why the Catholic Church has neither scorned nor rejected the pagan philosophies.** Instead, after freeing them from error and all contamination she has perfected and completed them by Christian revelation. So likewise the Church has graciously made her own the native art and culture which in some countries is so highly developed. She has carefully encouraged them and has brought them to a point of aesthetic perfection that of themselves they probably would never have attained. **By no means has she repressed native customs and traditions but has given them a certain religious significance;** she has even transformed their feast days and made them serve to commemorate the martyrs and to celebrate mysteries of the faith. In this connection, St. Basil says very well: "Just as dyers prepare the material to be dyed by certain processes beforehand and only when this has been done do they color it with purple or some other color: likewise if the unfading glory of the just is to be ours for all time we shall first be prepared by these external rites and then we shall master the teachings and mysteries of Faith.

'When we become accustomed to looking at the reflection of the sun in the water, we shall turn to gaze upon the sun itself. . . Certainly the essential function of a tree is to produce fruit in season; still the foliage that its branches also bear serves to adorn it. In the same way the primary fruit of the soul is truth itself; but **the garb of natural culture is a welcome addition**, just as leaves provide shade for the fruit and add to its beauty. Thus Moses, a man of the greatest renown for his wisdom, is said to have come to the contemplation of Him, Who is, only after being trained in Egyptian lore. So later the wise Daniel is said to have been first schooled in Babylon in the wisdom of the Chaldeans, and only then to have come to know Divine Revelation."

'We ourselves made the following statement in the first Encyclical Letter We wrote, *Summi Pontificatus*

: "Persevering research carried out with laborious study, on the part of her missionaries of every age, has been **undertaken in order to facilitate the deeper appreciative insight into the various civilizations and to utilize their good qualities** to facilitate and render more fruitful the preaching of the Gospel of Christ. Whatever there is in the native customs that is not inseparably bound up with superstition and error will always receive kindly consideration and, when possible, will be preserved intact."

**Well. As a child I did not hear the cherry-picking, I only heard the promise inherent: There is a place for people like us** who are different, who are ethnic close to the bone as yet, who have not stepped into the melting pot, or tried, but didn't fit. How wonderful, a real place for us. A place of regard and respect for what we bring, what we know, what we have known for centuries, perhaps by other names, or by No Name, but a holy of holies nonetheless.

**Yet, isn't it so that the Church has not always lived up to Pius's kinder intents behind his words here? ....** certainly not before and often enough, whether Hawaii, Africa, Polynesia, Canada, and elsewhere among the native tribes most anywhere, not afterward either. Teaching about the God of Love ?on mission? has seemed so to depend on the character development of the one who is doing the ?respect for people and the including of native custom,?... whether they are genuinely in love with the human soul, or instead mostly valuing ?correcting others, that is, valuing being ?right? over valuing being patient and loving.

**As my Grandmother used to say about the Church silencing people:** ?Ay, they threw so and so out for being a sinner. If the men in red really wanted to set a good example for the rest of us, they would yell, ?We are sinners too, so throw us out as well.??

As an adult, I see and hear in this encyclical the pope then was a man of his times, and yet was at least semi-reverent toward others? ancient understandings of spirit, art and music and dance. He seems sort of charmed by the rites and rituals of ?exotic foreign people? which is something ?we foreign people? have taken delight in one way, but sometimes would just like to be seen as regular people, not peculiar or nastier names, like apostates. But in all, Pius was not different than Claude Levi-Strauss, nor Freud, nor Carl Jung, nor other men of that time who were educated at university to believe that others, unlike themselves, were ?primitives.?

Yet, by the way this passage from Pius XII was explained to me when I was young, I believed enough in this encyclical's seeming intent, that I wrote to Pope Pius seeking an audience to discuss the matter with him. It was quite an endeavor to get a stamp, I remember that. And then to seek an address that seemed to have almost all consonants with few vowels in it. I can just imagine the pope's sergeant at arms saying, ?Oh dear Your Holiness, another letter from that strange girl in America.? If even that. Sadly I have to report to you, at least I, can write to popes all day and all night offering to break bread and listen and learn and ask, but never hear back from them even a tired, ?So sorry, I am busy trying to prevent nuclear war.? Yet, I understand. But. Neither have I given up.

