

In Memoriam

Jan de Vos

1936–2011

He sat in front of me, in the very first row, listening intently. My subject matter—‘Disease and Depopulation in Guatemala, 1519–1632’—was surely no cause for light-hearted commentary, but I had come across an old Castilian refrain, a nursery rhyme of sorts, that invoked with at least a semblance of humor how difficult diagnosis can be in the case of compound outbreaks of sickness. The refrain runs:

Measles knocks the door.
Smallpox cries out ‘Who’s there?’
And scarlet fever is the one who replies:
‘All three of us are here!’

‘Nice one,’ I heard him mutter, nodding his head approvingly. I returned the smile he gave me, one that could become a mischievous, playful grin. His eyes shone, blue as the heavens, looking straight into mine. I wondered who this handsome fellow, full head of hair in cheery fifties prime, might be. It was 16 August 1989, the occasion the Primer Congreso de Mayistas in San Cristóbal de la Casas, Mexico. Unbeknownst to me, I had just had my first face to face encounter with Jan de Vos. Many more were to follow—and lots of laughter too, notwithstanding the frequently unsettling nature of what we had to engage as students of the Mesoamerican past, and its often equally unsettling present.

His writings, of course, I was already familiar with, especially the first installment of what would become his Lacandón trilogy, *La paz de Dios y del Rey* (1988a [1980]), which deals with a lowland Maya group that Spanish conquistadors and missionaries never succeeded in bringing to heel. Lacandón resistance took many forms: one of them, repeated raids on their part from the rainforests of Chiapas up into the Sierra de los Cuchumatanes, the regional focus of my doctoral research, challenged Spanish hegemony no end. In Jan’s eyes, how the Lacandón were dealt with after the first attempts to conquer them led to later iniquities equally as destructive to native mores (De Vos 1988b, 2002). The no-man’s land between Chiapas and Guatemala, but especially what took place there during colonial times, gave us the perfect geographical

construct upon which to mount our friendship: a border. We crossed back and forth, me to visit Jan in Chiapas, Jan to visit me in Guatemala, on and off (literally and figuratively) for the rest of his life, which he lived passionately and uncompromisingly, right to the end.

Though mutual interests brought us together ‘in situ’ in Mesoamerica, what Juan Marchena Fernández dubbed ‘El Matrimonio Maya’ was consummated on the very shores that Spanish conquistadors set sail from centuries ago—first in 1997 at the Universidad Internacional de Andalucía in La Rábida, as part of its Master’s Program in Latin American History, and for a decade thereafter as an integral component of the Doctoral Program in Indigenous Worlds at the Universidad Pablo de Olavide in Seville. Jan was schooled by Jesuits in boyhood and youth in his native Belgium, and served the Order in Colombia and Mexico until he felt compelled to leave it in 1986. His long spell as a preacher of the Word made the transition to teacher of the Word felicitous. Jan loved many things, but I believe (next to singing and strumming the guitar) what he loved most was to teach, which he did in various guises at different levels in several countries. I saw him at his pedagogic best as visiting professor in the two Spanish universities in which our duties overlapped, delivering lectures to rapturous acclaim in the courses on Maya history I had the honor to share with him. I made a point of sitting in on his classes, and he reciprocated by sitting in on mine. ‘We get two “profes” for the price of one!’ I heard more than a few of our students declare.

From Jan I learned a great deal, but it’s our students who continue to be the primary beneficiaries of what he held most dear. They received from him not mere instruction but a genuine education, above all how to ready themselves for the master’s or doctoral task at hand. Nowhere are Jan’s principles of sound scholarly inquiry better articulated than in his famous ‘ten commandments,’ *El decálogo del historiador*, itself inspired by *El oficio de historiar* (1988) of Luis González y González and later published as part of Jan’s own summing up, *La memoria interrogada* (2004). To pay homage to Clío, he insisted, one must acknowledge and comply with the following steps:

- (1) Choose a field of study;
- (2) Identify a theme within it;
- (3) Make plans for the work that lies ahead;
- (4) Go in search of information;
- (5) Store the data;
- (6) Interrogate the sources;
- (7) Explain what happened;
- (8) Prepare an outline;
- (9) Start putting the work together;
- (10) Publish your findings.

I had the pleasure of hearing Jan deliver these ‘ten commandments’ several times, not only as spoken discourse in the classroom but also, on one memorable occasion,

sung in verse to guitar accompaniment in a colleague's apartment, where wine flowed and spirits ran high. Commandment One in this guise translates something like this:

Coming to grips with history is hard work;
 It's a lonely vocation.
 Like a fledgling farmhand
 You must choose the right season,
 And find clean and fertile soil.
 With much forbearance
 You must arm yourself with patience,
 And manage what you do prudently.
 Above all, you have to have good land
 And there sow the seeds of our science.

And Commandment Six something like this:

Not everything written down is truthful,
 Nor the spoken word a fantasy.
 If you are to be in credible command
 Of every bit of evidence
 Then never remain quiet
 When doubts arise;
 Doubts can be healthy.
 And if truth be your goal
 Then let it be a garden
 That flowers every morning.

Jan, who received his doctorate in history from the University of Leuven, published prodigiously, especially in the quarter century between 1980 and 2005. He leaves behind a rich legacy in the form of articles and books, most of them pertaining to his calling as 'regional historian' of Chiapas and its Maya peoples. Toward the end of his life, he queried himself about what he had been able to accomplish, asking with customary candor the extent to which he had complied with his own mandates, turning the 'ten commandments' into a list of trenchant, reflective questions: 'Did I choose the right field of study?', 'Did I identify pertinent themes within it?' and so on until 'Did I put the work together satisfactorily?' and 'Did I publish enough of my findings?' The fascinating outcome, *La memoria interrogada* (2004), is a model of illuminating self-analysis, in which a master teacher holds to account a master researcher. He writes:

I put these thoughts together as I celebrate having lived in Mexico for the past thirty-two years, most of them in the state of Chiapas. I hope to kill two birds with the one stone. In the first instance, I formulate some problems as I see them with respect to the history of Chiapas, in particular how it can be retrieved through the study of multiple sources and works that are based on them. Second, I pose myself certain questions as to the effectiveness of my own efforts to write that history.

Jan concludes: 'I believe, despite inevitable errors and omissions, the balance on the whole to be positive.'

A positive balance on the whole? In academic terms, I would assert most emphatically so, as did Xóchitl Leyva Solano (2004) when honoring Jan upon the library of CIESAS (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social) in San Cristóbal de las Casas being named after him. In human terms, however, Jan carried himself 'Cum Laude' throughout life, as anyone fortunate to have shared quality time with him can attest. Ask his many friends or colleagues, or any of his students, in Mexico or Spain or wherever they may be, just how lively and eventful it was to be with him. In or out of the classroom, whether attending a concert or on an outing to the theater; during a visit to a museum or a behind-the-scenes peek in an archive; while on an excursion into the countryside or eating, drinking, singing, and reciting poetry in a tapas bar or someone's home, it was the human factor that Jan appreciated, and contributed to, most.

A presence such as his will be missed, but never forgotten.

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