

THE HISPANIC CHURCH IN THE USA: A LOCAL ECCLESIOLOGY

*Not a separate Church . . . but a challenge
for a more Catholic expression of the one Church*

INTRODUCTION

Six years ago it was my privilege to address this assembly on the topic of: "A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of the Hispanic American." At that time, I attempted to trace the main elements of the history and the actual situation of the approximately eighteen million Hispanic Americans of the United States. I am still grateful for the positive response of those who participated in that session. Yet I am even more grateful and encouraged by the fact that now you have invited us—the Hispanic family—to reflect on the topic of "The Hispanic Church of the USA: a Local Ecclesiology." The title itself is indicative of the great strides that have been made during the last few years.

Conscious of the ambiguity and debate concerning the meaning of the terms "particular" and "local" church, I would like to simply specify the use of the terms in this presentation. Particular refers to the diocesan church centered on its visible bond of unity—the bishop. Local refers to the church which has emerged out of the common historical and cultural experience of a specific believing group.

Regardless of the use of the terms the presumption seems to be that the particular and local church are always made up of the same people, speaking the same language and sharing a common historical and cultural experience. Today, this is not always the case.

The specific problematic which is the subject matter of this presentation might best be stated in the following questions: What happens when a significant portion of one local church becomes a part of a particular church which has a total different expression of local church?

During the last decade the United States Catholic Church, as the United States Protestant Churches, have discovered the Hispanics. But even more significant is the fact that the Hispanics are discovering the Church. Hispanics are rapidly becoming aware that *we are church*. The ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium* and of *Ad gentes* with the emphasis on the birth and development of the local churches, the social teachings with their emphasis on justice, the new pastoral and theological breakthroughs of Latin America and

the rise of the minority movements in the United States have all blended together in calling us forth to new ecclesial life. This new life is still to be studied, charted, evaluated and proclaimed. There is definitely a new *ecclesia* in the making; it is now our task and our challenge to explore the corresponding ecclesiology.

John Paul II stated in Puebla that the Church is born out of our response in faith to Christ . . . but on the other hand, we are born of the Church. This is an insightful statement and analogy. In this simple image, John Paul II captures the essence of the ongoing birth and development of new churches—as it was in the very beginning of Christianity and as it continues to be today. The child that is born certainly carries the life of the parents, but it is not a mere prolongation or extension of the parents.

Like any child which is born, the new churches will be historically conditioned and culturally expressed. This ongoing inculturation gives rise to new communities which, without ceasing, to be who they are culturally, are nevertheless transformed from within by the power of the Spirit. Far from being a deviation from the tradition of the Church, this ongoing process is in complete fidelity to the way of the Incarnation (AG 22). It is not a threat to the Catholicity of the Church but rather a means of enhancing its innermost universality (LG 13). It is not a weakening of the unity, but a strengthening of the fellowship of churches which together in the richness of their diversity radiate the true unity of the Spirit.

Because of the very nature of the Church as it stems from the communitarian living of the Gospel in historical and concrete situations, ecclesiology as the Church's study and expression of its self-understanding will always be historical and contemporary. As such it has two essential sources which must be in constant dialogue with one another. The first comprises the historical sources: Scripture, tradition and the teachings of the Church in the documents which reflect Church life as it was understood in that specific moment of history and in that particular cultural milieu. These documents bring out the nature and mission of the mother churches as they themselves came to be and to understand themselves in relation to their historical cultural milieu. The second comprises the contemporary sources: the actual historical-cultural life of the local church of which we are a part today.

In this presentation, while not ignoring the importance of the historical sources, I will concentrate on the contemporary which are the immediate interest of this presentation.

To understand the rapidly developing Hispanic Church of the United States it is important to situate it historically so as to appreciate its originality and specific genius. It will also be necessary to see it relationally in reference to the established mainline

U.S. Catholic Church in order to appreciate the present day tensions and possibilities. I will begin with a brief presentation of some of the characteristics of the U.S. Catholic Church as perceived by the Hispanics, followed by the development of the Latin American Catholic Church and finally come to the new church which is emerging within the U.S.

