

A CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY: THE SITUATION OF HISPANIC AMERICANS

"A people twice conquered; twice colonized; twice oppressed"

It is a distinct pleasure for me to be here with you discussing the situation of the Hispanic Americans of the United States in the context of the theme of the convention: "Catholic Theology in Social and Political Context." Father J. Bryan Hehir has just presented a very incisive and clear report of the shifting relations of power in the global community. In a way, what is happening among the nations of the world, is also happening within the United States among various groups of citizens. Today, I am here to report to you on the situation of the Hispanic Americans in our country.

I. STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

According to the reports of the 1970 Census, there were 9,000,000 Spanish surnamed persons in the United States. This figure was challenged by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF) and it was proven that the actual figure was actually closer to 12,000,000. This figure was still questioned by many in various sectors of society and in samples taken in various areas, it was discovered that a more accurate figure was actually 27% higher. Thus, by 1973, the number of Spanish surnamed persons was estimated at 15,240,000. If you add to this the 3,000,000 persons who are here without legal documentation, commonly called "illegals," a total which is estimated between 1,500,000 and 5,000,000 by officials in the Immigration Department and remembering that this figure cannot be counted in the census reports since they would not fill in the regular census data, then one would have to conclude that there are probably about 18,240,000 persons in the United States who would be identified with the Hispanic Americans.

Of this figure, 57% are of Mexican Origin, 16% of Puerto Rican, 7% of Cuban, 7% are of Central or South American origin and 13% of Spanish and other Spanish speaking countries. The states which have the largest concentrations of Hispanic Americans are: California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and Mich-

igan. The large metropolitan areas of New York City, Miami, and Chicago are rapidly becoming Spanish speaking. Cardinal Cody recently reported to a committee of bishops and seminary rectors that 68 parishes in Chicago conducted services in Spanish. Los Angeles with 2,500,000 Mexican Americans, is considered the largest Mexican city outside of Mexico City itself.

Not only are the Spanish speaking in large concentrations in these areas, but there are indications that the numbers will continue to increase. It is estimated that by 1980, there will be five million Spanish speaking persons in California alone. In the diocese of Dallas, which has only about 12% Spanish speaking, the bishop recently reported that in the last three years, 59% of the baptisms had been in families of Spanish surnames.

This rapid increase of the Spanish speaking in the United States is due to several factors. First of all, even though families are smaller, they will never accept zero population as an ideal and will usually like to have several children. Thus, there will be a natural increase of those already in this country. The other major factor is that with the rapid demographic explosion in Latin America coupled with the image of the "good life" in the United States and the dehumanizing misery which exists in Latin America, migrations into the United States are going to continue—whether legally or illegally, as long as the present situation continues. Those in misery will go through anything to seek out a more human existence.

The official Catholic directory of 1975 lists the total number of Catholics as 48,702,000. Of the 18,240,000 Spanish speaking persons, 80% are considered to be Catholics which means we have about 14,500,000 million Spanish speaking Catholics in the United States, or that approximately 30% of all U.S. Catholics are Spanish speaking.

It might be of further interest to note that of the twenty somewhat Spanish speaking countries in the world which are listed in the World Almanac of 1975, the United States ranks fifth in the line-up according to population. We have more Spanish speaking persons in the United States than there are in Peru, Cuba, Ecuador, and even Chile.

With such a high number of Spanish speaking persons, it seems evident to those of us working with the Spanish speaking of the United States, that we cannot look to the other Spanish speaking countries of the world to solve our pastoral questions or produce our catechetical,

liturgical and theological materials, or even to supply us with personnel and formation programs. It is the United States Catholic Church which has to respond to the pastoral needs of the Spanish speaking Catholics of this country.

In order to offer an appropriate and adequate pastoral response to the needs of the Spanish speaking of this country, it will be necessary to make a careful study of the actual situation. This will have to be done both from a historical perspective so that we can see the gradual forces, events and circumstances which have been shaping the personality and actual situation of the Spanish speaking and from a sociological perspective so that we can take a good look at the actual situation as it is today. It is my growing conviction that we cannot understand nor appreciate the actual situation unless we see it in the light of its historical becoming. It is only in the light of history that we will be able to appreciate the present day struggles and suffering of the Spanish speaking people of the United States.

