# In-Betweenness: Pain and Promise

Dr. Justo L. González

AETH

Words of Hope Conference
Bluefield, West Virginia
April 13, 2024

© Justo L. Gonzalez
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/
info@aeth.org

# In-betweenness: Pain and Promise

Good morning. I wish to begin by thanking all responsible for the planning of this conference and for the hospitality and welcoming that Catherine and I have received. And I also wish to thank each one of you for taking the time to come here and explore the ministry of writing, particularly what it means to live, think and write in a situation of in-betweenness.

However, before discussing the meaning and significance of in-betweenness I feel that it is necessary to say something about how I came to be a writer. This is so important to me that Catherine often says that instead of blood I have printer's ink. She also says that I have never had an unpublished thought. (To which I respond that I have had many an unthought published!)

I grew up in an environment in which words were important. My mother was a professor of Spanish literature. My father was a novelist and a newspaper editor. Being blessed by not having TV, our dinners were often accompanied and followed by long conversations about the use of language or about a particular poem or other piece of literature. Behind my father's chair at one end of the table there was a sideboard with the three books that often seemed to be the final arbiters in our discussions: the Bible in the center, the dictionary of the Spanish Academy to one side, and the Grammar of the Academy to the other.

As I now reflect on those days and what they have meant for the rest of my life, one incident seems to mark a turning point. It must have been in the 3rd or 4th grade, and our assignment was to write an essay on the city of Havana. I fired away with all guns, finding ways to make use of everything I had learned at our dinner table. The teacher gave me a one hundred on my essay and wrote very laudatory comments. I came home proud of my paper and gave it to my father to read. He took it and read it, read it again, and again. Then he asked: “What did you want to say?” When I told him, his response was, “And why didn't you just say it?”

That, experience, and many others, have led me to the conclusion that too often we are taught how not to write well. We are not taught to write to communicate something but rather to impress our teachers –as I had done in that other essay many years ago. And the last requirement in most Ph.D. programs is to write a dissertation whose main purpose is to impress three readers.

AETH

My father’s reaction to my supposedly excellent essay was deflating, but life changing. Later I learned that this was part of the way he looked at writing. Several years before I was born, he was part of a movement that overthrew a dictator. When the new regime was being organized, he was asked what position he wanted in the new government. His response was that what he wanted was to direct an office in the Department of Agriculture whose task would be to learn from scientists about the best practices in agriculture, animal husbandry, hygiene, herbal medicine, and the like, and then write it in such a way that an almost illiterate farmer could

understand and apply that knowledge. I still remember meetings in our living room when three or four scientists would explain something to my father in a way that I could not understand, and then he would explain it back to them in a way that was quite clear to me.

***

Now to our subject for this conference: “Words of Hope.” Words are not just useful means of communication. Words are powerful. What children are often taught, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” is simply not true. Words can hurt more than sticks and stones. Sticks and stones may break our bones, but words may break our souls! A boy who is constantly told that he is bad is very likely to become a bad man. A girl who is told that because she is a girl she is inferior to boys is likely to become an abused wife. Words can break our souls. But words can also bless our souls.

Words are not simply, as the medieval nominalists would say, *flatus vocis*, the wind of the voice. In the Bible we are told that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” This is not, as some would have us think, John's last-minute attempt to make his faith relevant to his Hellenistic times. Long before John, the Hebrew Scriptures declared that at the very beginning of all things God said, “Let there be

light. And there was light!" Whatever God pronounces leaps into existence. God speaks to nothingness, and out of nothingness all things emerge! They emerge by the power of the Word!

In our day, there is so much discussion on the art and science of communication that we tend to think that words are simply a way of saying something, a means to let others know something. As a consequence, we also tend to think that the Word of God is simply God's way of telling us something. It is thus that I long understood the well-known words of the prophet Isaiah:

> For as the rain and the rain of the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Is 55:11)

When I was a teenager, this passage was often quoted in our church whenever we were setting out in an evangelistic endeavor. To us, it meant that if we spoke the gospel someone would listen. But now I am convinced that what the prophet is saying is that God's Word not only tells but also does. Just as water comes from heaven in order to irrigate the land and make it productive, and then evaporates and returns to heaven, the Word of God comes to earth in order to do –and not just to tell– the will of God.

I am also convinced that part of what is meant when Scripture says that we are created after the image of God is that, just as God has the power of the Word to create, we, too, have the power of our words. And, after the image of God's eternal Word, our words do have the power to

create. God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light! Lewis Carrol said, “Let there be Alice,” and there was Alice! And ever since, the Cheshire cat has smiled on our sad world.

