

HISPANIC THEOLOGY AND POPULAR PIETY: *From Interreligious Encounter to a New Ecumenism*

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to San Antonio, welcome to the Southwest, welcome to the great frontier and crossroads of the two great religious-cultural traditions of the Americas, welcome to one of the most unique borderlands of the planet! You have providentially come to one of the most interesting regions of the world for the subject which this conference addresses: ecumenism, interreligious relations and cultural diversity. For those of us who are Mexican American, interreligious relations have not been an intellectual option nor an ecclesial choice, but a necessity which arose from the deepest level of the life process: the new being which was born out of our corporal relations. From the very beginning, the Catholic Iberians (who themselves were the products of the eight hundred years of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian coexistence in Spain) conquered and mated with the Amerindians of the Nahuatl culture and religion. In so doing, these Nahuatl and European peoples gave birth to a new race, a new culture and a new religion: the Mestizo Latin American Catholic. Later on, U.S. Anglo Protestants along with French, Irish and German Catholics came into our lives and started a new intermingling. As Mexican Americans of the Southwest, we have been twice conquered and three times evangelized, yet never fully welcomed into the fullness of ecclesial life. Perhaps this has providentially prepared us to be the *avant garde* of the future Church!* The people who evangelized us were concerned about our souls, but seemed to despise our bodies. Generally speaking, the evangelizers have not taken the time to really know us, to ask us our name, or to enter into our collective soul: our religious expressions.

Why do I theologize? I suppose out of my love/disgust relationship with my Catholic Church. I grew up in a Mexican American neighborhood here in San Antonio in which the Catholic parish was the center of life. The parish was the only institution in the city where we felt fully at home, fully free to express ourselves in our own language, our singing, our festivities, our worship. Popular devotions were an integral part of life in our home, neighborhood and parish. Our Catholic religion gave me life and a deep sense of belonging and I love it.

*Editor's note. The author uses "Church" to refer to ecclesial communities and "church" to refer to the building. —P.G.C.

As I went through theological studies, however, I started to distance myself from the living faith of my own Mexican American people. The religious practices of my people started to appear, from the perspective of Western theologies, as simplistic, backward, superstitious, and even pagan. I had somewhat accepted these theological teachings as correct and was trying to implement their pastoral consequences among my people.

During my early years as a priest, I discovered that great numbers of our Mexican American people had a very negative experience of Church and had to rely entirely on the popular faith expressions of our tradition for they could not rely on the services of the institutional Church. In many U.S. Catholic parishes my people were made to sit in the rear of the church or barred from entering at all. It was not uncommon to be told: "Go to the Mexican church. This is not your church." Pastors and others often made us feel like dirty and unwanted foreigners. Why the people kept going to a Church in which they were insulted and rejected is a great mystery. It has to be a tribute to the very deep faith of our people and our acceptance of the human sinfulness of our Church. I had received so much from my Catholic tradition and I believed in it, yet the Catholic Church of the United States, which was the official custodian and interpreter of this tradition, seemed determined to destroy our Mexican Catholic tradition or get rid of us. As Mexican Catholics it was clear we were not wanted. As Archbishop Flores stated during the First National Encuentro de Pastoral in Washington, D.C.: "The Church was like the mother who chose not to hear the cries of her young daughter who was being raped so that she would not have to do anything about it!"

In the early 1970s, we were having a vocation conference at the Mexican American Cultural Center. There were several bishops, priests, religious and many Mexican American laity. All kinds of suggestions were made as to how we could recruit more Mexican Americans into the priesthood and religious life. One couple came up to the podium and told us why they hoped and prayed that none of their sons or daughters would ever become religious or priests. They stated: "We don't want to lose them from the family." Everyone was stunned! They were against the very purpose for which we had all gathered. I immediately reacted (as I am sure many others did) by thinking that we too had to be generous and let go of our children so that they could become priests or religious. But before I could respond, they had already started to explain themselves:

If one of our sons or daughters became a religious or priest, and the Church sent them to Africa, China, or some other distant place, and we never saw them again in our lives, that would not be losing them from the family. In fact, we would be gaining the people they worked with into our family and we would be honored and proud.