II. THE HISTORICAL BECOMING

For the purpose of this presentation, I will present some brief and important historical considerations. The statements will be telescopic and condensed for, if they were to be fully developed, it would take entire volumes. Furthermore, I will limit myself in the presentation to the development of the Mexican American for to do otherwise would be to step out of the field of my own expertise and also because in comparing our historical process to that of the Puerto Ricans and to the Cubans, we discover that although there are differences in dates and geographical settings, there are many parallel situations especially in the key moments which have marked our historical development which has brought us to the present moment. One final point: I will divide this historical reflection into three parts which are divided by the two key moments when we entered into a different era, that is the two key moments in which we were forced to begin a new historical time. It was at each one of these two historical moments that we became a conquered people who were subsequently colonized and oppressed by the dominant group.

1. Pre-Hispanic America

The ancestors of one of our roots, the indigenous or native American, has been here and developing for many thousands of years. Some

say 30,000, others 50,000, and others are beginning to say that actually we have been here and developing much longer than 50,000 years. Regardless, of the exact number of years, or even of the way we came to this land, or even just where we came from, we have been here for a very long time. During this period, we have been developing our personality, customs, traditions and most of all our own cosmovision not only of the world but even of the beyond. Even though many superficial differences can be found among the various groups of this land, it is my growing conviction that behind these superficial differences, there is a profound unity in our fundamental categories of thought which together make our cosmovision.

Some of the basic concepts which seem common to the native citizens of pre-colonized America included a deep sense of the sacred. A strong belief in the creating process of the Great Spirit gave them a sense of the sacred in all things. Because a thing is, it is an expression of the creative force which brought it into being and which sustains it in being. They were not pantheists, for they did not identify reality with the Great Spirit, but they did conceive of reality as reflective of the presence of the Great Spirit.

In the light of this, they saw the most basic elements of reality as sacramental—in some mysterious way reflective of the tensions of life which are found in all reality. Thus air, water, fire, earth, and spirit were considered as special signs of the divine presence. Earth had a very prominent place since it was seen as “mother earth” out of which we receive everything that we have. It is out of the womb of mother earth that things come into existence.

For the indigenous world, human communication did not take place through the spoken proposition or the abstract statement. Truth for our native ancestors can only be communicated through the symbol, the image, the gesture, the story, poetry, music and dance. It was the natural expressions of the spirit in man which were alone capable of communicating complete truth. Furthermore, in speaking about what we today would call saving truth, our ancestors would tell it through flowers and songs, for only through flower and song could persons transcend the existing moment and enter into contract with the ultimate who alone was absolute truth. Propositional truth in the sense in which we in the Western World have known it would be impossible to even conceive of in native categories of thought.

When we analyze some of the key concepts which make up our cosmovision, we discover that behind similar words, there is a totally distinct meaning. Such fundamental words as world, person, property, ownership, law, time, wisdom, health, family, war and even communication itself have totally distinct meanings than they do in the cosmovision of the European world.

By the early 1500's there were in America well developed civilizations and urban centers. The Incas had been great communitarian empire builders with well developed systems of highways, communications, and redistribution of goods to insure that everyone would participate equally in the goods of the empire. The Mayas, who were already in decline, had been great scientists, thinkers and city builders. The Aztecs, the Romans of America, were in the process of building a great empire. The historian who accompanied Cortez into Mexico City writes that it was the most magnificent city he had ever seen—far greater than the great cities of Europe.

In many ways, pre-European America was, at least in certain sectors, far more developed than Europe. They were "underdeveloped" in one very important aspect: in the art of warfare. Christian Europe was much more skilled in the art and science of warfare and thus had an important advantage over our indigenous ancestors.