I. THE U.S. CATHOLIC EXPERIENCE AS PERCEIVED BY THE HISPANIC

The United States was born out of post-Reformation Nordic Europe. While some came seeking religious freedom for themselves the greater number came simply seeking a more human existence. Their fundamental unity was not in religion or ideology but in the fact that they were convinced that this land which they had just discovered belonged to them and offered them a new life. This mentality is certainly brought out in the classical poem of Robert Frost which was read at the inauguration of President Kennedy:

*The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years before we were her
people....*

Even the most religious regarded the native inhabitants as "heathens"—devilish people to be eliminated so that the land could be civilized. The elimination of the natives appeared as a "divine must" for the new colonizers. The land must be cleared so that the Kingdom of God could be established.

Whether religious or not, educated or illiterate, they are imbued with the spirit of pragmatism, individualism, advancement and material success. Promise, opportunity, progress, prosperity, the survival of the fittest and the success of the blessed became the unquestioned first principle of the new vision of life. As the country developed, the basic imagery of the new nation would be that of biblical Protestantism while the cultural substrata would be rationalism, empiricism and racism.

The building of a new empire would become the fundamental religious enterprise and mission of this new adventure. This quickly becomes the fundamental religion of the land. Thus there would be a separation of the church and state, but a profound unity of religion with the new emerging "American" culture. And though the secular and the churches were separate, in effect, the secular enterprise would function as the core religion of the land.

These beginnings of Americanism provided the womb which would receive the various waves of Catholic immigrants from the

different countries of Europe. They did not come to convert the natives or to transform their civilizations but rather to convert themselves into Americans and transform their own ways of life into the American Way. They came from a post-Reformation experience into a vast space which offered incredible material opportunities, but constant religious threats to their own Roman Catholic identity. They came with their own clergy and religious and quickly began to create their own institutions—their parish, their parochial schools, the ethnic seminaries (e.g. Josephinum for the Germans, St. Cyril and Methatas for the Czechs, Orchard Lake for the Polish) and ethnic monasteries such as St. John's Collegeville for the Germans, and religious provinces such as the German Franciscans of Cincinnati and the Polish Felicians. The parish was the center of community life. No community of Catholic immigrants would dream of being without its priest and sisters.

The Church struggled to serve its own people in the religious sphere and to help them to Americanize in the secular sphere of life. In fact, until recent times, the Catholic Church of the United States had been the church of the poor, the immigrants and the foreigner. It was the church of the common folk and not of the elite.

In general, the church officials have strived to cooperate with the authorities and with those in power in order to win acceptance and a sense of truly American belonging for the masses of Catholics in the U.S. The election of John Kennedy marked the symbolic acceptance of Catholics as full citizens of this country.

While guarding carefully the explicitly "Catholic" traits of its members, the Church helped Catholics to Americanize as much as possible and to interiorize the tenets of "The American Way." Being a good citizen has been equated with being a good Catholic and vice-versa. Thus the Church, while maintaining its visible structures and rites and while continuing to confess its doctrines and creed, took unto itself the values, thought, way of life and fundamental imagery of the country.

The characteristics of today's United States local church have emerged out of the historical journey of the Catholics of this country. As one local church beginning to experience the life of another it seems to the Hispanics that the U.S. local church is characterized by the following traits:

(1) It functions through and places a high priority on institutional organizations and bureaucracy. It is very clergy-dependent and clergy-controlled. In many ways it has structured itself like a factory or business enterprise.

(2) It expresses itself through the categories and thought patterns of the Enlightenment thus appearing to be overly rationalistic and wordy with an emphasis on doctrine and dogma.

(3) Behaviorly, it seems to be legalistic, moralistic and very controlled. Commandments and law appear as all-important.

(4) Motivationally, it is characterized by voluntarism—people are free to belong or to join another church or none at all.

II. THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE LATIN AMERICAN CHURCH

In order to appreciate the difference between the U.S. Catholic Church and the Latin American Church, it is important to see that the core experience of the masses of the United States is not even suspected or imagined by the masses of Latin America and vice-versa. The core experience of each group is totally different. The great masses of the people of Latin America are the conquered, the colonized, the oppressed and the exploited, while in the United States the masses have experienced a certain amount of freedom, ownership, participation and prosperity.

Whereas in the U.S. it is the masses which have experienced liberty and justice and the minorities which have experienced enslavement and injustice, in Latin America it is the very opposite. It is the minority who have been the elite, while the masses have been delegated to a subhuman status without voice, dignity or vote.

When speaking of the Church of Latin America, it would be more precise to say the churches of Latin America. In concrete fact, there are two churches in Latin America. Some would like to distinguish between the so-called "people's church" and the "official" or "institutional" Church and set them in opposition to each other. This is a false dichotomy. It is evident that from the very beginning of its history some of the official Church have been very much a part of the people and vice-versa. The division is not between the institutional Church and the church of the people, but rather between the church of the elites of society and the church of the masses of society.