What we mean by losing them from the family is that when one of our daughters or sons goes to the convent or seminary, they come home to visit us ashamed of who we are, especially of how we pray and how we express and

practice our faith. This is losing them from the family!

There was a profound silence in the room. No one dared to respond; no one at that moment had an answer. These simple and unassuming *barrio* parents had pronounced a prophetic word which was immediately evident. They had identified the root of the problem: U.S. Catholicism was ashamed of our Mexican Catholicism and thus to become good priests or religious in the United States, we had to assume that shame of our own people. To go through any formation program successfully, we had to become foreigners to our own people—we had to abandon the very sources of our faith and the deepest bonding of *nuestro pueblo*. No wonder that over half of the ordained Mexican American priests at that time did not want to work with Mexican American people. This couple's simple word from the heart immediately revealed to me why I had felt a certain anger and disgust within me at the theological formation that had turned me against my people and especially against the very expressions of the faith through which I had come to know and love God, Jesus, Mary and the saints in a very personal way. I had never verbalized this, even to myself. But this was the naked truth: theology had caused me to abandon rather than understand the living faith tradition of my people. This was a betrayal both of theology itself and of my people's faith. Paradoxical as it sounds, theological formation had made me and others like me dishonor our parents and ancestors; it had made us break the fourth commandment. Our theological formation was preparing us to destroy the faith basis of our Mexican American existence.

It was at this moment that I, as a diocesan priest who had never been too interested in academic or university theology, decided that either we ourselves must begin to theologize seriously out of the living faith experience of our people, or theology would continue to alienate Mexican American priests and religious from our own people and thus damage our people's faith. We had to theologize ourselves or be destroyed by the theology of others, not because other theologies are bad, but because Western theologies arose out of a totally different historical journey and worldview. We had to theologize not against others, but alongside those who had other perspectives and faith experiences within the Church. We needed their help, but we did not need them to do it for us. This was one of the main reasons we started the Mexican American Cultural Center: to begin a serious, critical and creative process of theological reflection from within the living faith tradition of our people. Gustavo Gutiérrez made us aware of the all important theological category of "the poor" and from there we ourselves discovered a specific dimension of our poverty: our biological marginalization and rejection—a body and blood, skin and soul type of existential poverty.

We have come a long way but are the first ones to realize that we have a much longer way to go. In the beginning MACC was alone; today we have several centers around the country and many of our women and men are theologizing professionally and creatively out of our people's faith experience. We just completed our annual colloquium of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theolo-

gians in the United States (ACHTUS) and it was outstanding. Out of our common struggle as U.S. Hispanics/Latinos, we are emerging with some exciting insights into the mystery of God, Christ, Mary, tradition, Church, liturgy and prayer that I am sure will be enriching not just for our own people, but for the Church at large. We are finally beginning to break through and theologize out of the living faith tradition of our Mestizo Latin American peoples in the United States.

As exciting as Hispanic theologies are, today I will limit myself to theologizing out of my own Mexican American experience. This is not because I am not interested in the other expressions of Hispanic theology or do not consider them important, but because I think it would be arrogant for me to speak for the Puerto Ricans, Cubans and others. Hispanic theologies have some commonalities, but at this moment each group is attempting to theologize out of their own particular experience. This, I might add, is one of the distinctive features of our new Hispanic theologies: each of us theologizes out of and in communion with the faith journey of our people. And it is the acceptance of our people, not of the academy, that is the first and most important verification of the validity of our work. Are we making sense to our own Christian people? If our work makes sense to our people, that we will have something of value to share with you, our coworkers in the ministry of theologizing. Thus I will speak out of my own experience and that of my people in the Southwest of the United States, or as some Mexican geography books say, that part of Mexico which is presently occupied by the United States.

I. THE THREE EVANGELIZATIONS: CONQUEST, EVANGELIZATION, DOMINATION

To appreciate who we are as a believing people, it is important to note that we have always been evangelized by missionaries from groups that have conquered, dominated, and controlled our lives. Until the most recent times, we have not been allowed to be ourselves. Our ecclesial life has been dictated by outsiders, while our faith life has developed quite independently of the clergy or religious through the priesthood of the simple *barrio* people of the land. In our experience, there has always been a type of coexistence between official ecclesial life and the faith expressions of the people. Sometimes these two meet, but usually each goes its own way. Today, we are trying to bring them closer together in various ways. It is not an either/or situation, as the Latin American Bishops' document of Puebla states, but a mutuality which enriches both the popular expressions of piety of the people and the official expressions of Catholicism.