2. The First Conquest

In the year 1519, Cortez landed with his expedition on the coast of Mexico. As it is important to understand the personality of pre-Hispanic America, so it is likewise to understand the characteristics of the Spain of the early 1500's. Spain was quite different from the rest of Europe in many aspects. First of all, Spain is geographically situated at the very frontier of Europe almost touching the coast of Africa. It was in this frontier country where most of the Moslem wars took place. For eight hundred years the Spaniards were warring with the Moslems. They had no choice but to become a fighting people, highly individualistic, and proud of the fact that they had been especially chosen by God to fight against the pagans. It was only in 1492 when the final crusade was won at Granada that the Moorish domination of Spain came to an end. During this eight hundred year presence, even though there was much fighting going on, there was also a natural *mestizaje* (the Spanish word a complete mixture of two peoples: blood, traditions, customs, mental-

ity, etc.) developing. Another factor which was very important was the Jewish presence and the Jewish conversions to Christianity. Many of the great theological thinkers of that era came from Jewish heritage and therefore were very conscious of saving history as an on-going process. While the secular life of Spain was very influenced by the humanistic renaissance of that period, small significant groups within the Church were seeking a return to the evangelical simplicity of the early Christian community. There was in effect a pre-reformation renewal movement which was quite active in many sectors of Spain and of Europe. The Brethren of the Christian Schools of the low countries, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Thomas More of England, and the faculty of the University of Alcalá were all to play key roles in the early evangelization of America. It was out of the ranks of the avant garde reformers that the first missionaries came to the Americas. Many were quite influenced by the prophecies of Joachim de Flore and were convinced that the Church of Europe was finished. It was so corrupt that it had indeed come to an end. Thus, the discovery of America marked for them the opportunity for a new beginning or, as they put it, the beginning of the final age. The middle age had come to an end and now the final age would begin in its fullness. Thus, the term "new world" indicated not just a new discovery, but truly a new and final moment in saving history.

The military conquest, as every military conquest tends to be, was cruel. There were massacres, murders, rape, robbery and wholesale destruction. The missionaries came into immediate clash with the conquistadores for their atrocities and inhuman treatment of the native. The defeat of the Aztec nation was in effect the defeat of the native peoples. For the indigenous nation, defeat was not only a military one, but a theological one, as their gods had lost out. They no longer had a reason to live and therefore simply wanted to die. Evidence of this collective trauma of the people can be found in the chants of the conquest as recorded by the native historians. December 13, 1521 was the day of the final battle. It was on this date that an era came to an end, and another one started. During the next few years, many efforts were made by the missionaries to convert the natives. Yet the barriers were too great. It was not only a language barrier, but the barrier of the "conquistador group" trying to evangelize the conquered group—like the priests of the Roman Empire trying to evangelize the "little ones" of the conquered nations, or the U.S. military chaplain trying to evan-

gelize the survivors of Mai Lai—an evangelical contradiction. At the formal level, attempts were made between the Spanish theologians and the Aztec theologians, but to no avail. The Aztec theologians would listen attentively, but then proceed to show the fallacies of the Christian apologetics. At the “informal level” missionaries like Pedro de Gante decided in effect to become like little children by playing with the children and being with them most of the time thus being reborn into the indigenous way of life. Within a few years of the conquest, Pedro de Gante had a school for young people where he prepared the youngsters to put on evangelical plays in the language and thought patterns of the people. It was thus that a deep evangelizing process was started and the deep seeds of a truly evangelical Christianity were planted.

The missionaries quickly developed well planned evangelical programs utilizing the music, songs, images and total way of life of the people. Even though they destroyed the material temples of the indigenous religions, they did not destroy the living temples of their customs and sacrifices, but rather gave them a new Christian meaning. They were thus in keeping with the best of the missionary practice of the Church. When Pope Gregory the Great sent Boniface to convert the German peoples, he carefully instructed him to respect German traditions and religiosity and to transform them not by eliminating them but by bringing to their way of life the light of the gospel and thus give it a new meaning. I am sure that if we had a record of the instructions given to other great missionaries to the various churches of Europe, we would find similar instructions. Such was the case in Mexico and thus not only were the individual persons evangelized, but the people, their language and their customs, and even their land was evangelized. It is my conviction in studying the catechumenate in the history of the Church that nowhere else in history since the beginning of the primitive Church has there been such an excellent program on evangelization and ongoing catechesis than in the case of Mexico. The problems of an excessive sacramentalization came only after 1572 when the problems of the post-reformation Church began to be imported into the new Church in Mexico. Nevertheless, individual persons, a people and a land had been truly evangelized, converted and baptized in the early 1500's.

