The Quincentenary Conference and the Earth Summit, 1992
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I have been going round the world for years, to house after house, to town after town and to different countries. I have gotten lost in airports, in buses and in train stations. I have been invited to many places. People have gradually got to know me. I am like a drop of water on a rock. After drip, drip, dripping in the same place, I begin to leave a mark, and I leave my mark in many people’s hearts.

Over a period of ten years, from my first visit to the United States in May 1982 until the end of 1991, I had the good fortune to meet an enormous number of people—in solidarity groups, in women’s organisations and in ethnic groups. In the early days, I was happy if there was just one photographer or journalist at my press conferences. I had no complexes. I talked about Guatemala and about indigenous peoples. I told my life story, and discussed my childhood, my youth and my first book.

I learned a lot by listening to other people. I did not learn from reading but by listening to young people’s problems, marital problems, society’s insensitivity and people’s intolerance. I listened to the voices of other victims of oppression, and sometimes we would end up crying, not just for Guatemala, but for all the things they had gone through too.
If I talk about specific problems in other countries, it is not because I have read about them in a book, but because people have told me about them. People usually start by asking me about Guatemala. Then they compare it with their own reality, and soon they begin talking about their own uncertainties and hopes and aspirations. People cry out in pain all over the planet. All these speaking tours have come about quite spontaneously. We never had a particular itinerary. There was no decision to follow a particular line.

Somebody had to do it. If no one had done it before, it was because no one had had the opportunity. They weren't as privileged as I was. Nothing was planned. If it had been, it might not have got very far. These things are like footprints on a path, like the smell of the earth after the rain; they happen by themselves.

In 1993, we went on a tour of twenty-eight countries. It was very hard work. In each country the days were packed with arranged meetings and activities. On top of that, there were the unexpected events. We might suddenly have to go to a special function with presidents, ministers, royalty, celebrities, “important people.” Even though we had had twelve years’ experience of using elegant knives and forks, we still found it difficult. In contrast we might visit Burmese refugees in Thailand, or indigenous people in Santa Maria del Este in Argentina or Chimborazo in Ecuador. We might get to countries where they eat and live differently, or where we had to take our rubber shoes off and walk through the mud.

You have to be with people, live the lives they lead and feel how they feel. We might go to elegant houses and feel very tense, and have to be careful about what we did and said. From there we’d go to a world of poor marginal people. We’d feel so weary and conscience-stricken, and also so full of admiration for these people’s courage. That happened everywhere we went.

Sometimes, after fifteen days with a team of workers, I felt I needed to change them so that we didn’t all get tired together. I would return to Mexico, leave one team behind, and set off again with another. There was no alternative. It’s been like that for the last few years.

In 1992, there were the celebrations of the Quincentenary of the Spanish “discovery” of America. I learned many things that year. It’s no secret that I had many problems with the official Spanish Commission on the Quincentenary, especially the team dealing with indigenous peoples. The commission included a particular racist whose name I choose not to mention. He defended the most indefensible positions.

We had started organising a counter-campaign in 1989 when we first heard that the Spanish Commission was bent on celebrating the Quincentenary. Our people said that there wasn’t anything to celebrate. On the contrary, the occasion offended us and generations of our ancestors. It was no cause for celebration, and even less a meeting of two cultures. We wanted to commemorate our ancestors, and remember them with a dignity worthy of the coming century. If the Spanish Commission thought the date was so important, they should have given us the opportunity to participate as protagonists in our own history.

In 1989, we managed to hold our first continental Quincentenary Conference in Colombia. The original idea came from the indigenous movements in Ecuador (CONAI), Colombia (ONIC) and Guatemala (CUC). The first conference, organised initially to support the landless peasants of Brazil, brought together all the active indigenous organisations in America and began the “Five Hundred Years of Resistance” campaign.

By the time of the second conference, held in Guatemala in 1991, we had included not only the Caribbean, but also popular movements throughout the continent. We changed the name of the campaign to “Five Hundred Years of Indigenous, Black and Popular Resistance.”