We came into being—we were born—out of the totalitarian interreligious encounter between Catholic Spain and the peoples of the indigenous religions of Mexico which was started in 1519 with the arrival of Hernan Cortez. The conquest was holistic in that the Iberians conquered the lands and the peoples, and immediately started to bear children through the native women. The missionaries

attempted to evangelize in the context of conquest. It was difficult and even contradictory to speak about the God of love when the people of this God had just conquered, massacred, enslaved and raped. At the official level, there was only imposition and not real dialogue—although a few efforts were made in the very beginning to bring about dialogue. However, profound and creative dialogue did occur, but not in the suspected places. As a people we came into being through the bodily encounters in the bedrooms, through the creation of new foods and new thought in the kitchens, and through the sacralization of our new life in our home *altarcitos* (home altars) and shrines. The Christian Iberian fathers started the biological-religious process, but it was the native mothers who cultivated it creatively and brought it to maturity in the kitchens and *altarcitos*. These kitchens and *altarcitos* were the places where natural dialogue took place between the ways of our ancestors and the new ideas about God introduced by the missionaries. This is the biological-cultural-religious beginning of the Christian tradition of Mexico and Mexican Americans in the United States. Just as the East and the West have their traditions, we are the beginning of a new tradition in the communion of believers.

It would not be too long before the Mexican Mestizo Catholic would begin to be challenged by the arriving WASP colonizers from the northern United States. The people of the United States were filled with expansionist dreams and projects. They were convinced that it was their Manifest Destiny to expand the United States throughout the entire continent of the Americas. Northern Mexico would be the first step. This would begin the violent clash between two totally different and even opposing cultures, religious expressions and ways of life—even between two very different forms of Roman Catholicism. Hostilities broke out in the 1830s and fifty percent of Mexico would soon become the Southwest of the United States. You are in the very city and actually on the very grounds where some of the most bloody battles took place. Thus many of our Mexican families found themselves to be in the United States without ever having migrated a single mile. Unlike most of the people of the United States, we Mexican Americans are not immigrants who live in some type of continuity with the Christianity—Protestant or Catholic—of European ancestors.

As a Mexican American people, we are the product of two violent conquests: the Iberian conquest of Mexico beginning in 1519 and the U.S. conquest of Northern Mexico (Texas to California) beginning in the 1830s. We were born from the violent and unequal encounter with each of these two colonizing enterprises. Our men were killed or enslaved, our lands were taken away from us, our women were raped, and our Mestizo and Mulatto children were condemned to a life of marginalization and inferiority.

As Mestizos, our flesh and blood identity has consistently marginalized us from both parent groups. We have been too Spanish for the Indians and too Indian for the Spaniards, too Mexican for the United States, and too "Gringo" for our Mexican brothers and sisters. Our nonbeing has been our being! It is this multiple rejection and marginalization which have constituted the deepest pain and

shared commonalty of our people. Yet, like the Hebrew peoples in captivity, we continue to multiply and increase. Others try to destroy us, but we continue to affirm and propagate life!

Beginning in 1519, Iberian Catholics of Europe evangelized our indigenous peoples of Mexico. Then the Anglo Protestants and the French, Irish, and German Catholics of the United States evangelized the Mexican American Catholics after the U.S. conquest of northern Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. Finally, in contemporary times we are being evangelized by the Fundamentalists. All three evangelizations have proceeded from a conquest paradigm as the missionaries came with the colonizers and presupposed that their religious expression is the only way to salvation and their cultural life the only way of life possible for the "saved." Thus evangelization and "civilization" (Church and school) are presented as interwoven aspects of salvation. In this model, the sacred customs and traditions of our ancestors are looked upon as pagan, evil, and even diabolical. Only the missionary and his/her people know the way to God and they alone have a monopoly on the truth, the beautiful, the dignified and the right way of living. Thus in the name of God, people are exhorted to accept the missionary's cultural-religious way of life for no other lifestyle is worthy of God's people. In this sense, the missionaries of all three evangelizing efforts have functioned in the same way. Their good will has been accompanied by an arrogant approach which holds that they are the sole possessors of truth and condemns everything else as false. This religious arrogance has been the typical demon of all the evangelizers who work out of the conquest paradigm of evangelization.