Obviously, there are limits to this human power to create. Traditionally we express the difference between God's powers of creation and ours by affirming that God created all things “out of nothing” –ex nihilo– which we cannot do.
Unlike God's Word, the power of our words does not depend only on us but also on the other who hears or reads our words.

Even so, the result of our speaking with others, and of listening to them, is a new reality. I speak. The other listens. The other speaks. I listen. In the middle of our conversation, a new reality is being born: a new we. I am in that reality, but that reality is not all that I am. The other, my interlocutor, is also part of this third reality. But that reality is not all that he or she is. I no longer exist by myself, for that new reality in between us is part of who I am.

I spoke earlier of the emphasis that we put on words as communication. But in fact, we have eroded the very meaning of the word, “communication” Originally, the word “communication” –*communicatio*– had a deeper and wider meaning than it has for us today. To communicate did not mean simply to deliver an idea. Literally, to communicate meant to make common, to share. Real communication is not simply saying or hearing something to another. Real communication results in a new reality, in an in-between reality, in something that is both you and I, is neither

you nor I, and yet somehow redefines both you and me. Significantly, we often call that new reality a “community.”

When we take this into account, we realize that in a way in-betweenness is unavoidable. Without some form of in-betweenness –a third reality among us– we could have no community. And without community we cannot survive.

But, as with every other aspect of life, the in-betweenness that is at the heart of any community can also be twisted by sin. It is at this point that in-betweenness becomes painful, and in some cases tragically destructive. Painful in-betweenness may take many different forms, though all are characterized by the experience of belonging to a community and at the same time not belonging to it. Painful in-betweenness is the frequent experience of those at the margins of communities to which they belong and from which, at the same time, they are somehow excluded.

One of the ways we refer to that experience within the Latino community is the word *mestizaje*. In its original use, that word had a heavy pejorative connotation. In the Spanish colonies in this hemisphere, all the way from Colorado to Tierra del Fuego, a *mestizo* was what in English would be a “half-breed” or a mongrel. A *mestizo* was a person of mixed Spanish and Indo-American blood. (Other names were given to other mixtures, notably to people of both African and

European descent, who were called *mulatos* –another pejorative title with etymological connections with the word “mule.”)

The words *mestizo* and *mestizaje* began taking a more positive connotation early in the 20th century, partly as a result of the Mexican revolution and the national consciousness undergirding it. In 1925, Mexican politician Jose Vasconcelos, who was also a philosopher and a writer, suggested that *mestizaje* was not something about which to be ashamed but rather a sign of the future. He suggested that, in the mixture that was taking place in Mexico and all over Latin America, a new race was being born containing elements from every race on earth, which he then called “*la raza cósmica*” –the cosmic race. His views are now reflected in an inscription in Tlatelolco commemorating the final great battle between the Spanish conquistadores and the Aztec army. The inscription comments: “this was neither a victory nor a defeat, but rather the painful birth of the *mestizo* people of today's Mexico.”

It was several decades after Vasconcelos, in the work of my dear and now departed friend, Father Virgilio Elizondo, that the theme of *mestizaje* came into its own in the field of theological reflection. Elizondo was born and raised in Texas, where he was repeatedly told that he did not really belong because he was a Mexican. Being defined as a Mexican made him dream about Mexico, where he would no longer be a foreigner. And yet, when he was in Mexico, he was called a “Pocho” –a pejorative word for an Americanized Mexican. This led him to ponder on the painful side of the *mestizaje* that Vasconcelos had glorified.

Most significantly, these experiences led him to read the gospels in a different way. He began exploring what it meant for Jesus to be a Galilean. Romans and other Gentiles considered Galileans to be Jews, applying to them all the prejudices that Gentiles in general held about Jews. On their part, the Jews from Judea, who considered themselves better Jews than any others, did not think very highly of Galilee, which they called "Galilee of the Gentiles," claiming that no prophet had ever risen in that land and that Galileans were not really Jews. For Elizondo, this was an earthshaking discovery. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on that subject –a dissertation he later adapted and published under the title of Galilean Journey. There, Elizondo argued that his experience as a mestizo was similar to Jesus's experience as a Galilean.

