

## "LILIES OF THE FIELD": A HISPANIC THEOLOGY OF PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

### A. INTRODUCTION AND CLARIFICATIONS

Before we begin, some observations must be made. First of all, this paper—though read by two persons—is, in fact, *one* paper. Both of us have worked on and are responsible for the entire piece.

Second, given the subject of the paper and the very nature of the theological method we have followed, and the limiting factor of the time allotted for it, it is impossible to present here all the data, sources, explanations, etc., that might be necessary in order to treat thoroughly our subject. And besides this, we also recognize from the start that the Hispanic theology we are attempting to create is still experimental and, as a consequence, just as we see its strong points and possibilities, we also see its limitations and weaknesses.

Third, we must explain the word "Hispanic." It must be underlined that there is no such thing as a "Hispanic" community in the United States. The term "Hispanic" refers, accurately, only to a *community of communities*. One cannot identify, without plenty of nuances and caveats, a Mexican-American with a Puerto Rican, a Cuban-American with a Salvadorean, and so on. Each Hispanic community is unique, having its own roots, traditions and history, and its own peculiar way of being Hispanic. However, all of these groups share some fundamental elements: first is the Spanish language or variations thereof. Most of us are Catholic, with a distinct inclination for popular participation and a mistrust of powerful institutions, with a deep sense of celebration and of the tragic element of life. We also share certain other important cultural elements we inherited from Spain; but do remember that just as important are the Amerindian or African contributions that joined the Spanish component in the formation (and distinguishing definitions) of our various cultures. And—most especially—all our communities share in what is called "popular religiosity."<sup>1</sup> This was and is the main vehicle for our

---

<sup>1</sup>There is a growing body of literature dealing with popular religiosity. As examples, cf. P. H. Vrijhof and J. Waardenburg, eds., *Official and Popular Religion: Analysis of a Theme for Religious Studies* (The Hague: Mouton, 1979); S. Galilea, *Religiosidad popular y pastoral* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1979); R. and C. Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984); Pedro A. Ribeiro de Oliveira, ed., *A religião do povo* (Curitiba: Cadernos da Universidade Católica, 1976); V. and E. Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); F. C. Rolim, *Religião e classes populares* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1980); L. Maldonado, *Introducción a la religiosidad popular* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1985); A. Cabré Ruffat, ed., *La fe de un pueblo. Historia y misión* (Santiago: Mundo, 1977).

evangelization, and a very important guardian of our culture, history and identity. Without popular religiosity we would not be the peoples we are. *Our identity as an integral part of the Catholic Church* would not have survived the frequent clashes with the Non-Hispanic—and often, anti-Hispanic—ways of the church in America, *had our popular religiosity not* kept us Catholic in spite of prejudice, rejection and “religio-cultural” invasions.

Having said this, we must clarify that the “locus” of our theological work is the Hispanic community of South Florida, which is very much from Caribbean roots (and that means Spanish and African). Though the vast majority of the Hispanic population of South Florida is Cuban-American (like the two of us), in recent years our corner of the world keeps attracting more and more persons of non-Caribbean Hispanic backgrounds. It has also been our privilege to work with Hispanics from other parts of the country. We have discussed many of our ideas and intuitions with other Hispanic theologians and have discovered that what we share far surpasses that which might distinguish us from one another.

One more point. The Catholic Church was alive in what is today the United States at least a century before the Pilgrims landed in New England. Hispanic Catholics were here, in the Southwest and in Florida, before the thirteen British colonies. And we have never gone away. Though very many of us are immigrants, the majority are Americans by birth or citizenship, and, as a consequence, we are members of the American Catholic family. Many statistical projections point to Hispanics being half of all American Catholics by the end of this century. A Hispanic dimension and awareness in theology, as a consequence, cannot be seen as a temporary “scholarly fad.” Which brings us to the last observation.

The Hispanic Catholic communities in America are, with few exceptions, not formed by the wealthy or the successful. Most of our people are the hard-working poor, many of whom feel treated as second-class members by both church and society.<sup>2</sup> Any theology that today pretends to be both Catholic and American cannot ignore that fact, at the risk of being neither. And obviously, this applies even more so to a theology that pretends to be Catholic, American and Hispanic. In our country the church is also the “Church of the poor,” and that is very important. The Hispanic poor are nearly half the church.

---

<sup>2</sup>On Hispanics in the U.S., the following are important studies, from different perspectives. C. McWilliams, *North from Mexico: The Spanish-Speaking People of the United States* (New York: Greenwood, 1968); V. Elizondo, *Christianity and Culture* (San Antonio: MACC, 1975); L. J. Mosqueda, *Chicanos, Catholicism, and Political Ideology* (New York: University Press of America, 1986); R. Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); A. Mirandé, *The Chicano Experience: An Alternative Perspective* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985); D. Abalos, *Latinos in the United States* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986); J. P. Fitzpatrick, *Puerto Rican Americans: The Meaning of Migration to the Mainland* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971); R. Gonzalez and M. LaVelle, *The Hispanic Catholic in the United States: A Socio-Cultural and Religious Profile* (New York: Northeast Pastoral Center for Hispanics, 1985).

## B. QUESTIONS OF METHOD

In both 1987 and 1988 we presented workshop papers at our conventions.<sup>3</sup> In them we sought to explore the possibilities, justifications and applications of a theological method that would be truly "Hispanic-American" and not merely an adaptation of North Atlantic or Latin American methodologies. Given the time limits of the current presentation, we cannot but very briefly indicate some highlights that were developed in those two previous papers. We think that this quick reference to our *presuppositions* and *context* is important in order to understand the way we have theologically dealt here with providence and human responsibility.

We recognize that there not only could be, but in fact are, other ways of theologically dealing with providence and human responsibility from a Hispanic perspective. However, we made a choice, a few years ago, to attempt to theologize from within Hispanic popular religiosity, because the latter provided us with a richness of faith and experience that was not readily available elsewhere among Hispanics, and also because of popular religiosity's ability to bind the various Hispanic communities together. Finally, we made our choice for this method because of popular religiosity's role as guardian of our cultures, and because—being such an important creation of our people—it could help ensure that our theology would truly remain in touch with the depths of those it attempts to understand and address.

1. *Methodological presuppositions*

All theology presupposes method, and all methods are founded on choices made by the theologian. Theological method is never solely made or used on purely "theological" grounds. Culture (with all it entails) and ideology, with its roots, ramifications and social functions, do enter and color all theological methods, their choice, justifications, development and applications. Theological method is always qualified and marked by class interests and socio-cultural presuppositions about the nature and content of truth (and about how to attain to it). Therefore, the theologian, conscious of it or not, is always rooted in culture, history and class, with their biases, interests, worldviews and assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

No serious theology can be created today that is not truly aware of its context, ideological motives, social functions, and so on. And by the same token, without this previous awareness a Hispanic theological method would be reduced to repetition of pre-existing North-Atlantic or Latin American models, or worse, slide into religious demagogery.