By 1992, we had decided to change course again, to make it a continental movement and not just a campaign. Hitherto we had followed the approach that governments were taking to the Quincentenary. Now we wanted to approach it in a different way, looking towards the year 2000. In our struggle, we always follow a
star—a long-term vision—in this case, the prospect of a better life for oppressed and marginalised sectors and the achievement of full recognition for the indigenous peoples of the world.

The financial resources for organising these activities came from thousands of people: solidarity committees, women’s groups, youth groups, human rights groups, small institutions in Europe and the United States. A large part came from the Evangelical churches and from the National Council of American Churches, the World Council of Churches and the International Lutheran Federation. Collecting this money was not easy. Certain institutions put us through a kind of Spanish Inquisition first before they would part, reluctantly, with a thousand dollars or five thousand dollars—when they could have given us so much more. To powerful institutions like the Catholic Church, our activities smacked of subversion or communism. It was as if we were the Devil undermining their belief. They could never understand why our people criticised the Quincentenary. They thought we were just being aggressive, and they were suspicious of us. Yet, as always, we also found good and generous allies, and these we will not forget.

We indigenous peoples live in different parts of the American continent, we have different experiences and identities, and we also have diverse and multiple dreams. Each of us has survived alone, in our own nations, without contact with other indigenous peoples. Just as I was not aware that there were other Mayans before I went to Mexico, the indigenous peoples of Latin America have not known a great deal about each other. Yet the fundamental bases of our culture unite us, because they are ancient cultures.

We discovered that indigenous peoples have always contributed valuable things to society through their labour and culture, their art and medicine, their wisdom and patience. They have contributed their own blood and pain to build the so-called democracies, a contribution that has never been recognised. On the contrary, a good number of our mestizo children have been denied participation in our ancient culture, and have been made to feel ashamed of the earth which bore them and of their roots.

By the time of the Quincentenary in 1992, the indigenous peoples of America had begun to have a common vision, shared demands and a sense of solidarity. The majority of our peoples have a vision. They foresee a great future. They have dreams, and the determination to see them take shape, for the sense of community is sacred, and something of real value in this day and age. We called our third conference, which took place in Nicaragua that October, “The Conference of Self-Discovery.” The huge majority of our people are poor. We discovered that if poor people unite they can achieve results. Before we got funding, we had to take a few centavos from each family, from our children’s mouths, for our projects to materialise. The expenses of our early meetings were borne by our own families. Our community is the reason why we are still alive, why we are still here five hundred years after the Conquest. We have survived amid the rubble of endless massacres. If our peoples had disintegrated, if they had lost their languages, if they had lost their communities, their collective way of life, their concept of leadership, they would have died out. We discovered that if we unite, if we recognise our organisations’ leaders and avoid rivalries, we will achieve the results we seek.

We also discovered that we have not simply been spectators during these five hundred years. We have been protagonists as well. We realised how often our intellectual rights have been usurped, how our thinking has been manipulated and distorted. Since 1989, the world has rediscovered indigenous wisdom. This is a source of pride for us. I am pleased that the thoughts and lives of our peoples have become more widely known. Yet the more they are known, the more they have become a commercial product. Our profound appreciation of the relationship between Mother Nature and people’s lives has been exploited over and over again, by environmentalists, writers and celebrities. Voluminous works plagiarising our thinking have appeared, apparently magical works pulled out of the air by famous brains, the sole authors of indigenous thought. They have stolen these concepts from us and not given us credit.
They don’t say, “This is what the Yanomamis think, or the Mayans, or the Aztecs.” Or, “This wisdom comes from the native peoples of the Pacific, or the Maoris.” They don’t say, “This is the wisdom of ancient cultures, therefore we respect it, we borrow it to share with other people.” No, these are simply great brains who have suddenly discovered the importance of harmony.

When I read a poem about nature and find that it is actually a Hopi or Navajo saying, and that the poet does not recognise the source and presents it as his own work, it makes me very suspicious. They never say, “Chief Descage said this.” Or, “A Mayan chief said this.” Or, “A Chorti woman, a Chamula woman, said this.” They never explain that these concepts had ancient roots. That is why people often think that indigenous peoples have no body of thought. I know that a people’s experiences, values and wisdom do not belong to any one individual and should be universal patrimony. It offends me when this patrimony is simply used to benefit certain individuals.