1. The Church of the Elite

The conquistadores had no doubts whatsoever about their own Catholicity. They felt no need for being evangelized. They came to the New World for the glory of God and their kings and most of all for their own aggrandizement. They exploited the natives in every way and subjugated them more brutally than if they had been beasts of burden. For the conquistadores, the missionaries were to domesticate the natives for the glory of God while they themselves were to work them to death for the glory of mammon. They who had been scandalized at the human sacrifice

to the gods did not hesitate to sacrifice many more human beings—and are still doing so today—to the gods of their own avarice.

These were still the pre-Reformation days of the old Christendom. The Church and the States were united in the expansion of the kingdoms and the Church. Weapons preceded the Gospel and gold and silver were the precious goods whose acquisition was far more important than the life or death of the natives.

Even though there were some clashes and tensions between some ecclesiastical leaders and those in power, generally speaking, there was collaboration between the institutional Church and the power figures of the new colonial empire. A new Christendom was emerging in which church and state would work together for the good of each other. Keep in mind that when we say "the state" in Latin America, we are not referring to the people as we tend to think in the United States, but to the very small number of elites who maintain absolute control over the masses of the people. For these elites there would never be a lack of clergy willing to minister to their "spiritual" needs without in any way molesting the status quo. Many of the bishops and officials of the Church have come from among their ranks. It would be mainly the church of the European-Latin Americans and only a few *mestizos* would be able to squeeze in. The Church would bless, sanctify and comfort, but never evangelize. These powerful elite were convinced that they had a right to have the Church on their side—ministering to them and giving religious support to their institutions and way of life. This Church would help to intensify and solidify the inferior status of the *mestizos* and natives. By its solidarity with the ruling elites, it would in effect justify the on-going massacre and exploitation of the masses for the sake of the few. Furthermore, it would continue to look toward Europe for its models of existence and downplay any inculturation as syncretism, uncivilized and pagan.

For the conquistadores and their descendants, a new church was never born. It was simply the transplantation of the ways and customs of the decaying church of the old Christendom. It is this church which today cannot understand, and is often scandalized, by the new church of the masses which is coming into maturity. Let us now take a brief look at the birth of the new and original church of Latin America.

2. The Church of the Masses

The very same people who raped us also baptized us. They penetrated deeply into the depths of our mother soil, but equally implanted the very seeds of new life and ultimate liberation.

Biologically and anthropologically a new race was born—the *mestizo* race. Theologically a new church was born which is today the church of the masses of Latin America.

Alongside the conquistadores there were also some fearless and zealous missionaries who came to protect and evangelize the natives. Their efforts were not always successful, but nevertheless through the power of the Spirit, the Gospel was transmitted to the natives, has been gradually assimilated and interiorized and is today coming into maturity.

From the very beginning, great men of the Church such as Pedro de Ganto; Bishop Juan de Zumaraga, first bishop of Mexico; Vasco de Quiroga, the soldier who was named bishop of Pascuaro; Bartolomé de las Casas of Chiapas; Toribio of Mogrovejo of Lima; and many others labored to evangelize the masses of the natives and to build a new church which would be built solidly upon evangelical principles. According to these early missionaries this new church was to avoid the mistakes of the church of Europe. It was to be the New Church of the New World composed of the new People of God. The early missionaries came from the pre-Reformation renewal movements of Spain and were inspired by the ecclesiology of Joachim de Flore who felt that the legal and institutional aspects of the Church were unimportant and even obstacles to the true Church, the biblical humanism of Erasmus and the biblical enthusiasm of Cardinal Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros. This was to be a new Church built upon the Word and Spirit of the Gospel.

The actual work of the missionaries was marvelous, but from our perspective today it also had some serious defects. The natives and *mestizos* were loved but never trusted enough to be invited into the ranks of the clergy or religious. To this day the Church of the masses does not have clergy or religious from among its own ranks. The actual institutions of the Church have been those of the elite thus excluding the presence of the masses. The clergy continues to be foreign to the ordinary Indo and *mestizo*, the institutions continue to be foreign to their way of life and the official rituals of the Church continue to appear as the affairs of foreigners. Furthermore, because of the shortage of clergy among the poor sections of Latin America, the masses of the people have never experienced a clergy, sacramental or parish-centered religion. Out of necessity we have been a pueblo-centered religion. What has been the ordinary experience of church in the United States, has been extraordinary and unsuspected for the church of the masses of Latin America.