---

<sup>3</sup>The full-length papers have not been published, but were distributed to those attending the workshops and are available upon request. For the published synopses of the papers, cf. O. Espín and S. García, "Hispanic-American Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 42 (1987) 114-19, and "The Sources of Hispanic Theology," *idem* 43 (1988) 122-25.

<sup>4</sup>Our thought on the questions of method has been influenced by the writings of Antonio Gramsci and Pedro A. Ribeiro de Oliveira.

2. *Popular religiosity as bearer of Tradition  
and, in consequence, as theological source*

Tradition is the life of the church as lived out and understood in history. Inspired and sustained by the Spirit, the church believes and teaches, celebrates and prays, serves and witnesses in specific ways that, it claims, not only do not contradict Scripture but rather clarify, develop and embody the meanings and intentions of Scripture. Tradition is (at least) these historical teachings and practices.

The canonical biblical text needs to be interpreted by the present-day reader, assisted by the exegetical sciences, in order to become a source for theology. Unless the contemporary Christian is personally and existentially engaged by the biblical text today, that text would remain an archaeological, sterile document. However, the contemporary Christian can recognize him/herself as Christian, even prior to entering into existential dialogue with the text of the Scriptures, precisely by sharing in the set of meanings, doctrines and practices that have been handed down in and through what we call Tradition. The Christian can read the Scriptures within the context of meaning given by Tradition. Tradition leads us to ask the very questions that Scripture can answer.

The biblical text offers the substantial and seminal contents and meanings, while Tradition (which provided the context that gave rise to the biblical text) unfolds, develops, applies and interprets that message which Scripture offers in a seminal way.

The church's Tradition is thus historically expressed through other means besides the biblical text. And one of these means has been, and is, popular religiosity.

In our American case, popular religiosity is one common element that emerges from the rich variety of the Hispanic world in the United States. It is probably the least “invaded” area of any of the Hispanic cultures, one of the most “popular” of our peoples' creations, and the more deeply “ours.” It can be seen as a font of Hispanic worldviews and self-concepts.

In general terms, popular religiosity can be defined as the set of experiences, beliefs and rituals which ecclesially and socially peripheral groups create and develop in their search for an access to God and salvation. Often popular religiosity is created as a response to socio-cultural contexts that make people perceive themselves as somehow distant from the “official” Church and society.<sup>5</sup>

There is abundant evidence to support the view that Christian popular religiosity, of one kind or another, has been in existence since at least the post-apostolic church<sup>6</sup> (and some might claim, not without reasonable arguments and

<sup>5</sup>Cf. O. Espín, “Religiosidad popular: un aporte para su definición y hermenéutica,” *Estudios Sociales* 58 (1984) 41-56.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., cf. L. Maldonado, *Génesis del catolicismo popular* (Madrid: Cristianad, 1979); I. Herwegen, *Iglesia y aima. Estudio sobre la evolución de la piedad en la Edad Media* (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1957); P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); R. Van den Broek, “Popular Religious Practices and Ecclesiastical Policies in the Early Church,” in *Official and Popular Religion*, ed. P. H. Vrijhof and J. Waardenburg, 11-54; H. J. Carpenter, “Popular Christianity and the Theologians in the Early Centuries,” *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 14 (1963).

evidence, that even the apostolic generation had created its own brand—or brands—of popular religiosity). But especially, one need not prove that some of today's official dogmas were yesterday's popular beliefs, often the subject of heated debate by theologians and bishops of the time.

The universe of popular religious beliefs and practices, fashioned by the people as a "supplement" to official Christianity, has been and is a vehicle through which truth can be and is communicated in the church, and that a proper understanding of Tradition cannot ignore (nor can studies of popular religiosity disregard this very important function of the people's "supplementary" experience of faith).

Popular religiosity, however, has not been only the vehicle for "devotional statements" that later became defined dogmas. It has been (and still is) the means for communicating non-defined doctrine (which, might or might not coincide with the Magisterium's positions), for preserving the people's discerning *sensus fidei* (which relates not only to the doctrinal but also to the "praxical"), and for a *crítica* of the official Tradition, doctrine and practices.<sup>7</sup> Popular religiosity has also been (and still is) an important means through which people are evangelized. The faith has been preserved among many because of popular religiosity's evangelizing and "supplementary" roles.

If one understands popular religiosity and Tradition, and the relationship between them, in the ways that have been very briefly indicated above, then one can easily see the immense importance that the study of popular religiosity has for all theology. But when confronted with the role that popular religiosity has in the Hispanic context, its importance becomes so central that it would be meaningless to attempt to theologize in that Hispanic context while disregarding popular religiosity.

### 3. Two Visions of Christian Tradition

Hispanic Christianity exists thanks to the evangelizing role of popular religiosity.<sup>8</sup> The historical neglect to which Hispanics have been submitted by church and society, added to the constant pressure to become assimilated, would have long ago done away with Catholicism among Hispanics and with Hispanic culture

<sup>7</sup>The literature on the various roles of popular religiosity within Christianity is very vast. Rather than selecting a few titles here, we prefer to suggest the two best published bibliographies on the subject: Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil, *Bibliografia sobre religiosidade popular*, Estudos da CNBB 27 (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1981); C. Johansson and I. Pérez, "Bibliografía sobre religiosidad popular," *Teología Vida* 28/1-2 (1987) 105-73.

<sup>8</sup>The two bibliographies indicated in the preceding note contain much material on the evangelizing role of popular religiosity. Though referred to Latin America specifically, the reflections of the Puebla Document on this subject are pertinent to the U.S. Hispanic context (cf. *Puebla*, 444-69). See also V. Elizondo, *Galilian Journey* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1983); J. Vidal, "Popular Religion among Hispanics in the General Area of the Archdiocese of Newark," in *Presencia Nueva: A Study of Hispanics in the Archdiocese of Newark* (Newark: Archdiocesan Office of Research and Planning, 1988) 235-352. [This long essay by J. Vidal is one of the finest articles ever published on the evangelizing role of popular religiosity among U.S. Hispanics of Caribbean origins.]

in general. The Catholic faith of the people has been one of the key elements in the preservation of culture, and vice versa. The relationship between faith and cultural identity (and all that the latter implies) cannot be overly stressed in the Hispanic context. Though not necessarily so in principle, in fact the abandonment of the Catholic Church by Hispanics usually entails, in less than two generations, the weakening or even the loss of cultural identity and the consequences that this implies. Catholicism has been a major matrix of Hispanic culture, and this is of utmost importance for theology.