**I have now written to subsequent popes, I think five in all at present, also seeking audiences to discuss this very matter,** for I believe these passages about native inclusion as per ritual and thought that is concomitant, holds a key to the reunification not only of people from ancient bloodlines who have been too often run over and marauded upon. (As my grandmother Katerin used to say, ?Yes. we have been Catholics since the year 1000 when we were miraculously converted at sword point.? This referring to the tribes of Huns who, as the church used to teach were all magically transformed from heathen horsemen to nice Catholics, even though many of the old Huns still alive today, tell a different story. But, as most good stories go, that will be a story for another time.)

**The point of authentic ritual -- is that the rite has the entire heart and soul and spirit and brain and mind and body and universe and heartbeat in it ... versus ritual by rote.**

I think I have a bias, that is that sometimes those of us who still hold to or grew up in deeply ethnic traditions have a good deal of *prima materia* to offer ... ritual that has never turned to tirade, rites filled with such full participation. Not one dances for all. All dance for all. That's one way of putting it.

Some of us note, perhaps a little more easily if we are not so many generations away from "the old ways," and "the old teachers and old people"... that too much time spent in an injection-molded plasticizing culture means that one must swerve every day and hard against being absorbed by a learned blindness to the interior life.

Then, a weakening of sight, a dropping of the hands, a kind of non-righteous surrender, a strange quiet, lack of energy, insinuates itself in a person who was once vibrant.

**If a culture, whether clerical or secular, pressures the soul to conform for the scant reward of being "accepted,"** or via threats of marginalization because of one's beliefs, this all by itself may force an individual to attempt to assimilate into this least layer of culture ... thereby causing one's relationship to all beings and things to slowly become defective. There, one becomes disconnected from the observable Essence, from the affecting vitality of all creation.

It is not supposed to be this way for humans. Relationship is meant to be complementary, wherein one is able to feel the electricity, and the condition of that electricity, inside all things.

In *curanderismo*, often still an oral tradition passed down by the old women and old men to those far younger, much of our "written in the heart" literature regarding various phenomena of spirit, mind, body, rite and ritual of all sorts, whether in art, sociology, anthropology, culture, religiosity or science, or some or all of each is carried by the dignity of the elders who often attend Mass daily, who have their little *ofrenda*, altar, to La Señora, who pray the rosary like most of us say the word "the."

**This is as opposed to what Pius later in his encyclical calls the "superstitions,"** which seems to me to be a kind of attachment laid down with either a stupefying giddiness accompanied by claims that cannot be justified, or else validly described, but devoid of a true *élan vital*. Either of these attitudes toward the sacred are not brooked by the old *curanderas*. Mainly because such attitudes are believed to cause detachment of the soul from the person -- like a detached retina. Observations of trivia are crooned over, rather than gathering in light clear and useful observations which have depth and moment. The profane versus the sacred is the difference between a brief amusement park ride and being present at the birth of a child.

**Yet, no matter which sacred endeavor, if trivialized, or hidden or buried, you can be sure it will be the old women,** one or the other who will, with all due dignity and respect, come with her little fold-up shovel, to find it and dig it up again and restore it to its rightful sacralized place.

**The elders who show up in these ways, who speak the poetic mother tongue, who create instead of bleat,** who call and pray and tend to, who teach and imagine instead of always eating their green beans nicely no matter what, they ought not to be chastised. This courage ought be noted and awarded. I'm reminded that a pope who claimed utter infallibility said so. I might add, that despite all other human foibles, and critiques about Pius XII, he also raised the Blessed Mother many notches higher by papal decree.

Older women and *curanderas* most everywhere would instinctively find that utterly becoming.

**El Baptismo: My Second Baptism:**

**The Piercing Of My Ears By The Old Women**

Stolen and tattooed by the Magyars,

I was brought back to my own blood,

*cultura de Tex Mex,*

dressed in a tiara of fruits and ruffs

and fluffs and ribbons,

a *curandera* apron over my death dress,

and knowing the harvest dance.

The women took me in

The back room of the kitchen,

on the old porch with the hard dirt floor.

They talked and laughed about their first time,

?I bled so much, who would think

a little thing like that could bleed so much.?

They removed the ribbons from my hair.

Then, the thorn

doused with tequila

and held to the flame.

My eyes teared as the curved upholstery

needle tore through my flesh,

making a sound like a piece of paper

torn in two.

This intense blue pain

behind the bridge of my nose

shot into my eyes

as my ears were pierced for the first time.

Next, the lacy gold earrings  
pushed through the purple holes,  
dripping that watery  
Cristo-pierced-with-the-sword blood.

They whispered old Spanish words  
into tiny pale colored tissue papers  
and twisted them shut  
as though they held candies.