II. THE THREE CHURCHES: A RELIGIOUS CASTE SYSTEM

1. The New Mestizo Church: Rooted in the Culture

Whereas the missionaries of all three groups have proceeded from essentially the same paradigm, the type of Church which has come about has been quite different in each case. Many Iberian missionaries abhorred the Amerindian religious "idols" and rituals but admired their culture and language. They loved the natives, their language and many of their customs. At the same time, they were disgusted with their own European Catholic culture which they saw as debased and corrupt. They saw many values in the native cultures which were much more evangelical than the values of "Christian" Europe. Hence they sought to protect the culture and even to guard it from Spanish contamination. Their dream and their plan was to bring about a truly new Church, different from anything Europe had known before. These dreams were great, even utopic, but the devastating reality of the conquest made the realization of these dreams most difficult. There were many serious obstacles and dialogue with the natives was next to impossible, until the unexpected apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Had it not been for her, the Mexican Church would not have been born or be here today. We are only now beginning to appreciate the full impact and implication of that miracle at the very beginning of the Americas. She opened

the doors for a new dialogue between the Amerindians, herself, and the leaders of the official Church. This dialogue eventually brought about the profound synthesis of symbols which is the basis of the Mestizo Church of Mexico. Through her, absolute religious barriers were bypassed, a new common sacred space appeared, and new religious expressions started to emerge.

Although some effective catechetical programs were carried out, it was the emphasis on image, ritual and symbol which prevailed and became the basis of Mexican Catholicism. One of the very positive aspects of the new Church was that it provided common space and common symbols for all: conquerer and conquered alike. Here, they were all equal before God and in God's presence. Yet, there was also a negative aspect in that a very strongly enforced racial-religious caste system was developed which sacralized and institutionalized the racist and classist basis of Latin American society. Natives, Africans, Mulattos and Mestizos were not allowed into religious life or sacred orders. They were not considered worthy of the religious habit or of priestly ministry. They would be ministered to, but would not be allowed to minister officially in the Church; spoken to, but not allowed to speak; admonished, but not listened to.

The Mestizo Christian religion became deeply ingrained in the entire cultural fiber of Mexico and even though the religious evolution took place in the homes, neighborhoods and ranches, the official Church of this religion continued to be ruled and dominated by White European outsiders. Hence classism and racism continued to be reinforced and sacralized by the Church—this continues in many ways to this very day! To be dark-skinned is to be distanced from the inner circles of power and authority.

2. The U.S.-American Church: Church against the Mexican Culture

As the United States started its western expansion movement in the 1800s it was inevitable that it would come into contact and conflict with the borderlands of the old Spanish Empire of the new world. The WASP model of a "good, true, virtuous, and beautiful" human being fueled the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and not only justified but mandated the conquest of those who were "less human." The United States appeared as the new Israel meant to bring civic-religious salvation to the entire world. It was our sacred duty and responsibility to take our way of life to the rest of the Americas and throughout the globe.

The civic missionary mentality became an integral element of the national soul. Literature about the early contacts leave us no doubt whatsoever about the way the Anglo Americans viewed the Mexican inhabitants of the borderlands: as an abomination! The Mexicans were the very contradiction of everything WASP: Brown, Mestizo and Catholic! Since the Anglos had a profound disdain for both everything Spanish and everything Indian, the Mestizo was looked upon as the mongrel who inherited the worst of two already degenerate peoples. The encounter between WASP-U.S. and Mestizo-Mexico was truly the encounter between absolute otherness: each was the absolute opposite of what the other

considered a "good, virtuous, true and beautiful" human being. Thus the clash would not just be a political one, but a deeply anthropological one.

Whereas the Spanish missionaries who conquered in the 1500s admired and loved the natives they encountered, the U.S. missionaries despised the Mexican Mestizos whom they met. This made a major difference in the type of Church that would be produced through the evangelizing efforts of the missionaries—whether Catholic or Protestant. The new Catholic missionaries saw Mexican Catholicism as superstitious and pagan, and the Mexican people as degenerate, devious and backward. They had little or nothing good to say about the new Catholics they encountered in the borderlands and considered ministering to these people a burden and even a form of punishment. The Protestant missionaries shared this negative view of the Mexican people. However, they identified Roman Catholicism as the main cause of their poverty and misery.