It was on December 12, 1531 when the Virgin appeared in what had been one of the most sacred sites of pre-Hispanic America that the new Church of the Americas was truly born. Tepeyac, the site of the

apparition, was the principal sanctuary of the virgin mother-goddess of the native pantheon who was known as Tonantzin, which means "our most reverend mother." Thus in her apparition, the indigenous world saw the resurrection of their ancient world—it was not simply a return of the old, for the old was finished. Yet, out of the ashes of the old, a new would arise. There would be continuity, yet transcendence of meaning. She had not come with the conquistador, but had arisen out of the native soil. She was the pure, holy and unviolated mother of the new Church, in the new world, of a new people.

Mexico had been conquered by Spain, but now, an Indian maiden through an Indian messenger commanded the conquistador in the person of the bishop and told him what was to be done. The conquistador not only fell to his knees in the presence of the Lady, but freely obeyed her command.

A proper appreciation of these two key events: the conquest in 1521 and the beginning of the spiritual reconquest in 1531 is indispensable to an understanding of the Mexican personality of today.

The growth and the development of the Mexican people and nation would be a long and painful process, for it was the process of development of a new-born people. Mexico would not be a transplanted Europe, but it was indeed a new people born out of conquest and suffering. In the midst of the struggles of the slowly developing Mexican nation, another event would take place which in effect would mark the beginning of Mexican American history as a new era of space and time in human history.

3. The Second Conquest

Coinciding with the struggles of independence and self government within the Mexican nation, there was within the United States of North America the great expansionist movement which was nourished and theologically justified by the divine manifesto mentality of that period. As the Spaniards had been convinced they were the "chosen people" to defend and spread Catholicism, so were the people of the United States equally convinced they were the chosen people, divinely elected to take the way of life of the United States through the Americas. In the early 1800's, groups of Anglo Americans from the North were already beginning to settle in the frontiers of Mexico, that is, in what we know today as Texas, California, New Mexico, and Colorado. They viewed the His-

panic Americans as backward, superstitious, lazy, and worst of all, Catholic and Spanish speaking. Early novelists of that period had already begun to establish and perpetuate many of the present day negative stereotypes of the Hispanic Americans.

The independence of Texas in the 1830's, the American-Mexican war of the 1840's and the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848 marked the birth and beginning of a new people—the Mexican American. The birth and beginnings are similar to those of Spanish-Mexico: violence, clash, misunderstanding of the native people by the dominant power group of in-coming migrants, overpowering of the natives by the newcomers with the subsequent embitterment and loss of dignity of the native inhabitants of the land. On the other hand, the new conquistadores possessed the feeling of superiority, of righteousness and of divine predilection which prevailed over their whole way of life. Anything non-Anglo was considered backward, uncivilized and stupid. Laws were quickly passed so that no one would do unto them what they had done unto others. Groups such as the Texas Rangers were organized to insure law and order which in effect meant to keep the Mexican down and to protect the new conquistadores. Sadly enough, the Church of this period did not perceive this serious problem and acted out of the mentality of the conquering group and has thus participated in the conquering, colonizing, and oppression of the Mexican American. The North American clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, have gone along with the societal acceptance of all the negative stereotypes and have seen Latin American Catholicism as a somewhat pagan Christianity with a merely Christian veneer without questioning its own pagan elements and popular religious expressions that may or may not have anything to do with Christianity.

Poverty was institutionalized in the Southwest because a poor class was necessary to insure a cheap labor force which was seen as necessary for the economic growth and development of the farming and ranching industry of the area. Since slavery had been officially abolished, a new and indirect form of slavery had to be instituted to serve the business needs of the area.

This is a brief background which might serve as a stage setting to help us see how we have come to the present moment. The present day oppression and poverty did not just happen, much of it was well planned and intended and the sadness is that there are many today who would still like to perpetuate it.