Although I did not know Virgilio at the time, my own experience of in-betweenness –or rather, my fear of in-betweenness– was leading me along similar lines. I was teaching in Puerto Rico when I was invited to preach during Holy Week at a large Methodist church in Florida. The passage suggested for my first sermon was Peter's denial. I immediately remembered a sermon I had heard in my early childhood. The preacher asked, "How did people know that Peter was one of the disciples of Jesus?" And he answered: "Because when you have been with Jesus it shows in your face." I remember standing outside the church, looking at everyone leaving the service, and deciding that no one had been with Jesus!

Now I had to preach on the same passage. I certainly did not want to say what I had heard in that other sermon long ago. I was particularly concerned because, although I had preached in

English before, this was a huge congregation, and I feared that they would discount what I had to say because of my accent. Then, something unexpected suddenly jumped at me: In the Gospel of Matthew, the people who were accusing Peter of being one of the disciples say, "Certainly you are one of them for your accent betrays you." They did not know who Peter was because his face shone but because he talked funny!

This immediately led me to reread the gospels and to the discovery that much of what is taking place in their entire narrative is that the Galileans are coming into their own, and the Judeans do not like it. How is it possible for the Messiah to come from Galilee of the Gentiles and not from Judea and its holy city? The Messiah was supposed to come from Judea, not from some God-forsaken place like Galilee! He certainly was not supposed to have a foreign accent!

When I continue reading the narrative from the perspective of my own in-betweenness, I find many other instances. Countless times I have been told in Sunday school and in sermons that the reason why Saul of Tarsus took the name of Paul was the radical change that took place at his conversion. But read the story more carefully. According to the narrative in Acts 9, Saul is going to Damascus when he has his life-changing experience. It is still Saul who goes to visit Ananias; Saul who goes to Jerusalem to meet the apostles; Saul who becomes one of the leaders of the church in Antioch; Saul who is commissioned to go with Barnabas in a missionary enterprise. Finally in chapter 13, four chapters after his conversion, we are told that "Saul is also Paul."

The change of name has nothing to do with this conversion. Paul, like many Jews with Gentile connections or growing up in Gentile contexts, used two similar names: one a Jewish name, and the other a Gentile name. It is as the narrative moves from a mostly Jewish context into the larger word of the Roman Empire that Saul becomes Paul. (By the way, my friend Virgilio was also Virgil.)

Although the name “Paul” had nothing to do with his conversion, it had everything to do with his missionary endeavors. Paul could become the missionary he was because he was a Jew who had grown up among Gentiles. The more traditional Jews looked at him with suspicion and tried to silence him. But it was the Gentiles who finally silenced him.

In a word, it was out of his in-betweenness, out of his being both Paul and Saul, that he was able to be a successful missionary and a creative theologian.

There are many other examples of the role of in-betweenness leading to creativity. Have you ever considered how much of the New Testament was written in Jerusalem? Nothing, except perhaps the brief letter in Acts 15 that the leaders of the church in Jerusalem addressed to Gentile converts. It is not in Jerusalem, nor is it in Rome, that the growing edge, the true center, is to be found, but rather in the in-betweenness of the mission to the Gentiles.

In many ways, the same is true of some of the most notable events in the history of the church. I suppose that one of the reasons why I have been invited to speak to you is a book I wrote a few years ago, first in Spanish, and then translated and adapted into English, under the title of The Mestizo Augustine. Long before I gained consciousness of the significance of in-betweenness, I had taken several courses on the theology of Augustine. In those courses, I often read, and was repeatedly told, and then also taught, that Augustine's father, Patrick, was a minor Roman officer in the small town of Tagaste in North Africa and that his mother, Monica, was an African Christian of very firm –and sometimes rather narrow– convictions. But apparently that had little to do with his theology –and even less to do with how we should read and interpret him today.

But then I realized that by not taking into account Augustine's own heritage and the experience of living between two cultures, I had missed much of the pathos and inner struggles reflected in his writings. I had not realized how much his creativity was enhanced by his in-betweenness. Even worse, I had failed to see the connection between Augustine's experience of in-betweenness and the experiences –both good and bad– that I see daily among immigrant families in this country.

Augustine was born and raised in northern Africa and spent most of his life there. Most of the population of the area, particularly in the hinterlands, was Berber. Centuries earlier, the Phoenicians had settled there and subjugated the native Berber population. Roughly five

centuries before the time of Augustine, the Romans defeated the descendants of the earlier Phoenicians, whom they called “Punics.” Thus, there was in the area a three-tiered society: Romans, Punics, and Berbers. However, as so often happens in situations of cultural and political domination, to the Romans, everybody in the area who was deemed culturally inferior was a “Punic.”