However, when we speak of “Catholicism” in relation to Hispanic culture, we are not simply or mainly referring to the institutionalized version most frequent among Anglos. In the Hispanic context Catholicism is mostly (though obviously not exclusively) “popular Catholicism,” i.e., the version born of popular religiosity and handed down through generations by the laity more than by the teachers and ordained ministers of the Church. This way of being Catholic has always thought of itself as being the true faith of Christians, being as equally “Catholic” as the clergy’s version (to the point that, in some Hispanic cultural communities—for example, in Hispanic groups of Caribbean origin—the two visions are distinguished precisely as “the clergy’s” and “ours”).<sup>9</sup>

If the contents of the two visions of Tradition were to be synoptically compared, we would find significant differences in the symbolic, cultural and analogical use of language, in liturgical expressions, and in doctrinal emphases. These differences, if not understood as being at this level, could be misinterpreted and conflict might arise. We do not believe, however, that significant differences will be found in the *essential* elements of the faith (keeping in mind the role that culture plays in always contextualizing the faith and every expression of it). In other words, when careful examination is made of the “official” and “popular” versions of Tradition, the two will be found to be *essentially* the same, though culturally and symbolically expressed in different manners, and with doctrinal and praxical emphases that deeply reveal the socio-historical realities and interests of the holders of either vision of the Tradition. We further believe that it is these socio-historical realities and interests that ultimately create the significant distinctions between these two strands of Christian Tradition.<sup>10</sup>

When confronted with the reality of the Hispanic milieu, with the cultural matrix role of Catholicism, and with the ideological (though not always public) distinctions between the “official” and the “popular” visions of Tradition, the Hispanic theologian faces a very serious set of challenges and urgent questions. First of all, the theologian may be perceived by some as a member of the “official” church that has alienated (and continues to alienate) so many Hispanics. This

---

<sup>9</sup>Cf. J. Vidal, “Popular Religion among Hispanics in the General Area of the Archdiocese of Newark,” 256-61. The studies of E. Hall about “high-” and “low-context” cultures and communication might suggest an avenue for further study of the two-dimensional tradition. Cf. E. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Garden City NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1963); *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1966); *Beyond Culture* (Garden City NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1976).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. O. Espín, *Evangelización y religiones negras* (Rio de Janeiro: PUC, 1984) 2:219-319.

can be a drawback. For whom and for whose ideological and social interests does the theologian speak? Who benefits, socio-historically, from his/her theology? Second, the theologian shares (consciously or not, by ecclesiastic and academic recognition and by professional training) in the church's "official" vision of Tradition that is presented to Hispanics as exclusively normative, with formulae and structures which Hispanic popular religiosity may not always easily accept as solely valid, and may even reject, totally or partially, or even ignore. Which vision of Tradition must the Hispanic theologian be faithful to, especially at the times they might not seem to agree? Can a theology, as we know it, be made that excludes either vision of Tradition? Can a theology be made that combines the two visions, and if so, how can this be done without "colonizing" either vision? Is contextualized theology the only legitimate theology possible? Or has theology as we know it been a single contextualized theology that "colonized" other cultural milieux, and if so, what is its legitimacy outside of its original cultural context?

In our 1987 workshop paper we took up these and similar questions, as well as the themes we have been discussing here so far, and then attempted to outline a theological method for the creation of a truly Catholic, Hispanic theology in this country. In that paper we proposed a manner for retrieving the core themes of popular religiosity and, in a culturally respectful way, theologize from and on them. We refer you to that paper, since what follows presupposes it. However, you will probably be able to deduce the main elements of our method from our use of them here.

Now that we have briefly discussed our presuppositions and context, let us look at providence and human responsibility within the universe of Hispanic popular religiosity.

### C. THE DATA FROM POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

Where does the theologian go, in the complex world of Hispanic popular religiosity, to find belief in and references to divine providence and human responsibility? How and where do people express what could be interpreted as *their* "doctrine" on providence and human responsibility? In other words, what does the popular vision of Tradition have to say about our subject, and where do we find this said (consciously or not)?

#### 1. *The Level of the Expressions*

There seem to be several areas of expression of Hispanic popular beliefs and practices regarding divine providence and human responsibility, and among these areas we chose two of the most common: (1) "wisdom" phrases, and (2) the practice of *promesas*.

##### a. *"Wisdom" phrases*

By "wisdom" phrases we understand those aphorisms that are frequently used in daily life to explain circumstances, to communicate meaning, to teach values and expected behavior, and in general to share among the members of a community the wisdom of living learned by many generations.

Evidently, most human cultures have these "wisdom" phrases. So Hispanics are not unique in their creation. Nor are we different from many other human groups in that our aphorisms tend to have explicit religious contents. However common "wisdom" phrases might be in the world, among Hispanics they seem to be omnipresent, especially those phrases that refer to God. Who hasn't heard the often repeated *si Dios quiere* (i.e., "if God wills it") on the lips of Hispanics? Or the very religious *vaya con Dios* (i.e., "go with God")?<sup>11</sup>

It is not our intention to do a thorough examination of the meaning expressed through Hispanic "wisdom" phrases. We will limit ourselves to a few examples that, because they are so common in daily usage, might indicate to us some elements of a Hispanic understanding of the relation between providence and human responsibility.

There are a number of these popular phrases that refer to this relation. They do this by uniting, in a one-liner, both elements. For example: *al que madruga Dios lo ayuda* (i.e., "God helps the early riser"), or a *Dios rogando y con el mazo dando* (i.e., "pray to God and hit the hammer"), and *ayúdate que yo te ayudaré* (i.e., "help yourself and I will help you," implying that God is the speaker of this phrase).

These examples, and others that could have been mentioned, clearly indicate that God's help and intervention in daily life can be expected, but this requires that humans must do their part. These phrases seem to point to human cooperation as the condition for God's helpful intervention.

But there are other "wisdom" phrases that are pertinent here because they refer to another dimension of providence. For example: *Dios aprieta pero no ahoga* (i.e., "God squeezes but doesn't strangle"), or *Dios tarda pero no olvida* (i.e., "God might be late, but not forgetful"), or *Dios sabe lo que hace* (i.e., "God knows what he is doing"), etc.

These (and other) phrases indicate a sense of life being in the hands of God, even if humans do not understand how, or even if events might seem to point to another conclusion. There seems to be a strong faith in the active presence of a caring God.