For these peoples there has always been an opposition between themselves—both as citizens and as Catholics—and the

various sociopolitical institutions of their countries. Yet today, it is the very official Church which is helping to bring about a new consciousness of what it means to be church among the masses of Latin America. The people have been inspired and led by such great official teachers as Don Ramón Larraín; Dom Helder Camara of Recife; Paulo Evaristo Cardinal Arns of São Paulo; Bishop Samuel Ruiz of México; Leonides Proaño of Río Bamba; and Cardinal Pironeo of the Congregation for Religious in Rome and many others.

3. Cultural Substratum of the Hispanic Church

The Church of the masses has generally functioned through the extended family model rather than through the factory-model of the United States. Since we never had the clergy to allow us to become clergy-centered and clergy-dependent, we have depended on our families, our *religion casera*, our home altars and our devotions to maintain and transmit the faith. The clergy have always been too distant and too foreign in relation to the masses of our people.

The people have celebrated the faith not so much through the sacraments as through many popular devotions which they could celebrate on their own. When analyzed carefully one can easily discover many of the elements of the eucharistic celebration present in the faith expressions of the people. It is these rites of the people which have functioned as the principal liturgical celebrations of the community. It is through them that the faith has been nourished and that the people have experienced the presence of God in their midst. While the official liturgy of the Church was often too distant—and likewise too costly—the celebrations of popular devotions were easily within the reach of everyone without exception. They have served as the liturgical assemblies of the community of faith at worship.

The extended family continues to be the basic institution through which church life is passed on, lived and celebrated. The great paradox of the two churches of Latin America is that while the church of the elite is clergy-dependent and anticlerical, the church of the masses is neither clergy-dependent nor anticlerical. If the clergy is not around, it is not missed, but when it is there, it is welcomed.

The faith which we have received has been interiorized, reformulated and expressed, not through European thought, but through our native American Mysticism. It is expressed chiefly not through rational proposition, but through symbolic imagery which is experiential and suggestive. Our people have a very personal and

profound sense of the sacred and they seem to intuit that no rational explanation suffices to speak about God and God's ways. God is always with us, but God is totally beyond us. The Gospel led us beyond our religion of faceless gods, into the personal knowledge of *Papacito Dios, Jesús, María y los santos*.

Our categories of thought and analysis are not those of the universities, which remain closed and foreign to us, but those of the simple people of the land. We can interpret the gospels easily, for their imagery is very similar to ours. It is only the theological reflection of the learned of Western civilization which makes little sense to us—especially against the background of Western wars, imperialism, racism, violence, exploitation and arrogance.

We do not trust Western sophistication for its systems of logic seem to be easily manipulated to serve the interests of the ones in control, or to obscure the real problems and hurts of society. It is through mysticism, contemplation, reflection, art, poetry and song, that we are able to enter into the deepest communion with the totality of reality.

We are not uncritical or unscientific thinkers. We merely analyze, critique and communicate through a different world vision than that of the West.

Even though the Hispanics have been highly moral and quite disciplined, the practice of religion has not been associated with moralism. Through a unique combination of the Latin-European mentality and the native American vision of life, the practice of religion has been spontaneous, charismatic and festive. It has not been centered on the commandments or church life, but on *promesas, mandas, peregrinaciones* and the like. We have never gone to Mass simply because it is a legal obligation, but we have never dreamed of missing Mass when there is an occasion to celebrate. In fact, we are told to "*sanctificar las fiestas*" (sanctify the feasts). Even though the fiestas are well planned they in no way inhibit the spontaneity of the people.

Why are Latin Americans Catholic? Certainly behind any reason we could give is the mystery of the gift of faith. Our people, sometimes even after they become Protestants, remain profoundly Catholic. There are many factors behind this profound attachment to Catholicism. Certainly the exemplary evangelizing efforts of a good number of the early missionaries planted excellent seeds into the soil of native America. Likewise, the apparitions of Our Lady, especially at Tepeyac, which coincided with the actual birth of the new people, played an essential role in the implantation of the Gospel upon the hearts of our people.

