

THE SOURCES OF HISPANIC THEOLOGY

I. TRADITION AND POPULAR RELIGIOSITY.

A. This year's workshop on Hispanic theology follows through on the theme of last year's ("Toward a Hispanic-American Theology"), where we held that Hispanic popular religiosity is a unique hermeneutical entity for the development of a Hispanic theology. As we did last year, we drafted a paper ("The Sources of Hispanic Theology") which we distributed to those in attendance at the Friday meeting. The purpose of the workshop is to argue that the form of Tradition which flows within and through popular religiosity is a privileged source of Hispanic theology.

B. Orlando Espin read from the text of the paper, and Sixto Garcia contributed explanatory remarks to the reading and to the following discussion. Espin began by remarking on the sources of all theology: Scriptures, Tradition, Liturgy and human experience.

1. We perceive Scriptures and Tradition in a more intimate relationship than we used to: Tradition makes possible the emergence of the canonical text of Scriptures (which for most Christians, exegetes and theologians included, has been definitively established); this text, in turn, becomes the *norma non normata*, the privileged source of theology and spirituality for Christians. Tradition reflects the unceasing reflection of the church, through history, philosophy, literature and other disciplines, on the privileged data of Scriptures. It brings forth the demands and the challenge of Jesus of Nazareth into human history, making them ever new, ever meaningful. But Tradition must always rest on the existential and critical reading of the Bible. Biblical hermeneutics presupposes the scholarly use of historico-critical methodology; the committed reader of the Bible, however, must existentially internalize the biblical message, lest it become a mere archaeological curiosity.

2. Liturgy is the celebration of what we believe, and conversely it is the affirmation of belief in what we celebrate (*Lex orandi, lex credendi*). Liturgy presupposes a ritual, "hierarchically" established, yet open to necessary changes indicated by the cultural milieu and the specific symbols used by people of different cultures to express their religious and existential realities. Liturgy is a source of theology insofar as the theologian allows the liturgical celebration to speak to him or her about Christian faith and the self-revealing God who is the foundations of that faith experience.

3. Human experience is always open to "public" appropriation, and thus to perception, analysis and dialogue with the culture within which it occurs. In a few words, it is contextualized. Human experience can be characterized as transitory

by nature, yet it can leave "permanent" or at least long-lasting effects on its cultural surrounding, whenever the human subject of the experience addresses the situation and symbols of that culture, even if he or she does it in a "counter-cultural" way (as it happens with ancient and contemporary prophets). Human experience can and should be a source of theology as the theologian reflects and ponders on the theological categories (God-images, Savior-figures, salvation, grace, community) which surface in explicit fashion through the modalities of that experience.

4. Of the four sources of theology mentioned above, we chose Tradition as the hermeneutical tool for this workshop. The reason for the choice is this: The relationship between the form of Tradition "channelled" through popular religiosity (a form relatively unknown in most European and Anglo-American churches) and mainstream Tradition will shed light on popular religiosity as a source for Hispanic theology. Popular-religious Tradition is a legitimate form of Tradition, and should not be considered as a bastardized form of the mainstream Tradition, in need of "purification" (i.e., assimilation into the European and North American understandings of Tradition). The two forms complement each other; the theologian need not see them as mutually contradictory or hostile. They defined Tradition as "the life of the church actualized in history" (allowing for other, equally-valid definitions proposed elsewhere).

5. The form of Tradition found in popular-religious manifestations holds a greater importance than mere cultural curiosity. To begin with, there is abundant historical evidence that the dogmas of today, many of which were defined by the early councils, emerged from the manifestations of popular belief and popular liturgies. Popular religiosity can indeed be traced to at least the very early post-apostolic church, and we could offer cogent arguments to show that it can be found in the New Testament data itself.

6. Popular religiosity as a conveyor of its own form of Tradition has made evangelization possible in places where Christianity would have otherwise disappeared. Indeed, in many cases this popular Tradition was the only "symbol" of Christianity that many peoples or groups had; it became the only link between their experience and Christian faith.

7. Finally, popular-religious forms of Tradition can challenge the often-distorted meanings given to mainstream Tradition. It can challenge indifference towards church commitment, toward social-justice demands, towards a more vital and meaningful church. But to establish this, we must look at the retrieval of the main theological topics within popular-religious Tradition.

II. THE RETRIEVAL OF THEOLOGICAL TOPICS WITHIN POPULAR-RELIGIOUS FORMS OF TRADITION.

A. We offered three points to assess this retrieval:

1. The modes and structures in and through which these topics or categories "unveil" themselves within popular-religious Tradition.

2. The "performance" of these topics or categories within popular religiosity, i.e., the particular way in which they challenge, affect or denounce traditional understandings of the mainstream Tradition.