### b. The Practice of Promesas

It is difficult to walk into church buildings in heavily Hispanic neighborhoods or towns and not notice the many votive candles next to statues of Christ, Mary and of many of the saints. And in many places one will also find all sorts of other objects next to these statues: pieces of paper requesting help in dealing with specific problems, or small photographs of persons being prayed for, or diverse items that might express gratitude after the favors requested were granted. A clear example of church building that comes to mind in this context is the cathedral of San Antonio, Texas. But Hispanic churches all over America, regardless of the His-

---

<sup>11</sup>Our acquaintance with these and many other "wisdom phrases" comes from direct participation in our Hispanic communities. However, there have begun to appear published collections of these sayings. Merely as an example (applicable mainly but not solely to U.S. Hispanics of Dominican origin), see J. A. Cruz Brache, *Cinco mil seiscientas refranes y frases de uso común entre los dominicanos* (Santo Domingo: Galaxia: 1978).

panic community they serve, all share this abundance of external witness to our people's prayers.

Behind these public symbols lies the practice of *promesas* ("promises"), and behind these in turn there is a belief in divine providence and in human responsibility.

Though perhaps externally similar to a *do ut des* type of relationship with the Sacred, in fact the making of "promises" is more accurately described through familial categories. Christ, Mary and the saints are not powerful, sacred entities. Rather, they are members of the family, and they are very often treated as such. And in cultures where the inter-personal, relational dimension is of paramount importance, and where life seems to be organized around one's neighborhood's and family's web of relations, there should be no surprise when Christ, Mary and the saints are treated as relatives or friends who are very well connected.

"Promises" are made to obtain desired favors from Christ, Mary or the saints, or to have them intercede with God on the petitioner's behalf. People would promise to observe certain religious rituals, or to do works of charity, or to say specific prayers, and so on. Just about anything can be promised, religious or not, just as the favor sought can be anything.

Making a *promesa* is not a commitment to "pay" for a favor, not anymore than one could "pay" for a mother's or a sibling's act of love. A *promesa* is an external witness, a public statement of an internal attitude of trust and confidence, of faith in the ultimate goodness of providence, and a sign of belief in the very existence of that providence.

"Promises" imply that all of human life is open to the action of God, and that this God only acts in favor of human beings. "Promises" are a concrete and implicit cultural way of stating that we believe in a *Deus pro nobis*. But they are also—and just as importantly—means through which humans commit themselves to cooperate with providence. In other words, though the "promise" is not a "payment," it is a concrete and tangible way for the human person to show that he/she is willing to do his/her share in bringing about that which is requested of God in prayer. A *promesa* is binding on the petitioner, while leaving providence free to do as it might choose (even if there is the confidence that the choice will always be fair and loving).

## 2. The Level of "Popular Doctrine"

Together with and beyond the more common ways through which Hispanic popular religiosity expresses a belief and trust in God's providence, there is the level of what we have earlier called "popular doctrine"—a vision of Tradition that essentially coincides with what the "official" church teaches, but which might significantly differ from the latter in doctrinal and praxical expressions or emphases.

To ask Hispanic "popular doctrine" to state what it means by providence, human responsibility and the relation between the two, is to ask for a well contemplated and experienced dimension of Hispanic faith life. It is to open popular religiosity to a deeper level of understanding.

The contents of this "popular doctrine," however, are not retrieved from professional theological books or from Magisterial statements. The contents are

found (for example) in the formal prayers printed and used by the people, in the informal but frequent family catecheses that parents and grandparents offer their children as they teach the basics of the faith, or in the doctrinal presuppositions that stand implicitly behind all sorts of moral decision-making. But above all, "popular doctrine" can be discovered in the faith experience of people, as they attempt to respond (from within that faith) to the challenges of their daily world.

Providence is not a theological concept to be discussed. Nor is human responsibility. When answers are sought from Hispanic faith, the response will only be given when the listener remembers the contexts from where the answers come.

In a world of poverty and of second-class treatment, in a world of hard work and frequent frustration, of injustices and prejudice, of broken promises and pain, our Christian belief in human responsibility stands out not through statements but through frequent and concrete gestures and commitments to loyalty and trust, to family and community. Belief in human responsibility and cooperation with God needs to be seen under the light of the prophetic role it plays in the midst of our broken Hispanic world.

"Popular doctrine" on providence is "experienced" or "contemplated"—more than "thought-out" or reflected. It is a trust that creation and history are meaningful and have an ultimate purpose, and that the meaning and the purpose are fundamentally good. It believes that God is the ultimate source, goal and foundation of that creation and history. And that this God, in order to sustain and confirm the goodness of his creation and our history, can and does occasionally give signs of his majesty and compassion to his people (especially to the poor among them). These formulae of "popular doctrine" on providence and on human responsibility come clothed with the symbols of popular religiosity and of our cultures.

The "popular doctrine" on providence and on human responsibility has traditionally joined the two, so that providence's historical signs require human cooperation, explicit actions, and "promises" of good works. And at the same time, human responsibility alone is seen as ultimately insufficient, requiring God's caring favor. We may argue, then, that popular-religious doctrine on providence and human responsibility professes neither fatalistic providentialism nor flagrant Pelagianism.

#### D. ATTEMPT AT A SYSTEMATIC RETRIEVAL OF POPULAR-RELIGIOUS-DOCTRINE ON PROVIDENCE AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

We will now endeavor to re-think and re-formulate the structures and categories we have proposed above in terms of systematic-theological perspectives. Our method is, in a sense, a retrieval of the popular-religious categories on providence and human responsibility, and their correlation with contemporary system-

atic theological articulation.<sup>12</sup> We will use the categories of "Wisdom sayings," "Promises" and "Hispanic faith life" (understood as the experienced and contemplated popular doctrine we have referred to before) as the hermeneutical clues for our task. They provide, within Hispanic popular religiosity, an instructive and important set of categories, or, in more practical terms, of starting points for our attempt at systematization.

### 1. Providence, Human Responsibility and the Notion of Covenant

We will consider the biblical and theological notion of "covenant" as it correlates to a Hispanic popular-religious theology of providence.<sup>13</sup> We will try to illustrate how this notion relates to the Hispanic praxis of *promesa*, "wisdom phrases," and lived faith experience, as covenant-signs proclaiming that we stand, in our human nakedness, in need of God's concrete, specific favor (providence).

First of all, the idea of covenant presupposes God's gracious action on behalf of his people (manifested as liberation from oppression of one kind or another) and also the confirmation of the people's dignity and worth before God, and, ultimately, God's affirmation of their lives, filled with meaning and purpose.<sup>14</sup> This gracious act of God invariably demands the response of the people (Ex 19: 3-8). Though it is always, first and foremost, God's initiative, the biblical authors present us, as it were, with a "mutual agreement," which once contracted, it cannot and it will not be dissolved. Not by God, who is always faithful to his promises and covenants.<sup>15</sup> Not by the people, even in the face of their idolatric and other sinful practices, since, on the one hand, it is God who keeps the covenant valid, and on the other hand, there are always those who remain faithful among the people, the remnant, identified in later Hebrew theology with the *anawim*, the poor, the helpless, those who trust in God alone for liberation and salvation.

