

### C. PROVIDENCE AND HISTORIES: ONE HISPANIC'S VIEW

The task to focus on providence and the history of Hispanic Americans was both challenging and frustrating. A challenge, because while we know that the adjective Hispanic includes people from Europe, North, Central, South America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean region, it is hard to imagine that Hispanics in this country are more different than alike. Each human group encompassed within that broad geographic range has a unique history and a distinct linkage to Spain and to the religious communities which planted the seed of the gospel in the various regions and from which each derived its feel for the meaning of providence.

Frustrating, because there is not one Hispanic American history if that is taken to mean the history of peoples with Hispanic background who find themselves in the United States. There are many histories: Mexican-American, Puerto Rican-American, and Cuban-American histories, to mention only the Hispanic groups with the largest contingents in the U.S. The label *Hispanic American* is only a sociocultural descriptor of recent vintage made in the U.S. This descriptor puts together the histories and religious styles, customs and traditions of 20 nations as if they had an identical history, equal social and religious customs, and present and future problems and possibilities. Hence, there is no way that a 12 minute panel presentation could even begin to grapple with the rich historical and theological tradition of Hispanic America and its evolving sense of providence.

I chose to go to that portion of our history least known by American historians and theologians which provides a common thread to our varied national histories—the origins of the Hispanic presence in this hemisphere starting almost five hundred years ago. That common history finds its roots in fifteenth and sixteenth century Spain, a nation at the height of political, scientific and literary achievements, not to mention the creative theological and religious ferment that saw the birth, growth and importation not only of ruthless conquerors and merchants but of mystics, missionaries, religious philosophers and artists who began the most active cultural, social and trading exchange the world has seen.

But while Spain is the source for the common language and the Catholic tradition which are the broadest common denominators for the people called Hispanics in the U.S., these are only partially so. The various regions to which Spain transplanted its academic, social, political and religious institutions were all different soils where very different human groups had been in operation for centuries, and because different religious communities with different political tendencies and spiritualities dominated the evangelization efforts in different regions.

The mingling of Spanish culture with the relatively primitive Caribbean inhabitants who had made their home in the islands of Quisqueya, rebaptized by the Spanish as Hispaniola; Borinquen, known today as Puerto Rico; and Ciboney, known as Cuba, was very different from the dynamics that emerged in Mexico and Peru where they had to contend with rich and sophisticated empires, weak only in the knowledge of destructive weapons comparable to those the Spanish conquerors used to dazzle and defeat them.

It is common for histories of the Catholic Church in this hemisphere, written in this country, not to see anything of consequence in the complex theological, sociopolitical and economic issues of the nearly 300 years that elapsed between

the arrival of the Spanish ships lead by a Genoese, and the establishment of the American Catholic hierarchy in 1790. Those three hundred years are often compressed into one or at most two paragraphs in which the motivation of all the actors involved in the extraordinary saga that was the Europeanization of the continent and the Christianization of the natives of these lands is described as pure greed. The scientist and explorer that was Columbus; the powerful Queen Isabel who was also a pious Christian woman highly imbued with the desire to help establish one united Christendom; the missionaries who had to carry out the Queen's goals and the Papal injunction to christianize the peoples;<sup>1</sup> the traders who saw the tremendous potential inherent in the new world; and the workers and artisans who also saw untold new possibilities for employment, all are often caricatured as equally bloodthirsty and greedy, whose only concern was to fill the coffers of the Spanish empire with gold. Nothing could be more misleading. To hold such a view is as distorted as suggesting that Maryknoll and Mormon missionaries, CIA agents, Harvard anthropologists doing research among the Amazon tribal groups, and the American teams charged with the destruction of the coca fields in South America represent one and the same imperial interests. In the same way we need to differentiate the motives of the conquerors and ruthless colonizers from those of the missionaries, artisans and theologians who saw in the discovery of the New world God's providential plan to bring all the world under the banner of Christ.

What can be said about providence in a Hispanic perspective that may be different from other perspectives?

There is no doubt that at the time of the Old World's encounter with the New, all of Spain and the Mediterranean countries that had been victimized by the Moors had gained a good sense of God's special protection in the person of Queen Isabel and King Fernando who had been able to topple the 700-year Moorish occupation with the defeat of the Caliph in Granada in January of 1492, merely eight months before the departure of Columbus from Palos on August 3rd of the same year. Nothing is more reassuring of God's providential care than when one tastes the sweet wine of victory in a struggle that appears to be just and honorable.