This second evangelization took place not within the culture but against the culture and since there was no mediating symbol (as Guadalupe was in the first evangelization) the dialogue was strictly between the people and the Church. Actually, there was very little dialogue since the missionaries taught and the people were supposed to accept and change from their backward ways to the ways of the missionary. To become a true Christian, the missionaries demanded that the people break with their traditions and language so that they might develop into good human, civic, and religious persons. Assimilation into the United States culture and civilization was an integral component of the evangelizing efforts of the new missionaries—whether French, Irish or German Catholic or Protestant.

Actually, the traditional expressions of the faith of the people could have been a good medium for a life-giving dialogue between the people and the leadership of the Church, but since the Church never acknowledged or recognized as legitimate the piety of the people, it kept this dialogue from taking place. The Churches demanded that we break radically from the religious ways of our ancestors. Some of our people have tried and have found it very painful, others have managed to survive while still others have just given up altogether. It has been a painful journey of "either/or" but there has been no synthesis.

The positive effect of this second wave of evangelizers was that they helped the Mexicans living in the borderlands to enter into the cultural and linguistic space of the United States. Their emphasis on education contrasted sharply with the desires of the new U.S. *conquistadores* who wished to keep the Mexican people ignorant and exploit them as cheap labor. In fact, an unofficial "pass without learning" policy was effected in Texas so that the Mexican Americans could go to school (as required by law) but not learn enough to organize, defend themselves or go for higher education. Thus the educational emphasis placed by the Churches—Protestant and Catholic—was a great contribution toward the development of the Mexican American people. It is interesting to note that many of our outstanding leaders today went through a religious school: Henry Cisneros, Willie Velasquez and many others. However, the educational efforts of the Churches was limited to only a few of the people—less than one percent. Most

of the people remained outside the educational opportunities provided either by the Churches or by society.

The emphasis on education and knowledge of the faith meant that Mexican Catholics of the Southwest were confronted with a more verbal, rational, institutional, and regulation-oriented Catholicism. In this approach to Catholicism, the emphasis was more on Church than on religion. Mexican Catholicism was deeply rooted in the culture itself while U.S. Catholicism and Protestantism were rooted in the local institution with their precise confessions of faith and strict moral codes. Thus the former emphasized life and death, sorrow and fiesta, family and people, while the latter focused on institutional belonging, clear-cut regulations and strict accountability to those in authority. Concerns like parish registration, weekly attendance, regular contributions and reception of the sacraments were basic for belonging to a Church in the United States. Mexican Catholicism was comfortable and secure in the realm of sacred mystery, while U.S. Catholics and Protestants needed to know dogmas and doctrines clearly to feel secure. Through all these, Mexican Americans were enabled to learn about and enter into the institutional frame-reference of the way of life of the United States.

On the negative side, the U.S. Churches also continued the effects of the conquest model in that they continued the religious caste system initiated by the first missionaries. Separate churches were built so that the Mexicans would not contaminate the purer Christians of the United States. Protestants ordained Mexican Americans but kept them in an inferior status, while Catholics did not even allow Mexicans into the seminaries or religious life. When Mexican Americans were invited into religious life, it was only to become brothers or sisters working in the kitchens and laundries of the White Anglo-American religious. As in the first evangelization, the Mexican Mestizo was still not considered to be fully developed, capable, or worthy of full ministry and communion. In many ways, this distanced belonging is still the ordinary experience of Church today—whether Protestant or Catholic.

3. Bible Churches:

The Abomination of Catholic and Mexican Religious Symbols

The third wave of evangelists to approach our people have been the Fundamentalists. In many ways, their fervor in seeking to destroy "pagan idols" resembles that of the first Franciscan missionaries. Fundamentalists abhor the "pagan idols" of the people, which for them are the Latin American expressions of our Catholic-Christian faith. They are convinced, like the early Franciscans, that they have to uproot all the pagan idolatrous images and practices. Thus from the very beginning of their interaction with the Mexican Americans, they set out to discredit everything Catholic: the Pope, the Mass, priests and religious, Mary, the saints, etc. For them, the Pope is not the Vicar of Christ but the anti-Christ. They even go to the extreme of presenting Catholicism as the whore of Babylon and the monster of the Apocalypse.