The idea of covenant implies self-surrender to the caring and loving God who has established such a partnership with his people as a gracious act of love and

---

<sup>12</sup>For a contemporary use of the method of correlation in another theological context, cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). Obviously our use of *correlation* is not the same as Tillich's. It does not entail correlating the philosophical question with the revealed (theological) answer. We attempt to correlate the explicit or implicit categories found in Hispanic popular religiosity with their equivalent forms in mainstream systematic theology. Understood in this sense, our use of correlation finds itself interwoven with contextualization, or perhaps more properly said, theological inculturation. We are indebted to the indispensable work of Robert Schreier, especially his fine analysis of the seven approaches to popular religion in his *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1985).

<sup>13</sup>For theological perspectives of "covenant" with the people as related to promise, fidelity, and eschatology, and within the Hispanic world at large, cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación*, 12th ed. (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1985) 206-26. Gutiérrez's insights are quite valid and relevant for Hispanic communities in the United States.

<sup>14</sup>Dennis McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1972); Luis A. Schöckel and Juan Sicre, *Los Profetas de Israel*, 2 vols. (Madrid: Cristiandad, 1985); Gerhard von Rad, *Teología del Antiguo Testamento* (Salamanca: Sígueme) 1:222-23, 250-52; Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación*.

<sup>15</sup>Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación*; Hosea 2:1-18; 3:1-5.

compassion (Is 41: 21ff; 44: 1ff; 49: 16). Within Hispanic popular religiosity, God's providence is seen as a personal action of God on behalf of the people with whom it establishes the covenant. But, as we have seen, both in the Sinaitic and the Christian covenants, we discern the need for the human response, committing the human fidelity to it, and, more specifically within the messianic community of Jesus, to perpetuate the celebration of that covenant. Within the Hispanic universe of popular religiosity, this celebration may at times center on a Hispanic symbol-clothed eucharistic celebration. Quite often, however, the celebration will take the form of a procession, or other para-liturgical rites such as a popular Passion play, or a popular re-enactment of events in Jesus' (or Mary's, or a saint's) life.<sup>16</sup> This also implies further levels of human responsibility, in living out the experienced and contemplated implications of the covenant: solidarity, justice, love.

Hispanic popular religiosity has a deep, albeit athematic, or intuitive, sense of human fallibility, nakedness, and helplessness.<sup>17</sup> Given this radical fallibility that makes us reliant on God alone, we can see why, in Hispanic popular faith-experience, God's unique efficacious mediator (Jesus) and God's "family" (Mary and the saints) become, as we have mentioned before, very real and personal family members for the living faith of Hispanics—hence, in a certain sense they become "mediators" for this Hispanic faith experience.<sup>18</sup> This personal, intimate relationship, requires—intuitively, experientially—a sign of confirmation of the "mutual agreement," of the individual covenant between the person, in prayer of supplication or petition, and God. This sign, on the part of the popular religiosity of the faithful, is the *promesa*, which, ultimately, as we stated before, is seen—conceptually or intuitively—as radically insufficient before the Mystery of Love and Holiness that is God.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup>O. Espín and S. García, "The Sources of Hispanic Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 43 (1988) 122-25.

<sup>17</sup>O. Espín and S. García, "Toward a Hispanic American Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 42 (1987) 114-19. We find this *sentimiento trágico* in Hispanic secular literature in Miguel de Unamuno, *Del sentimiento trágico de la vida*, *Ensayos Completos*, ed. Bernardo del Cándamo (Madrid: Aguilar, 1966) 2:729-1,022; cf. the novels of the Mexican Carlos Fuentes (*Cambio de Piel* [Barcelona: Seiz Barral, 1967], among others); the Colombian Nobel Laureate Gabriel García Márquez (*Cien Años de Soledad* [Buenos Aires: Ed. Sudamericana, 1967]; *El General en su Laberinto* [Buenos Aires: Ed. Sudamericana, 1989]).

<sup>18</sup>We use here the concept of "mediator" in a purely secondary and analogical sense, certainly not in the same sense as Jesus' exclusive and efficacious mediation. On recent documents of the hierarchical Magisterium on the role of Mary, cf. ch. 8 of *Lumen Gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution of the Church), several editions; Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*; John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*; from a Hispanic-American angle, cf. Virgilio Elizondo, "Foreword" to Allen Figueroa Deck, *The Second Wave* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist 1989) xii-xvi; on the role of the saints in the theological enterprise, cf. William Thompson, *Fire and Light: Doing Theology with the Saints* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1987).

<sup>19</sup>Karl Rahner has made "Mystery" the key concept of his foundational theology. Among his numerous writings on the topic, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1978); cf. also James Bacik, *Mystagogy and the Eclipse of Mystery* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980). "Mystery" is also foundational for Hispanic theology.

We agree that in some cases, the religious attitude behind the *promesa* borders on the magical. In these cases, we do not have an acknowledgment, however implicit, of God's gracious love incarnated as saving, helping, liberating grace bestowed on human beings, but rather an attitude of constraint, of demanding God to help me assuming I promise to do certain things. But even a superficial overview of the actual practice in the Hispanic faith-experience tells us that this is much more the exception than the rule.<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, like any other practical manifestation of any faith-experience, the attitudes and practices of the *promesa* need to grow and be nurtured, at several levels:

a. They need to grow into the awareness of basic human helplessness before the Holy Mystery we call God. This transition will take place in the context of evangelization and/or catechesis, which do not imply, should not imply, an attitude of "purification" of popular religiosity by "learned" non-Hispanic—or even Hispanic—pastoral agents, but rather the Enthüllung, the unveiling of the deeper layers of theological and spiritual possibilities of this—and any other—concrete form of the Hispanic faith experience.<sup>21</sup>

b. Hispanic theology should point the way to the deeper, personal consequences and implications of the practice of *promesa*: an intimate, personal, prayerful and practical self-surrender and commitment (covenant) to Jesus and to the God of Jesus, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This self-surrender will still be—as indeed it must be—clothed with the symbols and forms of Hispanic popular religiosity, and as such, will allow Hispanics to form communities—different forms of communities—of faith and celebration, where the communitary praxis will display the same universe of Hispanic popular-religious symbols and forms.<sup>22</sup>

Within this deepened relationship with God, the Hispanic sense of providence will include a commitment (which, again, is a form of *promesa*) to do the works of love, of social justice, of the common good, as even more vital signs of the Hispanic human response and responsibility within the context of God's gracious providence.

Finally, a Hispanic theology of providence and human responsibility should affirm the theological value of the experienced doctrine, of intuitively contemplated tradition, as a privileged "place" for doing theology. It is this experience of popular doctrinal beliefs that will allow the theologian engaged in the Hispanic theological approach to providence, to glean out the communitary, ecclesiological and christological elements in Hispanic popular-religious experiences of providence and awareness of human responsibility.