I don’t like saying things like this, but sometimes you have to talk plainly in order to be understood and to make friends. It teaches you who your real friends are, and I want my friends to know what I think. In our culture, our word is our bond. This does not just refer to the spoken word, it also means commitment, feelings, responsibility, frankness. These are values one receives as a child, and we should reaffirm their importance. I go back to the time when I learned our culture from my elders. Yet paradoxically, to be able to talk about it, I had to physically leave my village and my wider community.

By the time of the third conference, we were delighted to see that the exchanges between our leaders had reached a qualitatively different level. Our efforts had given dignity to the human race. The Quincentenary taught me something: that the young five-hundred-year-old culture of the invader (a bloody culture with many inherent problems) had wanted to rapidly eliminate the memory of a culture that was thousands of years old. Yet five hundred years is nothing. It takes a lot longer to destroy an ancient culture.

Cultures have roots, a heart, a meaning. Hopefully, in the future, one culture will not impose itself on another in this way. Cultures will fuse, not by massacres, sterilisation, repression and destruction, but through mutual respect.

I happened by chance to be at the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. I had been invited to Brazil by various church organisations for another conference, and I was curious to see what the Summit was like. So I paid my fifty dollars entrance fee and went in. I couldn’t get through the security barriers that prevented ordinary people from going into the official conference, so I went in what was called the “global arena.” It was a very disappointing spectacle. Indigenous people were dancing for the public in a sort of folklore show. It turned out to be a load of blond people pretending to be Amazon Indians.

Some journalists came over to interview me, not because they recognised me but because I looked indigenous in my colourful costume. They asked me what I thought. I said, “It’s entertaining. There’s a lot to buy. I’ve enjoyed myself, I’ve watched Indians in feathers dance. I’ve seen lots of T-shirts, plastic bags and postcards being sold. But I wonder how many trees were cut down to make them?” I didn’t tell them my name because it wasn’t important.

I had gone to find out what their idea of the earth, plants and nature might be, and what I found was a commercial version of ecology. There were T-shirts with tigers, lions and parrots painted on them, and plastic bags with animals’ faces. It was a case of businessmen making money out of the environment. They usurped indigenous wisdom, and made films to sell to make even more money. They prostituted the thoughts of the indigenous peoples. I had the feeling that the organisers weren’t very clear about the difference between indigenous people and wild animals, between protecting the jungle and exploiting it. A love affair with nature has its limits when it comes to making money.

Yet the Earth Summit undoubtedly did a lot of good. It made young people think about environmental issues. Intellectuals devoted a moment of their time to studying the problem, and the views of representatives of ancient cultures were listened to. It was
a big success for us, it had world-wide exposure. The danger is that protecting the environment has become fashionable; it is a fad that may not last.

I walked around the streets and went into neighbourhoods, and I was recognised by certain nuns and priests. We went to see what they call “street children” and people lost in the precarious life of poverty. We heard many sad stories. People said, “There used to be lots of children on the streets but they had a clean-up before the Earth Summit.” We asked what they meant by a clean-up. “Well, they rounded the kids up and took them a long way away.” That’s what we were told.

A great many people assured us there was a city where all the children had been taken. I would have liked to find it. In some corner of Brazil were about thirty thousand kids who had been cleared off the city streets to prepare for the Earth Summit? Did it mean they were in some centre, or in a special barracks, or in a hospital, bottled up and ready to be sold? What did “taking them away” mean?

A lot of people said they had been killed. “Well, they weren’t any use,” they declared. “Why weren’t they any use?” I asked. “Because they were layabouts, they hung around the streets, and they stole. Some were ill, and they probably weren’t given medicine. They’re bound to be dead.”

I felt so impotent. I didn’t know what to do. I felt guilty just knowing about it.

They were also holding an indigenous people’s conference which I remember rightly was called the Carioca Conference. It was being held simultaneously with the Rio Summit. It aimed to produce an indigenous model for the next decade. I was curious to see what the model was, so I went along. If our houses were like those on show, it would indeed be a gift from God. Perhaps by the end of the decade our people will live in houses like that. They had concrete foundations that made them very stable. They were well built and attractive. Their architects had studied various types of houses in Brazil and had come up with this model house, large and spacious too.

