

## HISPANIC/LATINO THEOLOGIES

- Topic: Popular Religion as a Source  
for a Systematic Theology of the Eucharist
- Convener: Roberto S. Goizueta, Loyola University, Chicago
- Presenter: Orlando O. Espín, University of San Diego

Professor Orlando O. Espín presented a paper exploring the implications of U.S. Latino popular religion for eucharistic theology. In the first part of the paper, Professor Espín provided a theoretical framework for examining popular religion as an expression of the *sensus fidelium* and, therefore, as an appropriate and necessary context for theological reflection. He argued that, while theologians have studied the written texts of the Tradition, they have too often ignored the "living witness and faith" of the Christian community as bearers of God's self-revelation. In the second part of the paper, he focused more specifically on the popular religious practices surrounding the preparation of young Latinos and Latinas for first communion, suggesting that those practices express the community's "faith-full intuitions" concerning the eucharist and, even more so, concerning the Church. Noting that the paper represented a work-in-progress, Prof. Espín ventured a preliminary interpretation of those intuitions, suggesting that the process of preparing children for first communion reveals, above all, the Latino families' concern for establishing and reinforcing communal ties. Given that Hispanic parents seem more interested in the familial process and context of the preparation than in doctrinal content, argued Professor Espín, first communion preparation in Latino families should be understood as, above all, a process of community-building. As such, first communion preparation in the Hispanic community carries important ecclesiological meaning, reflecting a belief that community is not simply a consequence but a necessary precondition of eucharistic celebration.

The paper generated an extended, lively, and stimulating discussion. Much of the discussion concerned the role of popular religion in the theological enterprise. The practice of celebrating *quinceañeras* was adduced by one participant as a further example of community-building, while another participant argued for the need to develop a critique of destructive elements in popular religious practices such as these, especially as regards their impact on women. Professor Espín agreed with the need for such criticism while, at the same time, calling for an affirmation of the liberative aspects of popular religion.

The last part of the discussion period addressed the question: Why, at this particular time in history, is popular religion becoming a more acceptable object of theological study? Professor Espín and other participants observed that, during the first generation, theological movements promoting social change have tended to depreciate or ignore popular religion in the face of the urgent needs of liberation. Among both Latin Americans and African Americans, however, second and third generation theologians have begun to recover their communities' popular religion as an important source for theology. Hence, observed Professor Espín, the theological study of Latino popular religion begins with U.S. Latino theologians.

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