Besides these early beginnings, there are two key factors which have strongly influenced the transmission and the spirit of

Catholicism throughout Latin America. The first one is an external force: the power of the new Christendom. People were free only to be Catholics or to cease being! It was a certain type of determinism which gave people no other choice except that of being Catholics. Voluntarism was unthinkable and intolerable. The other force is the internal power of the Spirit which has interiorized the faith in the simple and marginated peoples of Latin America to such a degree that their insights into God and God's way as revealed in Scripture go far beyond the limitations of Western thought—especially as it has been enslaved by technological-ideological and philosophical world vision. To be a *Latino* is to be *Católico* and when one ceases being a *Católico*, in many ways, one ceases being a *Latino*. This is one of the profound questions that some of our Hispanic Protestant brethren are struggling with—can they be *Católicos Protestantes* instead of Roman Catholic?

III. A NEW WAVE: THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW CHURCH

It is this very Church of the masses which for the past 450 years has suffered oppression, exploitation and margination which is today discovering and joyfully accepting its God-given identity and mission. Through prayer and Scripture reading we are discovering the concrete and historical meaning of the following of Jesus in our space and time. We are assuming the road from Galilee to Jerusalem. We no longer look just upon our crucified Lord as the God who is in solidarity with our suffering, but we look upon the entire way of Jesus as our Lord not only in solidarity with our movements for liberation but, even more so, leading the way and showing us how to do it.

Our very suffering has become the basis of our mission—not revolution where forces change but the core structures remain the same, but provolution where there are radical breakthroughs for a new humanity to emerge. God does not will our suffering, but rather that out of our suffering we should struggle to build a new society wherein others will not have to suffer what we have suffered. God does not just want us to be good and avoid evil, God's will is that we struggle against evil and work to build up the Kingdom. At each moment of history and in each particular space of the earth, God calls upon the poor and the marginated to initiate not just reforms but new creation. This is the inscrutable mystery of God's plan (cf. 1 Cor 1 and also Lk 10:21, Mt 11:25 and Jn 7:45-49). What the world rejects and scorns, God chooses in a privileged way (Acts 4:11). What is marginal to human society, is central to God's plans.

As a poor and oppressed minority the Hispanic Catholics are finding a great solidarity with the other suffering minorities of this country and with the masses of oppressed and exploited in other parts of the world, but especially in Latin America. With them, we are becoming conscious of our fundamental human dignity as children of God. We are accepting the Gospel challenge to get up and walk. We are hearing the command of the Lord to come forth from the tombs of the living dead who are condemned to a life of misery, illiteracy and destitution. But more than that, we are hearing his invitation to follow him on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

What is the new Hispanic *ecclesia* which is beginning to take shape in the United States?

Reminiscent of the early churches of Christianity, especially those of the pre-Constantinian period, the assemblies of Hispanic Christians are composed of the poor, the marginated, the despised and often the persecuted of society. It is true that just as in the early Church there are some important and wealthy persons among us, but the masses of Hispanic Christians are from among the social outcasts of mainline U.S. culture and society. Our undocumented brothers and sisters are persecuted by the civic authorities, while the churches as a whole stand by silently. Our poor in the barrios and rural areas are often subjected to police brutality, illegal detentions, unjust court sentences, because they do not have the money or prestige to "buy" a benign sentence. Our farm, domestic and hospital workers are subject to hard labor, unjust wages and hardly any worker's compensation. They work and suffer in silence, while those who enjoy the fruits of their labor waste themselves away in sumptuous living. The masses of our people are not only exploited, but even worse, the image of ourselves is ridiculed and put-down by all the media of communication, often including the religious media. In many ways, either by exclusion or ridicule, we are told clearly that we are an inferior and unworthy people—that we are the nothing of society, the scum of the earth.

In our nothingness, we are discovering our divine election. And the realization of this divine election is giving us a new vision of ourselves, of our society, of our world and of our Church. In hearing God's call and responding to it we find ourselves to be recreated as totally new persons. The discovery of the historical and concrete meaning of God's election is filling us with a new spirit of life, but this spirit has not yet taken on specific forms. Our institutions have not yet emerged, and our clear-cut theological clarifications have not yet developed.

Often, it is not easy to have to explain what we are about, and even when we try to explain it to others, it does not appear to make

sense to them. Yet the Spirit within us is not only calling us together as an *ecclesia*, but it is guiding us from within to experience what it means for us to be followers of Jesus as Hispanics in the U.S.A. The *ecclesia* has definitely come to life, but the ecclesiology, the study of our self-understanding as church, is yet to be developed and elaborated.