The difference between the two conferences was that the Carioca one was more authentic. Much of the folklore had been organised so that indigenous people performed for each other rather than being put on show as exotica. Even so, there were plenty of dirty blond people with long hair who were pretending to be Indians, or wanted to be indigenous, or sympathised with indigenous peoples. I came to the conclusion that we don’t need handouts or charity. We just want the chance for people themselves to take the decisions that affect their future.

After that I went to an ecumenical conference. Priests from various countries, of varying origins, and with various levels of social commitment, were there. This conference raised my spirits because it dealt with problems rigorously and critically. They looked at environmental issues from a moral point of view.

I stayed on in Brazil a few more days, doing my usual lobbying: cornering people to ask to be allowed to put our case, giving my opinion on issues they were tackling, finding out whether one thing was more important than another, and generally investigating what was going on. I spent still more time consolidating ties with indigenous groups and getting in touch with peasant organisations that were possibly there for the same reasons as me, but just a bit lost.

I often ask myself what the point is of our being here, we who are part of nature too. How will we be able to buy air and water, how will we be able to live? Human beings should think more carefully about the damage they are doing to life. Brazil has a very significant role because of the immense natural wealth it has available to sell to powerful trans-national companies. How much wood did it sell despite the conference? How much bargaining went on? How many deals were signed? And how many economic and political concessions were made before they reached agreement?

I didn’t get answers to a lot of questions I asked that year. There are defining moments in our lives that raise our awareness. It is a different kind of awareness from what you get from books, it comes from direct experience. I was lucky enough to have been to
the Earth Summit because it made me aware that the struggle of indigenous peoples to protect the environment is different from the struggles of other peoples. Ours is not just a passing fancy. We protect our environment, our air and our water by the way we live. It is our very life.

The solution to our problems of poverty is not just more money. It lies in more equal distribution. It may also mean eradicating fundamental inequalities, abolishing privileges and purging the development agencies. At the moment, we have government bodies full of experts with money in their pockets, who believe they hold the key to development. We also have poor peasants who have nothing and whose only value is as a theoretically developable object. This is a situation that has to change.

I have been very critical of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. I think these organisations deal very badly with problems of human-rights violations and the environment. If they didn’t deal with them so badly, the scorched-earth campaign in Guatemala could have been prevented, and new laws governing land distribution introduced. How can the World Bank allow huge areas of land to be used to pasture a few cows, so that land-owning and bourgeois families can spend their weekends killing deer? How can they allow this at a time when millions of people are starving because they have no land? How can it permit huge land concessions that destroy the natural world by trafficking in wood, rare animals and archaeological remains?

I continue to think that the IMF and the World Bank have a direct responsibility for the extreme poverty that plagues the majority of the world’s population. I still hope these institutions can bring about change, not with words, but with actions. There must be forms of economic planning and concrete measures that demonstrate to poor people the good will and generosity of these institutions.

In the absence of such large institutions, indigenous people have developed a spirit of co-operativism. This has been a way of instilling collective responsibility. It is not based solely on economic progress. I defend cooperative values wholeheartedly. It is a system of organisation, a way of life, a culture. Throughout the world, poor people are able to survive because they co-operate. They need to organise to combat social injustice and the unequal distribution of wealth. They need solidarity. Day after day, in their neighbourhoods, villages and municipalities, they face adversity—a brother’s death, a relative’s illness, a child being orphaned—in the tangible way that only the wretched of this earth really know. Charities programme their aid, but poor people contribute twenty-four hours a day. Charities choose which of the poor they want to help, but poor people don’t have a choice. They are born with a caring heart. It is not only indigenous people who have this sense of solidarity.

That’s why I argue that the struggle of indigenous peoples has a purpose—to represent all oppressed people in the world. If we were the only ones, we might act differently, because we have been wise enough to realise what was being done to us. Yet the fact is that poverty does not only affect indigenous peoples. It affects black people, mestizos, and all the world’s dispossessed. Suffering knows no frontiers.