Their sole source of authority is the Bible as they interpret it. The Bible alone is the source of power and truth and only by confessing the name of Jesus as Lord can one be saved. All previous expressions of Christian faith are considered to have come from the perversity of the Catholic Church and its hierarchy and thus are not Christian faith at all. Tradition is not only ignored, but totally discredited. The religious ways of the ancestors are looked upon as an abomination to God. This leads to the absolute rejection and hatred of all the sacred imagery and tradition which is the very basis of the Mexican American historical and cultural identity. Fundamentalism proceeds to systematically destroy the ultimate roots of our Mexican culture and replace them with the ethic of spiritual and material prosperity in which cultural differences are simply ignored.

The dialogue is now between the Bible and myself. Each person is called upon to read the Bible and proclaim what he/she hears from a particular text. Charismatic individuals quickly become the leaders of local churches. This in fact has been one of the positive contributions of Fundamentalism to the development of the Mexican American. For the first time in our history, our own are coming forth to minister to our own and in the fundamentalist Churches, we finally have our own space which is not under the control of outsiders. Fundamentalism has given us our own churches, our own ministers, access to and love of the Bible, and especially of Jesus, and our own style of worship which is more in keeping with the original *mitotes* (native American religious celebrations) than anything the European-based Churches have ever imagined or permitted. The cost of welcoming Fundamentalism is very high: we have to give up our most revered tradition. But the result is overwhelming: we can finally be ourselves and be liberated from the tutelage and control of foreigners.

This has been a great experience of liberation. We love our Catholic traditions yet we equally love our newfound liberty. The new type of *Tejano* religious music, charismatic preaching intermingling the Bible with our *barrio* talk, and the freedom to speak out in our own way is very appealing to a people who have been traditionally silenced and dominated. Ministers from our own ranks who answer primarily to our own people and not to some foreign institution or hierarchy give us a new Church experience of ownership, communion, and participation. We are free and responsible; thus we have to learn how to work together and not rely on some higher authority to work out our differences for us. All this is a great liberation from the tradition of subjugation. Yet the cost is high and painful. And behind this new ecclesial freedom, there is the realization that even this is still being used to keep us segregated: some of the rich Anglo Fundamentalist Churches finance the ones in the Mexican areas of town so that the converted Mexican Americans will not invade their Anglo Churches. They take us away from the Catholic communion of our own people, but do not want us fully in the Fundamentalist communion.

The final very painful and negative result of Fundamentalism is that it divides our families in deeply painful ways. It provokes even a hatred of those family members that remain Catholic. Fundamentalism guts and defleshes Mexi-

cans and Mexican Americans of our deepest being and commonalty. It offers us a disincarnated Jesus who destroys us while attempting to save us. This religious divisiveness is the most negative and destructive aspect of Fundamentalism.

III. BEGINNINGS OF A COMMON THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

About fifteen years ago, the Fund for Theological Education brought together U.S. Hispanic theological doctoral candidates at the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) in San Antonio to meet one another and some of the few Hispanic doctors in theology. As far as I know, it was the first ecumenical academic theological symposium. At the first social on the evening of arrival, everyone—Pentecostal, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Disciples, Adventist—expressed how much at home they felt at MACC. Our denominations had fought each other in the field, but here on our common ground, it was more like a family reunion. There was not so much an awareness of difference, as of profound similarity and commonalty. We all knew that many of our Churches had functioned as rivals and even enemies. Yet here in one of the only institutions in the country that was truly our own—*nuestra casa*—what we experienced was not division but loving and caring *familia*! We conversed, we laughed, lamented, ate, prayed, sang, and worshiped together. Here we could speak our own language and meet with our own experts without having to explain to anyone why we were the way we were. It was an incredible life-giving experience. Many interdenominational friendships and cooperative efforts started here. It was the birth of a new ecumenism. Today, this experience is being continued through the annual Hispanic School of Theology sponsored by the Fund for Theological Education.