<sup>20</sup>The magical approach to the worship of Mary and the saints is more common in peripheral or marginal (often non-Christian) popular religiosity. Cf. Espín and García, "Toward a Hispanic American Theology," *CTSA Proceedings* 42.

<sup>21</sup>For the idea of unveiling the deeper layers of reality, we draw (with adaptations) from Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1979); cf. also José María Castillo, *Símbolos de Libertad: Teología de los Sacramentos* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 1981) 141-64.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Espín and García, in *CTSA Proceedings* 42 and 43.

## 2. Providence, Human Responsibility, and Ecclesiology

In our 1987 workshop on Hispanic theology we referred to the peculiar notion of church in Hispanic popular religiosity, and the equally peculiar attitudes toward it.<sup>23</sup> The ecclesial-communitary element may be expressed differently from mainstream ecclesial practice, and may even be absent in some particular instances.

If we take into account, on the one hand, the role that Hispanic popular celebrations (such as processions honoring Christ, Mary and the saints) play in forming community, and on the other hand, the dynamics of “wisdom phrases,” promises, and lived faith-experience as experiences of these communities, we could argue that there is a sense of church, of a faith-community, present in popular religiosity, not easily compatible with regular communitary or ecclesial practices, such as parish or diocesan activities. We have developed this in detail in our workshop paper in 1987. Here we will only discuss some fundamental thoughts.

First of all, the theological community in general, and the church ministers will agree that we experience God’s providence, and the need for human responsibility, as part of a community of faith, even if such an experience presents at times an external individualistic profile.<sup>24</sup> We celebrate God’s salvific, providential love in our liturgies. In the Hispanic world we learn about God’s providence from other members of the communities of faith, in most instances from lay members, rather than ordained or commissioned ministers. Often, we seek help from people of the church, whether they be pastoral agents or not, to actualize our human responsibility regarding God’s providence.

The Hispanic “wisdom phrases,” promises and faith-life are born within the Hispanic faith milieux and faith experiences. Hispanic popular celebrations such as Passion Plays or Passion re-enactments, processions and others, presuppose a communitary participation, on occasions centered around a Hispanic parish or base community.<sup>25</sup> They presuppose a sense of church, however different from the mainstream theological and praxiological understanding of the term. It presupposes an ecclesiology, or, if this sounds too pretentious, a theology of community, however implicit it may be at times.

In our workshop last year in Toronto, we suggested that popular-religious Tradition is not a marginal part of, but also an indispensable element of Tradition as a whole. We have reiterated this perspective in the first part of our paper. Last year we proposed as a “test case” the practice of Passion Plays in Hispanic faith-communities. We proposed at that time, that these celebrations imply an ecclesiology. Here we further that idea by suggesting that the Hispanic attitude toward providence and human responsibility, can only be begotten within a community, even if the experienced and contemplated expectations of providence do not convey a full thematic consciousness of that communitary context.

The task of the theologian engaged in the systematic retrieval of these categories is to unveil the “sacramental” and kerygmatic perspectives within this ec-

<sup>23</sup>Espín and García, in *CTSA Proceedings* 42.

<sup>24</sup>Espín and García, in *CTSA Proceedings* 43.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

clesiology or communitary theology.<sup>26</sup> Here we suggest that "promises" usually imply a "sign," a concrete thing the person vows to do, or to abstain from. This becomes the secular sacrament of his partnership with the providential God. In a sense, given the Hispanic cultural milieu, we must say that promises, along with wisdom sayings and the lived faith-experience, flow out of the Hispanic popular religious sense of the sacramental structure of all reality.

The wisdom sayings form an extra-liturgical echoing of the Word present in our existential identity. "Logos" connotes not only "Word" but also intelligence of, or about something.<sup>27</sup> The proverbs heard within the Hispanic context are, as stated before, quite frequently, of a religious nature; they reflect the Hispanic perspective on God's providential initiative and the human answer in a non-conceptual theological way. They are, in fact, an invitation to fully live the faith-experiences of our communities.<sup>28</sup>

### 3. Providence, Human Responsibility, and Christology

There are few practical docetists and monophysites in the different Hispanic faith communities. We reflected on this last year in the context of the implicit christologies in Hispanic Passion Plays. We can say the same regarding Hispanic popular-religious notions of God's providence and human responsibility.

We have already alluded to one reason for this phenomenon. Hispanic popular spirituality perceives Jesus in a very personal fashion, as a "family member." The foundational attitude of Hispanic popular religiosity toward Jesus emphasizes more the attitude of accessibility to, and familiarity with him, than that of awe and distance. Within the Hispanic faith-experience, Jesus is not God disguised as, or playing the role of a human being.<sup>29</sup>

Another reason, closely interwoven with the first, is that the Hispanic popular religious concept of God's providence implies the notion of mediation. The practice of making promises implies a mediation for this covenantal relationship; the "wisdom phrases" allude to the concrete forms of human responsibility as mediating the forms of God's providence. The lived faith-experience implies the concrete human situation that presupposes a human mediator of providential graces. We could argue that there is, in all forms of popular-religious notions of providence, an implicit christocentrism which quite often becomes explicit.<sup>30</sup> In prayer and icon, Hispanic popular religiosity has sought God's salvific providence recognizing the uniqueness of Jesus' mediation within Christian parameters of faith.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. note 21. On the communitary element of all faith-experiences and of all theological endeavors, cf. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 20; Allan Deck, *The Second Wave*; Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. A. Debrunner, *λόγος*, in vol. 4 of *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1967) 69ff.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. García and Espín, *CTSA Proceedings* 43.

<sup>29</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Jesucristo Liberador* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 1975); Jon Sobrino, *Cristología desde Latinoamérica* (México: Ediciones CRT, 1977). Karl Rahner has insisted on this theme throughout his theological literary output: cf. *Theological Investigations*, vols. 4, 5, 21, among others; cf. also ch. 6 of *Foundations*.

<sup>30</sup>Espín and García, *CTSA Proceedings* 43.

Icons, shrines, and prayer formulae to Mary and the saints reflect not so much—and certainly not in all cases—Mariolatry or Hagiolatry, but rather a recognition of what family members can do as intercession and as secondary and analogical “mediators.”

The concept of mediation, which in mainstream systematics finds its unique and privileged identity in Jesus’ efficacious intercession, allows for a christological and christocentric retrieval of providence and human responsibility in Hispanic theology in the U.S.A. We can retrieve this perspective in correlation to the Hispanic approach to providence and human responsibility, by pointing to the role of the suffering Jesus in Hispanic spirituality.