What follows is an attempt to present some of the characteristics of our ecclesial experience. They are the elements out of which the U.S. Hispanic ecclesiology will be gradually developed and hopefully contribute to a new and broader ecclesiology of the U.S. local church.

We are discovering that being spiritual according to the Gospel, means being imbued with the Spirit of Jesus. It means loving and serving others. It means working for the common good and not being afraid to denounce the unjust structures of our society as sinful. It means dedicating ourselves to the building-up of the Kingdom. Being spiritual means discovering that the transformation of the world into more just societies is an integral part of the living out of the Gospel. We are discovering that the privileged ministry of the Christian layperson is the transformation of society. We do not want to clericalize the laity, but we do want to spiritualize the world.

Pope John Paul II told the poor people in Mexico, "The pope wants to be . . . the invitation to action, in order to make up for lost time, a time that is frequently one of prolonged suffering and unfulfilled hopes. . . . It is necessary to act quickly and with intensity. It is necessary to effect bold transformations, which are profoundly innovative" (Cuilapán, January 29, 1979).

If our Church has given us the motivation to collective action for the sake of human betterment, it is our United States society which has enriched us with the technical know-how. We are learning to organize, to strategize, to plan and to act boldly. Native leaders are being discovered and trained so as to convert their native abilities into effective energy. The church of the masses is coming to life in the marketplace and in the centers of political power. In Chicago, in Houston, in Los Angeles, in San Antonio and in many other places, the *ecclesia* is marching together to the Jerusalem Temples of today—the centers of power—and challenging the pillars of society to be responsive to the needs of the powerless, the voiceless and the afflicted. The parishes are taking on new life as centers of community organizations which work for the common good of the neighborhood. Organizations for the sake of justice are becoming one of the characteristics of our ecclesial experience. It is within the context of these efforts that our

eucharistic assemblies in the upper rooms of today take on new life and meaning. In this context they truly become the sign and the cause of the Christian assembly on pilgrimage to the Father's house.

Sociopolitical movements inspired by the love of God and of neighbor are necessary but not sufficient. We could easily become more concerned with the movement than with the very reason behind the movement which is to bring about the intimate communion—fellowship—between all persons. Thus the Hispanic Church is actively involved in the building of *Comunidades de Base* where Christians can meet together as persons and truly become someone to one another. In our large parishes people are often reduced to impersonal statistics. In the movements, the participants can often lose sight of the individual needs and sensitivities. The Church is concerned with the world, but it begins with the individual persons and never ignores them.

These small Christian communities gather together to pray, study the Scriptures, see how they can help one another and together be a service to the greater community and finally celebrate their faith together. The clergy is always welcomed in these Christian assemblies, but it is not missed when it is not there. Their point of unity is not the presence of a visible priest, but the one faith and the one Spirit which they all share and celebrate together.

These small Christian communities do not form new elites, nor do they remove themselves from the masses, but rather they seek to serve as a ferment within the masses converting the faceless mass into a people—the people of God in this particular time and space.

Realizing that in our Hispanic Catholic tradition the basis of the Church is the extended family, and likewise conscious of the many threats to this fundamental institution today, the Church is seeking new ways of strengthening family life. Good family life does not come about automatically. It must be worked at if it is to succeed and continue. We must not lose our sense of *abuelitos, compadres y comadres, cuñados, niños de crianza*. . . . This is our greatest asset, but we could easily lose it.

The Hispanic Church is discovering the Scriptures and quickly falling in love with them. Our people are hungry for the Word of God and are looking for places where this hunger can be satisfied. This, plus the fact of having ministers from among their own people, is one of the great appeals of the Protestant churches. The Charismatic Movement is also having a great effect in bringing people in direct contact with God's Word. The Hispanic Catholic is looking for ways of penetrating the Scriptures and discovering the

words of truth and of life. The Word of God in turn brings new meaning to our sociohistorical situation and destiny.