III. THE ACTUAL SITUATION TODAY

Economically, a great majority of our people are still living at below the official poverty level. The mean family income is estimated at \$7,600 as compared to \$10,500 for the average United States citizen. The structures have been against unionization and therefore the people have been left defenseless against the large enterprises. Many of the people cannot send their children to school because they do not have the proper clothing or because the children have to work to help support the family. The Spanish speaking have been systematically excluded from many positions, especially those of management and administration. Our people are often the victims of loan sharks who charge exorbitant interest rates which often bind a person for life for a small loan of \$200 or \$300 to be repaid on the basis of \$5 per week—they will keep on paying and each year, yet they will owe more than before because of the multiplying interest rates. Home loans are often arranged so that it will be impossible for the person to meet payments and thus will eventually lose the home and whatever they have paid on it. Prices are often higher for the very same product in the poor areas of the city and the rent rate is incredibly high.

The people are victims of a system which pays them below the normal rate and then charges much higher prices for the normal human needs in today's society; it gives the working person few if any of the working protection of the average employer.

Educationally, a very high percentage do not finish high school, few enter college, and hardly any enter graduate schools. There are many factors to consider in this phenomenon. The fact that the family needs the school age child at home to earn a living is one of the factors. Other realities include lack of proper clothing, poor educational system, and even worse, educational systems which make no attempt to have the child learn; rather, the student is simply passed from one grade to the next. Thus, the child finishes school but he has not learned anything because he has not been taught anything. School districts in the Spanish speaking areas often have a far lower budget per child than a school in the Anglo side of town or district. This system insures a class of uneducated people who will work for low wages and not rock the boat of the establishment.

Similarly, IQ tests have also worked against our people as it has been shown more and more conclusively that these tests do not really assess intelligence ability, but simply the degree of aculturation the child has to middle-class, white, Protestant values. Yet, these tests have been used to label our children as slow learners or retarded.

Language has also been a barrier since it has kept not only the child from learning, but the parent as well, who may not speak English, and who is thus inhibited from participating in discussions with the teachers and school authorities. The school authorities on their part have presumed the Spanish speaking parents were not interested.

Because our way of life and our value systems have not been understood or appreciated, they have often been labeled as backward. Even when they have not been labeled, by the simple fact they have not been spoken about in the classroom, this omission has in effect told the growing child that these foods, these customs, this way of life are not legitimate and therefore have no right to exist.

Children have often been labeled as lazy because they fall asleep or do not want to participate in physical activities. There is no realization that sometimes these children have gone to bed without supper and have gone to school in the morning without breakfast. Try to do a good day's work without nutritional meals and you will share in the daily experience of many of our school children who come from poor homes.

All of this has had serious implications in the seminaries and religious life of our country. Today we have very few native Spanish speaking vocations. It is not because our people have not wanted to serve, but it is rather because the system has discouraged us or even kept us out. Many were told they could be lay brothers or kitchen sisters, but not priests or teaching sisters. There were no efforts to make up for the deficiencies of the educational system of our society and less effort to appreciate a different life-style. One had to accept the WASP model. Some seminaries and religious communities of men and women, until recent times, have not looked too kindly on accepting native born Spanish speaking vocations.

Another result of this is that there is also a notable absence of the Spanish speaking in the professional, intellectual and university communities of our society. If one were to look into this very meeting of the CTSA, which in many ways is similar to the many other meetings of

priests and religious of this country, one would have to conclude that it is a white racist society, for there is no visible presence of browns, reds, blacks, or yellows.

Migrations are another factor. As long as the imbalance of life continues between the United States and Latin Americans, migrations will continue. They are not criminals who are coming to this country but, as is usually the case with migrations, it is the poorest of the poor who are risking everything including their very lives simply to find a more human existence. Yet the inhuman treatment that our "illegals" receive in this country is scandalous. In some cities, the immigration department has conducted raids on homes or assembly places and demanded documentation of citizenship of those present—could you prove at this moment that you are a citizen? In a way, many of the Nazi tactics against the Jews are actively in use in the United States today. It is not a simple question to resolve, but the Church has to be involved with these "little ones" who have no chance of speaking for themselves. It is my own personal conviction that there is no greater area of suffering today than the plight of the millions of "illegals" which are found in our country today.