In recent years, in their haste to control indigenous peoples and change the way they live, and perhaps to avoid internal conflicts, international agencies have tried to undermine the value of co-operatives. One of their strategies has been to create phoney NGOs. In our own experience, most of the experts in these NGOs are foreigners from the developed world. If they are not actually foreign, they tend to think and act like foreigners. They come with the idea that indigenous peoples understand nothing about development, and have no projects of their own. They believe that they have to educate them, like a species that can be trained to understand the principles of development. Their arrogance and deep paternalism so blinds them that they are unable to see the positive things and solutions that are already there. This has meant they have made many mistakes. In the end they merely create what
I call “parasites on society.” These are harsh words, I know. Not everyone is like this, but all suffer the same consequences.

We are talking about people who have made careers out of promising development. I had travelled all over the continent and visited most of the countries in the Americas long before I received the Nobel Prize. I know most of the local development agencies. I am not wrong when I say that these bodies undermine the people’s own organisations and leaders, imposing on them groups or organsisms that just serve to channel funds. A lot of money has gone to poor countries without anyone bothering to investigate properly whether it actually reaches the people. In the majority of cases, ridiculous, paternalistic and discriminatory policies are in force. How can you explain the fact that an expert lives in an area for fifteen years and then, when he leaves the community, it is poorer than before he came? What development has he taught?

The problem usually occurs because two different languages are being used. One is the language of the expert who comes from, and thinks in terms of, the First World. He earns an absurd salary; he earns in a month what poor people earn in two years. The other is the pragmatic language of local people. As a result, oppressive situations are re-created. The problem facing these agencies in the coming years will be for them to win back the people’s trust. Poor people are not for sale, our poverty is not for sale. Yet the great craving for development that has been awoken in our people still has to be satisfied.

Government agencies have to realise that our people can contribute knowledge, techniques, wisdom and labour. We could perhaps work on projects together, ones that are more humane, sensitive and respectful of the environment. We might have to find criteria for training experts so there might be a point at which our knowledge and that of the expert could be mutually beneficial. The development experts need our people and we need them. We could both contribute to a more secure future.

I got these ideas about the dialogue between different cultures from having stayed in the houses of many different people all round the world. I always ask a lot of questions on my solidarity tours. I have taken part in countless conferences about development and the eradication of poverty. I have spoken to audiences of hundreds of people.

These last few years have brought hundreds of new experiences. I have earned the affections of many people. I have been given flowers and wonderful hospitality. I don’t have a single bad memory of any of the homes I visited, and I don’t think any have bad memories of me. I tried to be respectful to all my hosts. I respected their food, their homes, their customs. I tried to learn things that were not easy for me.

It was hard for me when I discovered the consumer society, the society of waste: to see food and objects thrown away; to go to a vast supermarket and see all the food for cats and dogs, at incredible prices; to think of all the protein that this food contains, and to know that we never had food of that quality.

I also learned a lot about women and children. It was strange for me to discover about feminism and Islam, and about all the other beliefs I had not known about in the mountains of Chimel. Some of the things I discovered, I just couldn’t understand. I couldn’t understand how a woman could be with another woman. I had never heard of homosexuality. I was like a child who doesn’t understand, who questions and asks. It was hard to understand how people complicated their lives so much. I found lesbianism very strange because it has nothing to do with the way I was brought up. Yet in the end I don’t have to understand it to respect it. Respect for others is bigger than my small world. I have talked to several women friends and they have told me a lot about their lives. Theirs were very unusual circumstances. I have come to realise that each person’s life comes from their own experience and is the result of their own decision.

I have a great friend who is homosexual. I met him in New York. He is openly homosexual. He is a wonderful man, very courteous and refined, and with a simplicity that shows his pureness of heart. I was always very curious, but I never enquired about the details of his life. I was naive about such matters, though I knew it was a controversial subject. I have always thought it is
better to be reticent and not get involved in the whys and wherefores. I was more interested in understanding than in passing judgement. This is perhaps because we indigenous peoples have always been misunderstood, and many people think that our difference is a reason to despise us.