From our first encounter, we came to the realization that before being of any one denomination, we are flesh and blood, and Spanish-speaking Mestizo Hispanics. This was our common heritage. We have a similar skin, the same blood mixture, and a common language. Before or after any religious divisions, we are *un pueblo, la raza*! As such we all had one other thing in common: rejection! Our mother Churches had all made efforts to convert us and bring us into their fold, but in effect had only allowed us in so far. We were always marginal to the centers of our Churches. The academy had not helped either. Scholars either ignored our wisdom or considered it simplistic if not pagan. Even our ways of thinking and reasoning were considered illogical, confusing, and irrational. We were told that we were too emotional—that we needed to grow up! In many ways, all our Churches and theologians kept telling us we were nothing and had nothing of value to offer to the total Church. Salvation would come when we would give up our heritage and become like them in every way. They had told us to come and join them, but had never allowed us all the way in, nor accepted and valued us as we are. Out of this common experience of rejection, we began to discover the Jesus paradigm of evangelization. The Son of God divested himself of all power and prestige to enter our human situation in absolute lowliness.

He did not come to conquer or impose but to liberate and invite into communion. In the Gospel stories, it was those who, according to society and religion, had nothing to say, who were the first witnesses of the Good News: the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalen, the cured leper. In Jesus, the outcasts become the privileged spokespersons of the new creation. The very Gospel which had been used to subjugate, dominate and control us, would now become the power of our liberation.

Because the faithful had been neglected and margined from the centers of official authority, the people, moved by the Spirit, had developed their own forms of worship and religious expression. We discovered that this was the common experience in all our Churches—Catholic, Protestant, or Fundamentalist. This was our living *sensus fidelium*. No where else had God been more intimately incarnated than in the God-language and expressions of the simple people of faith. It was from the images of our *Papas* who could easily joke with God, the friendly visits of our *abuelitas* such as *Doña Margarita* with the *Virgencita de Guadalupe*, the *Tejano* songs of praise in the Pentecostal Church, and other such expressions that our tradition of faith was emerging. The official discourse about God was like a foreign language to us, but the God-language of our people arose out of our daily struggles for dignity, belonging, and survival.

In the ridiculed, insulted, and crucified Jesus, we knew that God had not abandoned us for the nice and fancy churches of our society, but that God in the person of the suffering Jesus carrying his cross was right there with us in our struggles. God was not with the high priests, the Herods or the Pontius Pilates of today's society, but among the suffering poor who were daily being scourged, crowned with thorns, and crucified by the Church and society of the dominant. The silent suffering of Jesus had been our way of life. All of us Hispanics had experienced this suffering even within our own Churches. But now, it was time to begin the resurrected existence. As God raised Jesus from the dead, God would bring new life through our crucified peoples.

Often margined and ridiculed by those in control, we started to discover our own hermeneutical keys through which we could read the life-giving message of the Scriptures. We were at the bottom of the social scale of our U.S. culture, but had not the Son of God emptied himself of all social rank to enter our human world as the lowliest of all (Phil 2:6)? Because he became our own condition of lowliness, today we have a privileged access and unsuspected insights into the Son of God. Since the "stone rejected by the builders which has become the cornerstone" (Ac 4:11), our own social and religious rejection by the builders of our society and Churches is the basis of our being chosen by God at this moment of history and in this space of the globe to begin something truly new which can bypass the tragic mistakes and divisions of the past. Thus our painful rejection and margination is the very basis of our present day election for a creative mission. We are not called to just enter and conform to the old Church models whose missionaries gave birth to the Hispanic Churches, but to create new expressions of Church wherein others will not suffer the segregation and rejection

which we ourselves suffered—Churches that will be ever more Christian. In and through us the Kingdom must begin in a new way: we must work to break down all the barriers of human divisions and hatreds.

Out of our biological, social, and religious "poverty"—what others have seen as our inferiority—we are called upon to be the artisans of a new creation. Even though Mexican Catholics, Protestants, or Fundamentalists have had different popular expressions of our faith, they have all functioned in the same way. They have used the language of self-affirmation, resistance, and celebration. Through our religious expressions, whether of Our Lady of Guadalupe or Pentecostal prayer meetings, we have experienced God's unconditional love for us. Even though the social and ecclesial world we live in might have considered us inferior and unwanted, God loved us and wanted us.