The Church has not been without blame in this sad state of affairs. Without question the Church has accepted the negative stereotypes of the Spanish speaking society without really becoming one with the people so that they could be known as they are and not as they have been painted to be by those who conquered them. Assignments to the "Mexican" parish have usually been considered punishment areas or areas to send the persons who could not get along anywhere else. Vocations were not encouraged and often discouraged. One could become a brother, but most probably not a priest. Many of the converts to Protestantism have started at the Catholic rectory because of the inhuman treatment which has often been dished out to our people. Because our religious traditions were not known or appreciated, they were labeled as superstitious and were taken away from us. We were told that if we wanted to pray and worship, we should learn the language of the country, as if God knew only English.

Since the Church for the most part remained silent during all the suffering and oppression of the past, the people have seen the Church as

a mother who was purposely too busy with keeping the house clean, the windows washed, the walls painted, etc., so as not to notice the constant rape of her daughter by her own husband and other friends and family. Prophetic voices like that of Archbishop Robert E. Lucey of San Antonio were few and far between. Today our bishops are becoming a strong voice in helping the cries of the poor and oppressed that are heard at all levels of our society; however, we still do not hear the voices of the religious superiors and much less the voices of the religious thinkers of our day. They still seem to be too busy with household affairs to want to notice the rape of one of their own.

IV. OUR REQUEST TO THE THEOLOGIANs

When I mentioned to friends in the Spanish speaking communities around the country that I would be speaking to the Catholic Theological Society of America, they asked me to bring three specific requests to you. We need you to exercise the ministry of theologizing in and out of today's real world. We do not want you to leave your field, but we need you to truly exercise it in the spirit of the dynamics of the Judeo-Christian tradition of biblical times.

Hence we ask you not to speak down to us, but truly to join our ranks. Become one with the little ones of today's society. Join us in our sufferings, our struggles, and our *movimientos* so that, having become one with those of us at the bottom, you may exercise your ministry by unveiling and denouncing the demonic powers which are present and at work in the invisible structures which are oppressing people in today's world. Sin is very much present in our world, often disguised behind very accepted and dignified institutional practices. We need you to uncover it and to show everyone that this is the devil at work in today's society. We need you to question with the light of the gospel some of the success models which are commonly accepted today and yet are the source of enslavement and destruction of many. Finally, we need you to help us announce the kingdom as it is gradually and painfully coming into being through the creation of new structures which hopefully will be ever more human and humanizing.

We are grateful for your interest, we look forward to your contribution in our common struggle in the building of the Kingdom.¹

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¹ED. NOTE: Because of the special nature of this topic and the need to have the problems understood by theologians, we list here the selected bibliography provided by Father Elizondo: Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle for Liberation* (San Francisco: Cantfield Press, 1972); Virgil Elizondo, *Anthropological and Psychological Characteristics of the Mexican American* (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1974); Virgil Elizondo, *Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1975); Virgil Elizondo, *Religious Practices of the Mexican American and Catechesis* (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1975); Bishop Patrick Flores, et al., *Coleccion Hispanica, Volume I, HOPE—Evangelization out of Oppression* (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1975); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970); Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1973); Gustavo Gutierrez, *Praxis of Liberation and Christian Faith* (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1974); Jacques Lafaye, *Quetzalcoatl el Guadalupe* (France: Gillimard, 1974); John Linskens, *Scripture Today Series 2* vols. (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1974-5); Juan Mateos, *Beyond Conventional Christianity* (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1974); Matt S. Meier and Feliciano Rivera, *The Chicanos: A History of Mexican Americans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972); Charles Reilly, Joao Pinto, et al., *Collection of "Liberación" and "Conscientización" Papers* (San Antonio, Texas: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1974); Nathaniel Wagner and Marsha J. Haug, *Chicanos: Social and Psychological Perspectives* (St. Louis: Mosby Co., 1971).