When we fight for our rights, we are called indigenous, but if we take our demands further than indigenous rights, then we are called communists. If we include women’s rights, we are not only indigenous communists but feminists too. They put labels on us to devalue our struggle. This hurts us deeply, so our understanding of others comes from that too. We know that other underprivileged or misunderstood groups face similar problems. They are marginalised like us.

In indigenous societies, homosexuality might exist but it would probably be integrated within our society. Most of our people get married between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, and they lead a very close-knit family life. In recent years, however, some women live alone or some men don’t get married. The indigenous community absorbs differences, be they sexual, mental or physical.

Disabled people in our villages are integrated into the community, that is, they are looked after by their family who treat them as equals. Everybody treats them with respect, because disability is considered normal—because it is Nature’s work too. We are taught from the time when we are very little that making fun of a disabled person brings a curse from Nature upon our heads. It is like offending something sacred.

The same goes for pregnant women. You can’t eat in front of a pregnant woman without offering her some of your food. Otherwise you would hurt her feelings and those of the baby she is carrying. So disabled people and pregnant women are thought of in the same way. In this respect, I think Western society has lost its sense of balance. Human beings are different from animals, there is something more profound in them than in animals. An animal doesn’t care what it does in public, whereas human beings are more discreet. Not for any moral reason but because there are sacred aspects of life which must be given total respect.

Mayan women are very hardworking. The sense of family, the feeling for life, the duality of life, is a philosophical and conceptual principle that governs their existence. Yet the position of women is very unfavourable at present. We too are fighting for better treatment and better conditions. We are fighting to achieve full and effective political participation. This doesn’t mean sterilising women so they can’t have any more children. Our problem is not our children, but having access to science, technology, knowledge, development and the legal system. We want equal opportunities, and to have them within the norms of our own culture.

As we near the end of the century, we can see all too clearly how some categories of human beings have been marginalised. An outrageous example of this is the war in the former Yugoslavia, where it was women who suffered the worst kind of violence. Throughout history women have always been raped in war. The very nature of motherhood, the very basis of femininity, has always been used as a weapon of war. What has happened as part of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia is horrifying and shameful, not only because it is a repetition of crimes committed fifty years ago under the Nazis, but because it has been happening at a time when everyone is preaching development, progress and modernity.

I was deeply disturbed when I realised what was being done to women. Forcing a woman so that she gives birth to the fruit of an act of violence is too terrible to imagine. If we, the women of the world, were to unite and organise, we could break down the frontiers of silence with our cries of condemnation. We could raise the cause of these women as a battle cry that would live forever in our common memory as a gender, as the givers of life and creators of hope.

We must never forget these women. It is almost as if there were a curse on them. Those Muslim mothers will never be accepted by those of their religion because they have been raped by strangers. It is like a human sacrifice. The rape of a Muslim woman is like making a human sacrifice to the Gods of War, Capitalism
and Power. What hope is there for the children when they are born? It is all bound up with the distribution of wealth, individual ambition, men and women's alienation and the abuse of military power.

How would I feel if I were a Muslim woman in that situation? How could I even bear the touch of my own skin? We have to put ourselves in their place. I am astounded that people dare tell them what to do. All those arguments we hear so much of, about whether they have the choice to abort babies conceived as a result of rape. There are world leaders who tell them that abortion is a sin. I have the deepest respect for the determination of these women, and I have to confess that I never agreed with those who begged these women not to have abortions. I respect world leaders, but this time they made my blood run cold. Their message went right against my own ethics, and my experience as a victim. If a woman has been raped, she and she alone knows what this act of cruelty means, and she alone must decide how to deal with it.

When the Spaniards arrived five hundred years ago, they raped our ancestors, our grandmothers, our mothers, to breed a race of mestizos. The result is the violence and cruelty that we are still living with today. The Spaniards used a vile method to create a mixed race, a race of children who doubted their own identity, with their heads on one side of the ocean and their feet on the other. That is what happened to our culture.