It would be difficult to find a Catholic Church in Latin American, or even in a U.S. Hispanic barrio, without an image of the suffering Christ. The craftsmen and artificers spare no sensibilities in conveying, in wood and paint, the agony and suffering of their blood-covered Christs.<sup>31</sup> The iconography of the Passion has a reflection in, and is itself a reflection of, Hispanic popular liturgies. Hispanic popular participation in the Paschal triduum traditionally emphasizes the celebration of Good Friday. People celebrate the Passion events with processions, where parish or community leaders bear the bleeding image of the suffering Christ, followed by the icon or statue of *la Madre Dolorosa* (The Sorrowful Mother). Although there have been changes in both iconography and liturgical praxis in recent times, these attitudes we have reflected on still hold in many Hispanic communities. The Paschal Vigil and Easter celebration, in some instances, are quite anticlimatic to the celebration of Good Friday.

“Wisdom phrases” also reflect this Good Friday-oriented celebration. By way of example: it is common to say, when referring to an injured person with physically ugly wounds, that so-and-so *parece un Cristo*, that is, that this person “looks like a Christ.” It is interesting the use of the indefinite article *un* in Spanish. The word “Christ” refers not only to the suffering Jesus of Nazareth, but to anyone whose suffering makes him or her “look like” Jesus the Christ. There is an intuitive notion of solidarity with the Passion of Jesus, which speaks powerfully to the poor, oppressed, discriminated, broken Hispanic world. In Hispanic popular religiosity, the theologian will find that christology remains, for the most part, kenotic and cross-centered, rather than incarnational or resurrectional. Jesus is the sorrowful *κύριος*, the suffering servant, but above all, he is the sacrament of God’s solidarity with the suffering and oppressed, of hope for liberation from that suffering and oppression, of love that fulfills humanity stricken by that suffering and oppression.

The preceding reflections allow us to address the role of christology in the Hispanic perception of providence. The solidarity and hope offered by the Cross constitute signs of God’s gracious providence, the possibility that prayers for deliverance from oppression and discrimination might be answered. This form of providence is not seen as immediate relief. It is rather a process rooted in history, a Hispanic *Heilsgeschichte*. Poverty, racism, oppression seemingly go on and on, unchallenged, and yet, we have the cross pointing to a resurrection. This resurrection still has not found its moment in Hispanic salvific history. The “first day

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

of the week" has not dawned yet in Hispanic time and space. And yet, intuitively, with deep certainty, popular religiosity tells Hispanic Christians that it has already taken place in Jesus, and hence it will, at a given point in time, take place in the history of their communities. It tells them that the oppressor will not prevail, and that the racist will be defeated by his or her own moral leprosy. It may even convey the message that the church is, by definition, universal, and thus cannot tolerate forever the marginalization of any group, however small, however large, of her sons and daughters.

As we have said twice before, for the Hispanic faith-experience, Jesus is not God in human disguise, to be approached with fear, awe and wonder, but primarily, "one of the family," the man of solidarity in sorrow and oppression, who also happens to be God's insuperable sacrament of love. Yet, the dimension of sin, and Jesus' mission as the deliverer from such sin, is present in the Hispanic expectation that God's providence, mediated by the suffering and solidaristic Christ, challenges, and eventually will prove stronger than the personal and social structures of sin: oppression, discrimination, marginalization.

Christology formulated in terms of a Hispanic theology of providence reflects and even deepens the mainstream Tradition's approach to the Jesus-event. It is not a juridical bandage to heal the wound of sin, superficially, leaving everything else untouched, but rather it is the mirror where we can see God's smiling face, telling those who toil and suffer in a world broken by injustice, racism and oppression, that in and through the person of the broken and risen Jesus, their persons and their lives possess an irreducible dignity, a depth of meaning and an orientation of hope that will prevail, in love and freedom, over the structures of sin. God will confirm this dignity and meaning even in the face of brokenness and injustice.<sup>32</sup>

In light of the above, human responsibility in a Hispanic theological retrieval of its relationship to God's providence finds a model in the suffering image of Christ. It does not lead to fatalism, because this suffering opens itself to hope. It cannot lead to implicit Pelagianism, because the first step toward liberation has been taken by the Christ of God, whose solidarity with us allows us to respond in love and freedom.

#### *4. Pastoral implications of a Hispanic theology of Providence and human responsibility*

Theology requires a responsibly analytical and critical attitude towards its method, presuppositions, hermeneutics and conclusions. This is also true, of course, of Hispanic theology, and the theologians, Hispanic or otherwise, who engage in such a theology must avoid the danger of absolutizing what is by its own nature, open to change, and always in need of it.

We have offered in this paper reflections on method and system for a Hispanic theology of providence and human responsibility based on Hispanic popular religiosity. A theologian seeking the pastoral applications and consequences of such a theology must analyze the critical role that popular-religious theological categories play vis-a-vis mainstream North American and European theologies, and then look at the problems and limitations of these popular-religious categories.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid. Cf. also Gutiérrez, *Teología de la Liberación*, 363ff.

It would be nothing short of theological idolatry to postulate that popular religiosity can claim exemption from responsible theological critical analysis. This would simply duplicate the mistake made for so long by some North American and European theologians who assumed that their methods and hermeneutics enjoy the privilege of infallibility, for varied and insufficient reasons, for example: theological longevity, the broader context of a supportive, “superior” culture, their mistaken identification of such First-World theologies with the faith of the Church or with Revelation itself, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

A Hispanic theology of providence stands as a critical alternative to mainstream theologies, at least to those theologies that dismiss the praxis of the people, especially the poor and the oppressed, as a theological locus. It reminds the mainstream theologian of the indispensable value of popular religious manifestations as a source for theological retrieval. It offers, to use a still useful expression, the “dangerous memory” of Jesus’ invitation to preferential commitment for the poor and marginalized.<sup>34</sup> It stands as the unceasing cry of the marginalized who does not accept the fact that God’s providence, insofar as it is always mediated by the community of faith, has not become structurally tangible and praxiological for all. It is, in short, an expression of true countercultural propheticism, which denounces as sinful not only the direct act of oppression, but the complicity with the oppressor by omission or indifference.

Just as Hispanic faith experiences can act as a critical and prophetic perspective when confronting mainstream or “official” church praxis and structures, evangelization (and theologizing) may only take place within the context of a prophetic, counter-cultural attitude and praxis addressed to those societies born and bred by consumerism, profit-inspired values, and in many cases, racism and other forms of discrimination.<sup>35</sup>

We could further remark that Hispanic theology of providence and human responsibility done within popular-religious categories, enriches and also prophetically criticizes mainstream theologies of providence by:

1. Emphasizing the rich universe of Hispanic communal symbols, that unveil communal-ecclesial life as one of suffering open to hope and deliverance. These symbols allow us to discover the core of Hispanic popular-religious certainty that the God of Jesus Christ will ultimately confirm the dignity and worth of their lives, and will eventually contribute to build a church faithful to her prophetic dimension.

