

HISPANICS IN NORTH AMERICA

This workshop provided an introduction to a theology from the perspective of Hispanics in the United States. Roberto Goizueta of Aquinas Center at Emory University dealt with some fundamental issues of method. Orlando Espín of the Catholic Center at the University of Florida, Gainesville, presented an example of soteriology from a Hispanic perspective. The discussion centered on the pastoral situation.

I. PLURALISM AND METHOD IN UNITED STATES HISPANIC THEOLOGY

Goizueta maintains that the underlying attitude and ideology of most academics and theologians in the United States is "pluralistic." Openness to outsiders, to perspectives other than the dominant white, middle-class Anglo-American ones, is taken for granted. This openness, however, can become a kind of "luxury of the intellectual life" isolating the academy from historical struggles at which people's lives are at stake.

A dilemma confronts the academy within the context of this prevailing liberal tradition. Pluralism has a tendency to reduce and relativize truth claims. There is a difference between being given a forum (being allowed to speak) and truly being heard. The leveling tendency of this kind of pluralism creates an illusion of openness which may actually mask the interests of the dominant Euro-American culture.

Goizueta gives the example of religious studies and theology departments, seminaries and theological centers which hire adjunct professors to teach "ethnic" or feminist courses. The curriculum is usually not impacted and the professors, being adjunct, have little influence on core methodologies and areas of study being advanced in the curriculum. The heart of the academic program continues to reflect Euro-American assumptions, interests, approaches and tastes.

The autonomous academy in the United States can fall prey to authoritarianism masked in a kind of "pluralistic dialogue" whose rules have been predetermined by the ideology of liberal individualism. An authentic pluralism requires that the marginalized be included in the very process of defining the rules, defining the very meaning of pluralism. Openness is the goal not the beginning of pluralism. So giving a voice to Hispanics is not the end of the affair. It is just a beginning with implications that go to the heart of the theology to be produced.

The "option for the poor" is the name given this epistemological orientation. A U.S. Hispanic theology begins with a commitment to truths which arise within the *particularity* of the Hispanic cultures and social contexts. They have implications that are universal going well beyond the Hispanic communities. Liberal

individualism, moreover, understands universality to be the sum of the particulars. The method Goizueta is suggesting here understands universality is revealed *through* the particular. The universal implications are discovered by entering more deeply into the particular. This understanding of pluralism is predicated not on ideological openness but on practical solidarity. Pluralism unhinged from its ethical-political foundations and consequences becomes "the perfect ideology for the modern bourgeois mind," to use Simone de Beauvoir's expression.

What is at stake then in this methodology that seeks to give a voice to analogous theological voices is respect for the otherness of marginalized people while appreciating the universal claims imbedded in the particularities of these cultures. This is a way of practical political affirmation of the dialectic between otherness and identity or particularity and universality.

Goizueta tries to demonstrate that the option for the poor is the methodological foundation of an authentic analogical pluralism, one that will avoid both the imperialism of univocal theologies and the illusory pluralism of equivocal theologies. He recommends this approach as especially appropriate for as U.S. Hispanic theology.

II. THE CULTURAL PROJECTION OF CONTENT: THE CASE OF SOTERIOLOGY

Orlando Espín gave an example of a soteriology from the point of view of Hispanics. He began with this statement: "For most of its history Christian theology has been created within the European or North Atlantic cultural milieu, thus producing theological themes, categories, methods and pastoral practices that have little to do with the life and 'salvation' experiences of most of the world's peoples." Experiences of God that are not expressed in the dominant categories were held to be "primitive, insufficient, non-theological, popular" and not up to the normative standards of the European and North Atlantic model. Espín believes that United States Hispanics have much in common with third world people in regard to the theological expression of their experiences.

Christians develop their understanding of what it means to be saved from their own cultural and societal milieu. Salvation, then, is first conceived of in terms of political, economic, cultural and social reality not "religiously." What people mean by "sin," for instance, has more to do with real evils experienced than with a biblical text or theological definition. But the experience of sin and limitation differs widely from European or North American middle class contexts to third world contexts. Sin in the case of those with power has to do with matters of private morality and individual rights. Salvation then has to do with the individual, with his or her consolation, divine confirmation, psychological fulfillment and ultimately with "the eternal preservation of privilege."

If a group does not participate in the power structure and is at the "bottom of the socio-economic ladder" this group will tend to view sin in communal, political, justice and economic terms. This group will perceive salvation in categories that imply struggle for change, liberation from oppression. Often this group experiences failure or frustration in bringing about change and may attempt to achieve through symbol and ritual what it feels it cannot attain in historical reality. The

point here is that salvation is not a univocal concept. It is a culturally constructed and socially projected concept.

Espín then turns to U.S. Hispanics and provides the outline of a soteriology reflective of their experience. One must begin with their experience of social evil. Then it is necessary to address the issue of how God saves. The bible suggests a certain understanding of the divine motives and options. God loves all but the poor with a certain predilection. The important question is, In favor of whom does God act? The gospel seems to indicate that the poor and marginal are of special concern to God. The poverty and rejection of Jesus was the medium. So it is from this "social location" and not from any other that salvation is offered to all. Hence the "reign of God," the core of Jesus' message and ministry, was not and is not merely or even mainly a "religious" category but an active, social, political reality with which God associates and, more amazingly, with which salvation itself is identified.

The discussion that followed the two presentations focused on the concrete pastoral and ministerial contexts of U.S. Hispanics. The question was asked regarding the success of basic ecclesial communities in the evangelization of U.S. Hispanics. These communities are viewed as appropriate contexts for doing theology from the perspective of the people's experience. While there are many good examples of basic ecclesial communities of Hispanics, they seem not to have been as successful as some may have hoped or as the literature on the subject might lead one to think. It was suggested that perhaps the highly mobile, urban character of Hispanic communities in the U.S. requires that other approaches also be taken in the effort to convoke the people and provide contexts for Christian community. Opportunities for doing theology with and of U.S. Hispanics will present themselves in a variety of contexts as pastoral workers adapt the basic ecclesial community to the North American context.

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