

A note to the text

This text of Illich first appeared in The Ellul Studies Forum: a Forum for Theology in a Technological Civilization published by the University of South Florida (# 9, January 1992, pp. 14-16). The issue was entirely occupied by a dossier announced as Ivan Illich's Theology of Technology, collected by Carl Mitcham as guest-editor: from his introduction we learn that this text had previously been proposed to CrossCurrents but rejected by its editor Joseph Cunneen. Together with the present letter to Fr. Kelly, the dossier comprised the English translation titled Health as One's Own Responsibility? No, Thank You! (pp. 3-5) of a speech held in Germany in September 1990; and similarly translated interview granted to Eva Schindele on that occasion Against Health, (pp. 6-7) (both translated by Jutta Mason); the first redaction of Posthumous Longevity (pp. 12-14) dated Epiphany 1989 and written to the Benedictine community of Bethlehem, Connecticut; some commentaries by Lee Hoinacki and David B. Schwarz to the above-mentioned texts. Not having been included in the 1992 collection of Illich's speeches In the Mirror of the Past, these texts, some of which later appeared in the posthumous La perte des sens (2004), sound to our ears, in retrospect, as inaugurating a new mood in Illich's public writing.

The Letter to Fr. Kelly stemmed from his unexpected visit to Illich in Ocotepc in the Summer of 1990. A contemporary of Illich, Robert Kelly (1925-2005) was an Irish Jesuit who in 1951 had been sent to Zambia with missionary assignments;

he would serve there for 54 years, performing a variety of tasks as a “white cleric” within the local Church, and would author more than a dozen books on Christian spirituality. There hadn’t been any previous acquaintance between those two men before that visit in Ocotepac, as we can tell from the letter itself. We are not told why Kelly took the trouble of traveling from Canada to Mexico to meet Illich during a brief respite from his missionary work. However, we can hypothesize that he had happened to have in hand a little book by Illich on missiology, which a Catholic publishing house from the neighboring Zimbabwe released as late as in 1974 (*Mission and Midwifery. Essays on Missionary Formation*, Mambo Press, Gwelo, ZWE) and which would be considerably influential in Christian Africa for at least a couple of decades.

The circumstance that Illich felt it necessary to put in writing the core theme of this encounter the very following night and to complete it within a few weeks (the final draft is dated October 27, 1990), as well as his attempt to rather quickly to publish the letter (or maybe just his agreement to the prospect of doing so) in a well distributed Catholic journal before steering it toward the *Ellul Forum*, can be related to a personal constellation of contemporaneous facts. In 1991 it was the fortieth anniversary of Illich’s (and, see the case, also Kelly’s) priestly ordination. Already, the year before, he had been contacted by a former fellow seminarian, bishop Giulio Augusto Salimei (Rome), to celebrate Mass anew together with his old colleagues. Reflections and clarifications would follow between the two friends, and reasonably, also between Ivan and himself. In August 1991, Illich would write to Salimei to decline his proposal.

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