2. It offers an experiential and intensely lived christology where the suffering humanity of Jesus is interpreted in terms of solidarity, freedom and love, a christology which avoids monophysitic and docetist nuances, as well as abstract reductionisms of Jesus’ mediating uniqueness. Within this popular-religious experiential christology, the theologian may even attempt to glean an implicit anthropology; the Hispanic christological dimension present within providential expectations, speaks powerfully of human beings whose divine image does not fade ever, even in the midst of personal or structural oppression.

<sup>33</sup>Clodovis Boff, *Theology and Praxis* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1987) 67ff., 155ff.

<sup>34</sup>Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Crossroads, 1980) 88ff.

<sup>35</sup>Espin and García, *CTSA Proceedings* 42.

Theologians of popular religiosity also have the unavoidable task of probing into the difficulties inherent in their procedures. Popular religiosity, as we have said before, stands always in need of growth and deepening. The theologian cannot simply accept the whole universe of popular religiosity as it is, *in toto*, uncritically. He or she must not only accept and retrieve the essentially true and prophetic dimensions of it. He or she must also engage in the task of "unveiling" the further possibilities of popular religiosity, and engage in critical dialogue with those (basically accidental) elements which might betray the prophetic and liberating elements inherent to popular manifestations of faith. The theologian ought to bear in mind the following:

1. Retrieval of popular-religious categories and their correlation with standard theological perspectives is not enough. The theologian must engage his or her theology into the dynamics of growth and unveiling of those elements in popular religiosity that he or she retrieves and correlates.

2. This task should not be understood as a "purification" of allegedly distorted faith-expression. Such an attitude would simply perpetuate the odious prejudice against Hispanic popular religion, and would substantiate the theological colonialism and overlordship which have victimized Hispanic faith communities for too long.<sup>36</sup> The theological task at hand implies an attitude of basic respect toward popular religious expressions. As an example of this task, within the context of a Hispanic theology of providence and human responsibility, the theologian might consider the following:

- a. The ecclesiological element in Hispanic attitudes toward providence might benefit from theological reflection on the need for specific forms and structures in Hispanic faith communities. Rather than attempt to "assimilate" Hispanics into parish structures or profiles that are alien to their cultural and religious categories, the theologian should offer alternative models of community—whether the term "parish" is used or not—which would celebrate, pray, reflect on and live God's providential self-bestowal, through the rich symbols of Hispanic popular religiosity.<sup>37</sup>

- b. A Hispanic theology of providence should also address the seminal christological element by complementing the emphasis on the kenotic and suffering Jesus, through a reflection on the fullness of the Easter event. This would require reflecting from the praxis of popular religiosity on the dimension of a hope that points beyond suffering and oppression, and on a love actualized in freedom that brings fullness of life to the community of faith. It is a dynamics of growth and unveiling, not of "purifying." A Hispanic theology of providence developed along these lines would avoid both extremes: on the one hand, a vision of a suffering Jesus that never transcends into love and resurrection, and, on the other hand, an easy triumphalistic perspective of God's providence as resurrection that dismisses or ignores the element of suffering and oppression.

- c. A Hispanic theology of providence must take into the account, on the one hand, the reluctance of many people within the mainstream church to change those ecclesial and social structures that keep Hispanics alienated or marginalized, and on the other, the growing impatience of Hispanic persons and communities with their situations of alienation. The ever-increasing awareness of personal dignity and

---

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

self-worth, driven across by those engaged in liberating pastoral ministries and made more accessible through the ever more sophisticated mass media, induce this—quite legitimate—restlessness and communitary demand for radical change. This reality brings forth the need for prophetism and liberating praxis in Hispanic theology.

### E. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have attempted to sketch an outline for a Hispanic theology of providence and human responsibility. We have done so while taking into account some specific features present in the contemporary Hispanic faith-experiences. Among them, we have reaffirmed the need to take seriously Hispanic popular religiosity and the growing importance of the Hispanic faith communities for the Catholic Church in the U.S.A.

We have not, however, lost sight of the diversity within the American Catholic Church. The Hispanic “problem” is a centrally important one, but not the only one.<sup>38</sup> The Hispanic theologian must stand always in critical dialogue with mainstream Tradition, biblical exegesis, and mainstream systematics, aware that his or her Hispanic theological milieu would only impoverish itself if it tried to claim absolute and exclusive validity. Leonardo Boff, writing from the Latin American liberation-theological context, affirms the need for this ongoing dialogue in the Epilogue written especially for the English translation of his *Jesus Christ Liberator*.<sup>39</sup> The Hispanic theologian would be ill-served by romantic notions or attitude regarding the specific situation of the Hispanic communities within the larger context of the American Catholic Church.

The Hispanic theologian, however, can and should remind the non-Hispanic communities in this Church that the present emphasis on doing “American theology” has not quite recognized the Hispanic component, that the works on the history of the American Catholic Church published in recent years (Tracy Ellis, Hennesey, Dolan) have devoted scant few pages to the past and present of a Hispanic community that, not only arrived here first, but has remained a most important factor in the composition and understanding of that Church whose history they record and analyze.<sup>40</sup>

The American Catholic Church stands in a privileged position, eleven short years away from the third millenium of Christianity, to offer a message and a possibility of God’s providence, translated as full salvation and liberation from all the structures and symbols of dehumanization, to her own diverse communities and in a sense, to older, and tired, churches in other places (such as Europe). This can hardly be accomplished by ignoring or marginalizing the Hispanic universe of faith experiences and faith communities.

<sup>38</sup>A. Deck, *The Second Wave*, 1-6.

<sup>39</sup>L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator* (Maryknoll NY: Obris) 264-95.

<sup>40</sup>John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); James Hennesey, *American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981). Jay P. Dolan’s *The American Catholic Experience* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1985) seems slightly more sensitive to the Hispanic presence in the American church.

Here we offer you, by way of conclusion, Paul's perspectives in the dynamics of "building" the church. We may safely say that Paul was aware of the cultural and religious (ecclesial) differences between the communities that he founded and/or wrote letters to. We may also legitimately claim that Paul did not attempt to "homogenize" these cultural and religious differences, but rather proclaim the one gospel of Jesus to all of them. In offering our reflections on Hispanic theological foundations in the past two years, and on a Hispanic theology of providence this year, we offer our hope that the Hispanic faith-experience will be seen as an integral and essential dimension of the one American Catholic Church, rich in her diversity, strong in her unity. After all, for Hispanic theology, as for any other theology, as it was for Paul, what matters is not "circumcision or non-circumcision," but rather, "faith translated (empowered) as love" (Gal 5: 6).

SIXTO J. GARCIA and ORLANDO ESPIN, S.J.  
*St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary, Boynton Beach, Florida*