This creates some difficulty when we try to understand Augustine’s in-betweenness. His father, Patrick, was clearly Roman, and apparently a not-very-big-fish in the little pond that was the town of Tagaste. We are told that his mother was “Punic,” but it is not clear whether she was of Phoenician or of Berber stock. Most likely, it was the latter, for her name, Monica, seems to be derived from the Berber goddess Mon. In any case, her social and cultural status was below that of her husband Patrick. Apparently, Patrick’s mother was not very happy with his choice of a wife –probably because of Monica's lower social status. Like many Romans, Patrick was a pagan, and, like many Berbers, Monica was a devout and rigorous Christian and constantly prayed for the conversion of her husband. When the couple was first married, they lived with Patrick’s parents, and Monica’s relationship with her mother-in-law does not seem to have been very cordial. Some 40 years before Augustine’s birth, when persecution ended and the Empire embraced Christianity, many Christians in North Africa –particularly those whom the Romans called “Punic”– refused to accept the new order. They objected particularly to the willingness of the church to forgive those who had yielded during the time of persecution. Those who followed this rigoristic line came to be called “Donatists.” Until very shortly before Augustine’s

birth, most of the population in the area, and many in his own family, were Donatists. Monica herself was not a Donatist, but her form of Christianity still reflected much of the rigorism that was traditional in North Africa and had resulted in Donatism. In short, Augustine was raised in a multilayered in-betweenness. Patrick was not rich, and he was not very high in the social order of Tagaste; but he ruled the home with an authority derived from both his gender and his social status. Apparently, this was manifested in Patrick's verbal abuse of Monica. She, on the other hand, while accepting the higher social status of her husband, felt that, because she was a staunch Christian, she had a higher doctrinal and moral standing than did her husband. She was very aware of her son's exceptional gifts. She was eager to see him move up in Roman society but also to see him baptized and become as devout a Christian as she was.

Most biographies of Augustine tell the story of how distressed Monica was when Augustine took up a concubine. Almost immediately as soon as her husband Patrick died, Monica began following her son and his concubine wherever they went, constantly pressuring him to dismiss his concubine. Part of her motivation was that she was convinced that her son was living in sin. But there was much more to it. Apparently, the concubine –whose name we do not know– was a woman of Berber roots, and Monica feared that if Augustine were to marry her, this would be a handicap in the advancement of his career. The way she dealt with her son and his concubine was very similar to the way her mother-in-law had related to her and her marriage to Patrick and reminds us of what we see today in some immigrant and minority families. Eventually Augustine obeyed Monica’s wishes and dismissed his concubine. Later he commented: “the

woman with whom I had been living was ripped from my side, fearing that she would be an obstacle to my marriage. She was so deeply grafted into my heart that I was left torn, and wounded, and trailing blood."

Although part of Monica's concern may have been her son's eternal salvation, it is clear that she also had other motivations. As soon as the concubine was gone, she began planning Augustine's marriage to a very young girl whose social connections would help his civil career. While waiting for the girl to reach the age of marriage, Augustine took another concubine. Monica does not seem to have raised any objections to this –in fact, she welcomed it, apparently because Augustine had no deep affection for his new concubine and would not be marrying her.

All of this is very different from the story we usually hear about Monica, the saintly woman who was only concerned for the salvation of her husband and her son. That is certainly a part of the story. But the story is also that of a woman who, together with many others like her, was born and lived in a painful in-betweenness; a woman who had hoped that her marriage to a Roman functionary would somehow improve her life; a woman who then was mistreated and humiliated by both her husband and her mother-in-law; a woman who loved her child deeply and wished him to rise above her own painful experience; a woman who wished to see her son move ahead in the society that had marginalized her, and at the same time wished him to be committed to a faith strengthened by that very marginalization.

One of the consequences of all this was that Augustine lived his entire life in a state of in-betweenness. As we read his own spiritual autobiography, it is clear that his mother's faith had long been tugging at him. It is also clear that he found that faith uncouth and not quite reasonable. From the other side, his father's Roman world, including the Roman legal tradition and the wisdom of the ancient Greeks, was pulling him in the opposite direction. The famous episode of the garden in Milan that we usually call his conversion was the result of a long process in which, through the influence of Ambrose and many others, he discovered that it was possible to hold on to both his mother's Christian faith and his father's Graeco-Roman legacy.