From the first lines of Columbus's log during his first trip which starts in the name of the Trinity to the closing lines of the same (March 15, 1493) which expressed the profound awe at the happy turn of events that brought him to this hemisphere, there is no doubt that providence was seen on the side of the Crown and all that took part in the saga of the Europeanization of this part of the world.

I know respecting this voyage that God has miraculously shown his will, (as may be seen from this journal, setting forth the numerous miracles that have been displayed in the voyage, and in me who was so long at the court of your Highness, working in opposition to an against the opinion of so many chief persons of your household, who were all against me, looking upon this enterprise as folly). But I hope, in our Lord, that it will be a great benefit to Christianity, for so it has ever appeared.

Some historians suggest that the spirit of Spanish Catholicism, forged in the long campaign against Jews and Moors, was transplanted to the New World with

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Vicente D. Sierra, *El sentido misional de la conquista de América* (Madrid: Talleres Espasa-Calpe, S.A., 1944).

"little attenuation of either its fierce orthodoxy or its ardent piety."<sup>2</sup> What Spain transmitted to the New World was a culture that had been little affected by the Renaissance, the Reformation or the commercial revolution. Reverence for intellectual, spiritual and political authority have been the distinctive marks of modern Hispanic America.<sup>3</sup> But anyone who knows Latin America is aware that if reverence of political and religious authorities had been that profound the history of the continent would be considerably different. That reverence certainly did not stop the Dominican friar Antón de Montesinos from preaching a sermon in Santo Domingo in 1511 which denounced the viceroy representative of the Queen and King of Spain as living in mortal sin *por la crueldad y tiranía que usáis con estas inocentes gentes* [the cruelty and tyranny you employ against these innocent peoples]; questioned the right of the Papacy to give power to Spain over the inhabitants of the new lands and challenged their authority to exercise legitimate jurisdiction over the Indians. Montesinos' sermon opened up the most intense legal, theological and anthropological debate the church has known; one which did not end until 1546 with the declaration, at least on paper, of the full humanity of the Indians.<sup>4</sup> Montesinos' questioning of the Crown's right over the new territories offers us a glimpse of that little understood Hispanic trait that holds in tension a profound sense for providence in the classical sense and a slow adherence to authority, be it papal or political.

This apparent contradiction has made it difficult for researchers to understand and explain, through North American sociological categories, what has been called the deep religious character of Latin American Catholics and their easygoing attitude towards rules and regulations that are not considered to be in the best interest of the person, and therefore not in accord with the providential care they profoundly believe in.

Pius XII once remarked that spiritually we Catholic Christians are Semites. And that statement is certainly valid for Hispanics, but with another dimension which is the Islamic one. Both Jews and Moslems created in Spain the first tri-religious state with these cultures intermarrying, exchanging goods and poetry, music, language and mysticism. We are as comfortable saying *Si Dios quiere* as *Ojalá* which is the equivalent to God willing in Arabic.

The acceptance of Christianity by the native inhabitants of the Americas would be hard to imagine unless there was a reality that spoke to them which went beyond the bad feelings created by the conquerors. Two elements have to be considered as being integral to the acceptance of Christianity by the Amerindians: the reality of the suffering Jesus, one of the favorite themes of the icons brought to the New World; and the rise of Marian devotions after what seems an apparent

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<sup>2</sup>Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, vol. 1 (Garden City: Image Books, 1975) 71.

<sup>3</sup>Irving A. Leonard, in forward to Mariano Picón-Salas, *A Cultural History of Spanish America, from Conquest to Independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966) x.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Silvio Zavala, *The Defense of Human Rights in Latin America: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Paris: UNESCO, 1964); and Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1965).

providential bias in favor of the downtrodden as in the case of the events on the hill of Tepeyac in Mexico City involving the Indian Juan Diego, Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Spanish Bishop. Providence, for Latin Americans, took on the suffering face of Jesus crucified and the female characteristics of motherly love and seems to have retained those qualities ever since.

However, in the last 30 years there have been some attempts to alter the traditional religious attitude to providence in the search for a new spirituality which has served as soil for the development of the theology of liberation. According to two of the leading thinkers that shaped Latin America in the 1960s the legacy of Spanish culture, and very directly the sense of providence and God's will as it permeates the life of large segments of Latin America, were the culprits of Latin American underdevelopment.