As the triologue between the Amerindians, Our Lady of Guadalupe, and the Iberian Church allowed a new Church to be born in the 1500s, so today through the new triologue between our diverse Hispanic religious expressions, our common U.S. experience of marginalization and of the person of Jesus, a new ecumenical spirit is emerging. What Our Lady of Guadalupe was to the birth of Mexican Catholicism, the person of Jesus is today to the birth of the new ecumenical Hispanic Church of the United States. Our denominational and doctrinal differences are not done away with or relativized, but we begin to perceive them in a new way: as diverse parts of the one body of Christ. We are discovering that differences do not have to be obstacles to unity, but rather, they can be diverse elements of a more vibrant and dynamic unity. We are discovering that our Hispanic Christian family can be inclusive of all its children: Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, etc. and that our diversity can be a source of enrichment to all of us. We should not eliminate differences, but celebrate them and enjoy them.

What I am speaking about is just barely beginning, but it is beginning! At the grass roots there is still a lot of competition, mistrust, and even disgust. But as each one of us deepens our faith journey from that which we have in common—our experience of rejection and our belief in Jesus who saves—we begin to reimagine and expand our understanding and appreciation of Church. We might easily say that we are all becoming less sectarian (without ceasing to be who we are) and more catholic. Yes, even the Roman Catholics are becoming more catholic in the process. While Western ecumenism seems to be carried out at the level of seeking a common understanding of doctrines and dogmas so that we might all arrive at a common understanding, Hispanic ecumenism is developing precisely in the way we accept and affirm our doctrinal differences without trying to reconcile them. It is in our reimaging the value of difference itself that we find a new and positive value in our denominational differences. We are discovering that we can all help one another become better Christians through our mutual contacts.

From our experience of interdenominational fellowship, we are discovering the basic need for interrelatedness. All of us can and need to help each other understand Jesus better. But in today's world, we must go even further. We are

discovering how intimately interrelated all life is within our planet. The ecological movement is certainly making us aware of this. It seems to me that the Aztec cosmology was much closer to the truth of the universe than our individualistic philosophies which have been so removed from the earth. The Aztecs were correct in believing in sacrifice for the sake of cosmic survival. Their crucial mistake was in thinking that by sacrificing human beings—the bodies of others—they could save the universe for everyone. What we need to discover today is that we need human sacrifice for survival, but not the sacrifice of others. We need to sacrifice our arrogance and self-righteousness that allows us to think that we alone possess the truth. As the new Catechism of the Catholic Church states, God made the nations diverse so as to keep any one nation from becoming too proud and arrogant. We need one another in our diversity to become complete.

Just as we need a new interrelatedness within the communion of Christian Churches, so we need a new interrelatedness within the communion of world religions. It is no longer a matter of converting the people of one religion to another, but of helping each other to truly live out the principles of the religion we confess! Conversion to one's own religion is much more challenging and difficult than going out to convert other peoples to our way! Each religion has to repent of its past intolerance and arrogance and recommit itself to the most humanizing elements of its own tradition. I know this is possible because it has already begun.

San Fernando Cathedral is a very traditional Roman Catholic Mexican American Church. Yet each year, on the feast of Thanksgiving, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Native Americans, Christian Protestants, Catholics, and Fundamentalists gather there to pray together—each in their own way. It has been an electrifying experience of God's presence. This is not mere tolerance, but a profound spiritual communion. The wife of a Rabbi stated that it was like being in Noah's ark preparing for the new creation. An elderly Catholic lady, holding her rosary in her hand, told me after the Thanksgiving service: "Father, the picture of the Last Supper has always been my favorite. Today, I had the feeling I was taking part in the Last Supper at the end of time!" Because we are praying together, a new paradigm of human and religious interrelatedness will bring about a new humanity—from enemies seeking to destroy one another, to friends working together. We know it is being born within us. It is just beginning. It is ambiguous, it is dangerous, it is fascinating, and it is exciting. Thus from our original interreligious encounters of the 1500s, through our various evangelizations and religious divisiveness, we have begun to forge a new ecumenism and now a new interreligious family of all of God's children.

Welcome to San Antonio where the future humanity of the planet has already begun.

VIRGILIO ELIZONDO
Mexican American Cultural Center
San Antonio, Texas