3. The relationship between popular-religious Tradition and a proper understanding of mainstream Tradition.

B. Sixto Garcia offered a "test case" to work with: the popular representations or re-enactments of the Passion of Jesus ("popular passion-plays," for want of a better term). We chose this particular test case because it is widespread in the Hispanic world (Spain, and its North, Central, and South American offsprings). The Passion plays of Sevilla, Spain, are world-famous and have served as models for similar celebrations in practically every Hispanic country and community. Furthermore, passion-imagery and symbolism pervade the Hispanic world. Churches in the Hispanic countries are full of statues and images of bleeding, thorn-crowned Christs and sorrowful Madonnas ("La Dolorosa"). Unlike Oberammergau or the Black Hills Passion Plays, there are no spectators in these popular representations. The people become in effect actors in the plays, screaming, weeping, groaning, suffering. Their tears are real, their grief genuine.

C. The retrieval of theological categories may well begin with the concept of *salvation*. We argued last year that in popular religiosities, salvation has a very here-and-now dimension, besides the transcendental one. The popular passion plays communicate a Tradition of salvation that, since New Testament times, through the entire Patristic age, seeks to wed earthly "salvation," i.e., human promotion through social justice, with total, integral salvation understood as the fullness of humanity in the bosom of the trinitarian God.

D. *Christology* may well be our second theological category. The bleeding and suffering Christs and Madonnas of popular passion plays communicate a Tradition already present in the Pauline communities and the Synoptics, and certainly in the early Councils: the irreducible dimension of the humanity of Jesus. Popular religiosity is farther removed from the implicit docetism or monophysitism (which anguished Rahner's pastoral heart so much) of many Christians today than their interpretation of mainstream Tradition.

E. *Ecclesiology* is very much present in the popular Tradition of the passion plays. The latter are usually prepared by a faith community: a parish or simply a group of Hispanic Christians. The intense participation of the people reflect a committed church, or at least an *ecclesiola*, a segment of the church.

F. There is no question that these popular passion plays constitute a form of popular "liturgy," even if they do not fit into the official definition of the term. People celebrate the passion with a degree of involvement seldom found in mainstream liturgies. Here they communicate a form of Tradition already present in the apostolic church, when the first-generation Christians marched in procession to the "tomb" of Christ (indeed, as E. Schillebeeckx, W. Kasper and others have shown, the early traditions about the empty tomb in the Gospels emerged from this early popular celebrations). In many Hispanic communities, the whole Triduum, not only the Good Friday events, are fully celebrated by the participating community, bringing a personalistic element into the whole liturgical context of the Paschal Mystery.

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS.

A. The three points to *assess* retrieval are present in the above examples: we find the modes of transmitting popular Tradition in and through popular passion plays; we see the performance of the theological categories unveiling themselves in the personal involvement of the people with the sufferings of the bleeding Christ, identifying in a particularly powerful mode the full humanity of Jesus of Nazareth. Finally, we can and must say that these forms of popularly-transmitted Tradition complement, enrich and expand the (properly understood) mainstream Tradition, in ways hitherto ignored by mainstream theology and official church teaching.

B. The theologian must be alert to popularly-conveyed Tradition, to the symbols and structures that convey it, and to those places where he or she must build bridges to bring together the two forms—popular and mainstream—of the one living Tradition as it flows into, and emerges from Scriptures, and as it reflects the biblical message about the all-loving God.

IV. DISCUSSION AND DIALOGUE ON THE SOURCES OF HISPANIC THEOLOGY

Several participants in the workshop discussed the actual possibilities of integrating North American Hispanic popular religiosity into the theology and liturgy of the American (U.S.A.) Church. Orlando Espin remarked that the need for a dialogue along those lines is imperative, given the fact that within 10 years, Hispanics will constitute half (or more) of the Catholic Church in the U.S.A. Robert Krieg remarked that those Latin or North American liberation theologians who include popular-religious categories in their theologies display more sensitivity towards the ecclesial needs of Hispanics than those who in fact engage in purely "academic" theological speculation.

Espin addressed Krieg's remarks, saying that the smaller, popular-religious works of many Hispanic theologians have not been translated into English and thus remain largely unknown. English-language publishers, added Espin, are more interested in issuing in English the "major" works of these theologians. Ann Patrick commented on those Hispanics who are in fact attached to parishes or dioceses, celebrate mainstream liturgies and have become assimilated into the mainstream ecclesial structures. Patrick asked whether the symbols of popular religiosity retain their validity for these people, and if so, how. Espin answered affirmatively; Garcia offered as an example the Marian dimension so common to Hispanic prayer and piety. Garcia said that for these people, the symbols relating to Mary may not be those of popular religiosity in the strict sense, but Mary will continue to play a role in their spirituality and in their perception of God, Jesus and the church.

The members of the workshop agreed that future theological endeavors within the American (U.S.A.) Church must take into account Hispanic modes and structures as sources to build a truly committed and meaningful American theology.

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