Roger Vekemans, an influential Belgian Jesuit and social thinker working in Chile, was convinced that nothing lasting would happen until Latin Americans could be made to see their relationship to God in a new light. He pointed out that the ethical-religious categories of divine will, faith, hope, grace, the transcendence of Catholic spirituality and the corresponding attitudes they produce in the believers (submission, paternalism, patience, disregard for the temporal, receptivity for and confidence in revealed truths) are projected into the profane world of economic development and social change. With those attitudes permeating their approach to the world, the Latin American Catholic—Vekemans suggested in the 1960s—lacked the attitude of domination, control, rationalization and objective coolness necessary for the scientific enterprise which is the basis for economic development and progress. Nothing short of a "cultural mutation" was Vekemans' recipe for the transformation of Latin America.<sup>5</sup> (Michael Novak is not the first one to see all that is wrong in Latin America as being born in the Mediterranean Catholicism of Spain). These views were widely accepted by politicians, theologians, sociologists and reformists of every kind as shown in the political goals of Eduardo Frei Montalba, ex-president of Chile and one of the chief exponent of Christian democracy in the continent. He summarized the theoretical ethos of Catholic theology as:

1. The presentation of existing social and economic structures as the will of God, as authorized by divine authority, and therefore the condemnation of any more or less radical change.
2. Disinterest in material goods, an almost exclusive concentration on the life to come, and indifference to present life.
3. Resignation to one's own and other people's misery or want, an emphasis on the necessary imperfection of social organisms as a consequence of original sin.
4. Fatalism as regards men's ability to control and transform his environment, leaving everything "in God's hands."
5. Emphasis on the goodness of intention and disregard for practical effectiveness and the functional values of good intentions.
6. Charity, taken to mean "favoring certain peoples because of their needs or personal links with them."

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<sup>5</sup>R. Vekemans, "Economic Development, Social Change, and Cultural Mutation in Latin America," in *Religion, Revolution and Reform: New Forces of Change in Latin America*, Wm. D'Antonio and F. B. Pike, eds. (New York: Praeger, 1964) 129-42.

7. Emphasis on the cultural, spiritual and Christian humanistic values, and contempt for more material occupations.<sup>6</sup>

The passive acceptance of providence, as critiqued by Vekemans and Frei Montalba, has some validity in terms of the passive submission to fate it produces in the personality. Yet, there is a need for theologians, anthropologists, sociologists and reformers to evaluate from the perspective of the 1990s the call to a cultural mutation toward values which in the fifties and sixties did not seem as corrupt as they appear today from the perspective of the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of much of Western culture. This bankruptcy includes the ecological crisis, continued persistence of racism, and growing economic disparities in the developed world from which the Latin American models for progress are being imported and even imposed.

While I do not want to be a Hispanic who believes that God will take care of me regardless of what little care I take of myself, I do not wish to see my six-year-old daughter grow up believing the message expounded by Jimminy Cricket in the opening scenes of Walt Disney's videos: Your world can be as magical as that of Mickey; you can become and do anything you really want to become and do. And all of that, of course, without any reference to God or to any transcendent reality that is any higher than the child's imagination. While one notion of God's promise denies the freedom and creativity of the individual, the other denies the freedom and creativity of God. One makes us passive recipients of God's care, the other dismisses God as the invention of the religious establishment to control the weak and ignorant. The first leads to passivity in view of one's powerlessness to change what is perceived as God's will for us. The other, however, leads to despair, to suicide and to drugs as one faces one's own impotence to change what we do not like with our limited human possibilities. While one has led thousands into lives of poverty, the other has made a few into masters of the destiny of the millions whose lives depends on their ability to work for those masters, more often than not underpaid and in subhuman conditions. While one has brought about political instability, the other thrives on fueling armed conflicts that continually increase the economic advantage and place the world on the brink of a nuclear holocaust.

In short, while some aspects of the Hispanic perspective on providence are not in keeping with what we feel today is the co-shared responsibility of a fully human person, I am not ready to trade it for the modern Anglo-German concepts of providence until at least three hundred more years of history prove them as more fruitful in bringing about a more just, loving and personal world than the one Hispanics have inherited from 16th century Spain.

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<sup>6</sup>E. Frei, "Notes on the Catholic Church and Development," in *Latin America: Evolution or Explosion?* M. Adams, ed. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1963) 197.