There is a revived interest in our popular expressions of the faith. We are beginning to see that they are not in opposition to the official liturgies of the Church but rather that they can be creatively integrated into them. In the places where this is taking place, the devotions of the people are purified and ennobled while the official liturgy is enriched and brought to life. Far from looking down with a certain amount of mistrust and disdain at the simple expressions of faith, we are discovering the profound wealth of theological content which is contained within them. The Creed, our concrete expression of the *sensus fidelium* of our Church, has been celebrated and lived through the on-going reenactments of the different moments of the Mystery of Christ, beginning with the *posadas* of Advent, going through the various celebrations of *Semana Santa* and the other celebrations of the year including the Communion of the Saints on November 2, and the Feast of Christ the King at the end of the Liturgical year. Once a year the masses of the people experience vicariously the core moments of the Mystery of Christ. It is a task and a challenge of the theologian and the catechist to explicitate and develop what is already contained within these living treasures of the faith. Far from being the expressions of the so-called "un-informed," they are emerging as the divine wisdom which God has hidden from the learned and the clever and reserved for his little ones (Lk 10:21). The on-going dialogue between the Word of God in the Scriptures, the actual life situation of the people and the spontaneous and constant expressions of the faith is bringing about the full, conscious and active participation by the entire people in these ritual re-enactments of the various mysteries of our faith (cf. SC 14). It is through these celebrations that the people experience the profound unity of being children of God. In them, we become of one heart and one mind having really experienced together the various aspects of the Pascal Mystery. We see ourselves as a prophetic people in Fiesta.

At the depths of our unity as a historical people and as a local portion of the people of God, has been and continues to be our profound intimacy with *Papacito Dios*, *María*, *la madre de Dios y nuestra madre*, and our brother, *Jesús*. As important as all these three are, it is our devotion to our Mother, *la virgen María* which pulls us together like no other force known to humanity. There could certainly be many explanations for this, but regardless of the explanation, the fact is that we find our deepest unity in her, our common mother. Because of our deep and far-reaching sense of family, we do not feel that this in any way takes away from the

centrality of Christ, but rather enhances it—because I know the mother of Jesus and honor her, I can know Jesus much better and give him even greater honor and glory. For us, Christocentric does not mean putting exclusive emphasis on Christ, but rather placing Christ in the center of his family. And within any Hispanic family, it is certainly the mother which has a very special place of honor.

Finally, we know that for the Church to exist and function properly, institutions are necessary. Thus we are struggling to enter the institutions of our Church so that we may participate actively and responsibly in the decision making process of our United States Catholic Church. We need for the Church to name more Hispanic bishops and for religious communities to elect or name more Hispanic superiors. But scholars cannot be named, they must be formed and developed, so we need you, the academic community to help us develop our scholars so that they may take their place among you—reflecting critically and creatively upon the struggles and life of faith of our people. We need more priests so that our people can experience the joy of having one of their own preside at the Eucharist. The Eucharist cannot remain a celebration by foreigners and still be the summit of Christian living of the local community.

The institutions have to help us to come in but, in helping us to come in, they must respect us for who we are and welcome our differences. We have been kept out too long. Now, we are coming in, but not at the cost of ceasing to be who we are—that would be an insult to God who created us and to our families who formed us. We do not want to form a separate church, but neither do we want to give up the faith treasures of our hearts—our tradition of faith or our particular *sensus fidelium*—in order to be a part of this Church. We are not working for division, but for a new and more Catholic form of unity. We have committed ourselves to working for a pluralistic church which will truly welcome the wealth which God has placed in the various people of the world.

The Hispanic Church has certainly much to learn and much to receive from the mainline U.S. Church, from the other minority groups in this country and especially from our black and native-American brothers and sisters, but we equally have much to offer—our love of family, our concerns for justice, our sense of ministry in the marketplace, our traditional devotions, our mysticism, our various forms of expression through images, music, song, poetry, dance and art, our personal relationships with God, Jesus, Mary and the saints, and especially our sense of fiesta.

Today the Church of the United States has the unique opportunity of becoming a new and exciting expression of Catholicism.

For we have the opportunity, not only of having many particular churches within the one local church of the United States, but even more so, the special grace of being able to have many local churches within each particular church. This does not have to divide the Church. On the contrary, it can provide a model for society and for the world that will bring out how peoples of various backgrounds, of various languages, and of various colors and walks of life can truly live and celebrate together as one people: not ceasing to be who they are, but all opening up both to give and to receive of each other; no one losing their originality and uniqueness but together forming a new unique and original people of God who can truly pull from all the nations of the world and be united in that which ultimately counts—the experience of being the children of God.

We have an opportunity for a new Pentecost in our country. The challenge is to find ways of combining the various local churches which are part of the United States into a new local church which will truly incorporate the treasure of our various traditions of the one faith.

As an Hispanic church we want to work for a more Catholic expression of the one Church—a church that radiates the unity in diversity, which is the one unity of the children of God.

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