But even then, in-betweenness did not disappear. Throughout the rest of his life, Augustine was both a Roman and an African, and he drew from both cultural legacies to deal with many of the most difficult issues facing him. Living in North Africa, he had to deal repeatedly with Donatism and its claims to a superior purity and greater authority. When it came to issues of authority, there was a contrast between Roman and Punic views and practices. Roman culture and civilization were built on the premise that authority is, above all, a matter of law. At least in theory, a leader’s authority had to be validated by a system of law. The governor of a province might be corrupt or ineffective, but he was still the governor until the proper authorities deposed him. In contrast, Punic culture –like many traditional tribal cultures– viewed authority as depending on the power and efficiency of the person holding it. If a chief became weak and no longer able to hold power, he lost his authority, and it was time for another to take his place.

Transferring this to the realm of church life and the Donatist controversy, the Donatists held that those bishops who had not held fast during the most recent persecution had lost their authority. They were no longer bishops, no matter what the Church or any of its established authorities said. Over against this, which was part of his own Punic tradition, and a reason why Donatism was so popular in Africa, Augustine turned to the Roman tradition of authority as based on law. A bishop is a bishop until deposed by proper authorities, even if some of the faithful declare that he is no longer suitable. Therefore, although Augustine had high standards and expectations for the office of bishop, he insisted that the entire system required that authority not be based on personal virtue. In short, when challenged by Donatism, Augustine appealed to his Roman legacy and its insistence that power depends on authority, and that authority does not depend on power.

But the opposite was the case when it came to Pelagianism. The Pelagians objected to Augustine's view of grace as being purely and simply a gift of God and not a reward for merit. True grace is always a free gift –as he would say. It is gratia gratis data. Both Pelagius and his most vocal defender, Celestius, were experts in Roman law. To them, the notion that God could give something –or withhold it– for no other reason the God's own decision was sheer madness, contrary to the very principles of law, which must be grounded on retributive justice. Some of them were convinced that Augustine was defending the notion of a purely free grace because this concurred with the unsophisticated views of Africans. They called him "an African interpreter," "the African Aristotle," and "the sophist of the Africans." In contrast, Jerome, who

disagreed with Augustine on many things but not on this, called Pelagius “a most Latin man.” In short, when defending God's freedom and human dependence on God’s will, Augustine appealed to his African inheritance, in which a chief had the right to distribute his gifts as he wished, without regard for the judgment of others.

Augustine never resolved his own in-betweenness. He was always an African Roman and a Roman African. But he was also painfully aware of a deeper in-betweenness. In-betweenness was at the very heart of the restlessness he deplores and yet celebrates in his famous prayer at the very beginning of his spiritual autobiography: “You made us for you, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”

Painful as all this may have been, it was Augustine’s in-betweenness –his personal in-betweenness as an Afro-Roman and his existential in-betweenness as a human being– and his claiming it, that made him the great thinker and writer that he was.

Towards the end of his life, he had to face a rising form of in-betweenness. New peoples, mostly of Germanic origin, were invading the supposedly indestructible Roman Empire. In response to the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in the year 410, and to those who claimed that this catastrophe was the result of Christianity having weakened the Empire, Augustine wrote The City of God, a vast review of world history as it was then known, trying to show that every city, every state, and every empire will pass because they are all founded on the love of self, and this

twisted love inevitably leads to its own destruction. In his view, even the mighty Roman Empire was a passing state of in-betweenness whose fall should not surprise us.

Augustine died twenty years after the fall of Rome, when one of the many invading Germanic peoples, the Vandals, were are the very doors oh his city.

A new mestizaje, a new in-betweenness, was being born. One of the predominant influences in the shaping of this new mestizaje would be the voice of Augustine. This was certainly due to the profundity of his thought, enhanced as it was by his own experience of in-betweenness. What had been a painful and shaming in-betweenness had proven to be the real center on which the future would be built.

***

All this leads us back to the passage from the Gospel of John that I quoted earlier: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The creative power of our words is a reflection of the creative power of God’s Word. But John does not stop there. He goes on to say that “the word became flesh”. Can you imagine that? The Creator becomes a creature! God becomes human! We call him “the Mediator” –that is, the in-between one. The one whom the winds and the waves obey is also the one who can cry, “My Lord, my Lord, why hast Thou forsaken me?” He is the one who, being fully human, can join in our pain

and anguish. He is also the one who, being fully divine, shows us the merciful face of God. He is God the Mediator meeting us in our in-betweenness. He is God the Word calling for our words to be words of love, words of redemption, WORDS OF HOPE!

AETH