These I chewed and swallowed  
one after the other until I had consumed  
fifteen wishes  
for my future life as a woman.

Revuelta sang into my ears  
and wrote signs of stars and sun  
into my palms with charcoal.

Suddenly I knew how to parade  
girl babies in lacy dresses  
on one arm,  
and how to roll dough  
into thin and perfect rounds, and  
how to run faster after chickens under storm skies,  
how to crack coconuts with one chop of machete,  
how to walk farther,

endure pain of birth  
and tell stories to the baby  
right away afterward,  
how to look forward to  
meeting the stranger on the road,  
how to catch the husband  
as he falls through the doorway,  
how to rule the home while  
pretending my mate makes the rules,  
how to clean the intestines from the shrimp,  
how to slit the eyes of the goat head  
before cooking,  
how to halve the onion  
and pour honey over for coughs,  
how tell which fish, which mango  
will feed eight,  
how to peel the prices at mercado,  
make a gourd into one hundred useful things,  
how to evade the upper-arm pinch  
of the moist old men,  
how to drink the worm.

How to like warm beer *sin heilo*,  
how to sleep while sitting up,  
how to keep a pocket of cilantro for courage,

how to recount the history of *la gente*,  
how chocolate is for awakening the senses  
and vanilla is for nerves,  
*y romano* for cleansing  
*y yerba Buena* for a hard life.  
How to collect the neck bag of bones,  
how to seek the telling vapors in the candle  
how to know where to press on the back  
to release the menstrual blood,  
how to read the egg broken into a glass jug,  
how to find the path through the forest by squinting,  
how the first egg fried up in the morning  
may hold a message for the rest of the day,  
how to poach rattlesnake in old blue bottles,  
how to make a sugar tit for the baby to stop crying  
how to stand beneath the Cross for a long, long time.

How getting cannot be got by going there.

How things cannot be saved by saving them.

How things cannot be used by using them.

How fear can only be mastered by fearing and acting now,

how there are powers that we can understand,

and that there are Powers we can never understand,

and that these are ?God?s business.?

All that life is for,

all it has ever been for,  
is for being as much as it can be,  
each to their own.

My grandmother brought out new shoes for me,  
shoes that seemed covered  
with green and rose beetle skin.

I put them on, and I knew how to hide,  
I knew how to run fast,  
how to carry the heart of home inside me forever.

It is from this place that I write.

It is in this place I live.

It is this place that I am,

this place that I have become,

this place that I am becoming.

In this place where I live

This is the room I write from.

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CODA: Recently, Dr. Rosemary Radforth Ruether was apparently "uninvited" to take a special chair at the University of San Diego. It is hard to hold seriously that a letter writing campaign would cause a revered university dedicated to courage and Catholic principle in this regard, to disinvite the professor they first chose. Academic freedom and depth is the root of university life. The opportunity at university to test one's thoughts and discuss all sides doesn't come from, as I stated above, plasticizing everything in sight so that everything is pleasantly dead instead of thrillingly alive. As I was writing about Pope Pius's encyclical re including "native people," I thought perhaps we who try, despite our introversions, to be vocal, have become "the new natives" of the church, seen as too exotic by some, as too "primitive," as too something or other. And yet, the same encyclical, even though it is in some places more than just a bit patronizing, says clearly: Add, don't subtract. Add. Add others. Add. Let their customs and their ways augment, be seen discussed, heard. Be patient.

I have to say, my one experience with Dr. R was in auditing a class she gave, and she is definitely not a "God is Gaia," proselytizer. If someone has put that upon her, they are making it up out of whole cloth. However, at one point she showed such beautiful spirit: Dr. R is a tall woman, and not tiny boned. (Me neither, except short to boot.) She told me about visiting Africa and the Catholic groups there, that she'd joined a native dance. Part of the dance was to mimic the stances of creatures. Right on the spot, Dr. Ruether became suddenly so light on her

feet, and singing a little bit, showed us how the blessing of the elephant part of the dance went, using one arm swaying to signify the trunk and doing a decidedly African rhythm-step, similar to our native dances. Her face was so happy and bright, and you could see, she was one of the elders dancing. A fine thing. The University of San Diego has forfeited a dancing elder, not to mention scholar. Their students will be the poorer for it, I think. I may have to write the pope about Catholic exclusion of the "new natives" now. And ask for an audience with the Holy Father to discuss this matter. Seriously. Again. I know, I know, but some birds fly *north* for the winter, too.

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