Admiring other cultures is fine, but the imposition of one culture on another is not. Mestizo society in America is not the result of a process of understanding within that society. I don’t mean that the mixing of races is a bad thing; it is just that cultures must learn to live together. Intellectuals like José Carlos Mariátegui defied the rules imposed on them by a society that devalued their roots and their reality. People like these make history, because they are part of our identity as a continent. Their ideas and their struggles have transcended society. The past cannot just be about myths. It must be a source of strength for the present and the future. All the good things that have come out of our continent, even the ideas that we once regarded as superficial and useless, must be re-examined. We have to blend our two cultures, the ancient and the modern. We should not be trying to eradicate anything or anybody because we think one is better. We should be trying to find a way of living together, combining the ancient culture of our peoples with the culture of the colonisers. That is the strength of our American identity, the privilege of having roots that go back for thousands of years.

The crises that a society goes through are also part of its history. They show us the way forward, they shape our culture. You can’t go back and change history, nor can you make it an excuse for not changing the future. We can make the future different, we can make it better.

Looking back, I think perhaps it was a mistake to turn the Quincentenary celebrations into a kind of battlefield. Many people want to return to the old Inca and Mayan ways of five hundred years ago. It is impossible to do that! How can we go back and be the same? Indigenous tradition itself says that time is long and wide, and it has its own signs. Each sign has a different meaning, it may mean the time has come for a generation of great leaders or great achievements. That is a sign of the time and you cannot go against it. On the other hand, it is wrong to simply praise the victors. We should accept that things can always be improved.

Many people believe that indigenous peoples have been no more than spectators over the past five hundred years, that we are the conquered people. It is true that we have been the victims of racism, discrimination and oppression. We know exactly what colonisation means. It means terrible exploitation and humiliation. But people should remember that indigenous peoples built great cities with our own hands, we created the most wonderful works of art with the sweat of our brows. All were carefully designed and built in our own distinctive way. We have contributed so much to the richness of our peoples in America that it is impossible to say where indigenous culture begins and ends.

Culture isn’t pure, it is dynamic, it is a kind of dialectic, it is something that progresses and evolves. As for purity, who can determine what that means? I don’t think our peoples were ever
passive bystanders. The advances made have just as much been ours, for we contributed to them, just as we have contributed to the enormous ethnic diversity. I think the whole idea of purity is damaging, it leads to sectarianism, intolerance, segregation and racism.

A lot of different attitudes emerged during the Quincentenary. Some of our brothers believed that the purity of the Mayan, Inca and Aztec cultures still exists, others proclaimed that the times favoured the ancient cultures. Then there are those who believe that human destiny is intercultural, that unity lies in recognising differences. I believe that the revival of ancient values does not benefit indigenous peoples alone.

Our _ajq'ij_ had the right idea. They didn't argue over whether our ancestors were better or worse, whether one person was purer than another, whether _ladinos_ were purer than us, whether _ladinos_ should live like Indians. They taught us that war destroyed indigenous dignity and unity. They didn’t say if you belong to our tribe you are pure, and if you don’t belong, you’re not. They didn’t waste their time on nonsense like that. The _ajq'ij_ were simple men, and wise at the same time. They said, 'Now is the time for the rain to fall and make the seeds grow on our soil and make our culture flourish, so let there be no more discord.' They told us when the rains would come and when there would be light, to light our path. This light would make us recognise our identity, recognise who we are, make us think in a different way. When one cycle is completed, then we are in a new cycle.

This is very closely bound up with the issue of the environment that seems to be one of the main themes in this new cycle. The most important thing about the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was that it generated debate everywhere, from the indigenous communities to the most elegant salons. I attended countless women’s conferences and youth conferences. Young people are beginning to care much more about the environment. People are becoming more environmentally conscious, and when there is awareness of a problem, there is positive action and solutions are found. Sometimes this sort of thing may just be a fashion, and this can prove negative. But I think the past few years have been very fruitful as far as environmental awareness is concerned.

Indigenous peoples have always cared about the environment, we learned about it from our elders. Now we can make a much bigger and better contribution. We have to say to the world, “Listen, we want to have our say, because we love Mother Earth and we love life.” I think the future looks good, but we must remember that the fruit only comes when we have had time to sow the seeds and bring in the harvest. It may be some time before many of us see how the world reacts. Maybe a lot of what is being done now is simply reclaiming the living seeds. It is these living seeds that will germinate and flower again.