

A RESPONSE TO MT DÁVILA

I want to begin by saying how gratified and grateful I am at this moment for being invited to share this CTSA platform with María Teresa Dávila and review some of the salient features of U.S. Latino theology as they have unfolded over the last three decades. Some twenty-two years ago, when we were graduate students in Rome, Monsignor Arturo Bañuelas and I dreamt about establishing an academy of U.S. Latino theologians. I am delighted to say that just three days ago here in Miami, the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS) celebrated its 20th anniversary at its annual colloquium, which was bigger and more engaging than ever. ACHTUS has grown from an initial group of eight to more than 150 members. This makes ACHTUS one of the larger theological societies in the world. It is very fitting that the CTSA has chosen generational differences among U.S. theologians as the theme for its 2008 convention, as ACHTUS celebrates its twentieth birthday. Undoubtedly, the same or similar generational shifts we see in the CTSA membership are affecting ACHTUS as well. One would have to be insensitive and unobservant not to notice the changes in tone, spirit, attitude, and interests among the younger Latinos doing graduate study, joining faculties at universities and seminaries, teaching in Catholic schools, as well as serving in positions of ministerial leadership in dioceses and parishes throughout the land. I, for one, am not alarmed at all by these differences but see them as elements of the gifts that the Spirit keeps lavishing on God's people.

María Teresa's engaging presentation highlights some of the major characteristics of U.S. Latino theology: the emphasis on experience as the starting point for method, especially to everyday experience or *lo cotidiano*; the value given to collaborative theological reflection or *teología de conjunto*, as well as the option for the poor, the marginal and oppressed as its unwavering hermeneutical stance. María Teresa's presentation provides us with a sense of the major themes and the substantial accomplishments of a theology in which both women's and men's voices have blended in dialogue from the very beginning. Among those accomplishments is the groundbreaking research and analysis of popular religion, *mestizaje*, and Hispanic approaches to theological anthropology and aesthetics. If one doubts the growing scope and depth of U.S. Latino theology, all one needs to do is consult the ACHTUS webpage where a substantial, updated bibliography is now available.¹

¹For an early description of U.S. Latino/a theology's origin see Allan Figueroa Deck, "Introduction," in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, ed. Allan Figueroa

In this brief reflection, I want to stress the main point that María Teresa vigorously makes in her presentation and then add some concerns of my own that perhaps place her concerns in a larger framework. María Teresa's point is that the most fundamental element of an authentically U.S. Latino theology must be its preferential option for the poor, its ethical and liberative commitment. She shows how other members of her generation have criticized the work of the first generation of Latino/a theologians from the point of view of the failure of these theologians to address adequately the social, economic, and political realities in their increasingly globalized context. Her reflections convey an underlying current of frustration with our inability to be as true as possible to the method we espouse, one that insists on taking the reality of poverty in its material aspects as seriously as possible, making that reality the starting point of the theological enterprise. In various ways, she points out how some Latino/a theologians tend to domesticate, benignly ignore, or simply dismiss the unpleasant realities around them. María Teresa's presentation is a plea to us as theologians and Christians to put the reality of suffering, marginalization, and death that permeates our world front and center in our calculations and concerns. In doing so, she echoes a principle of biblical faith enunciated long ago by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 2:10. Paul was speaking, of course, of the first great theological dispute of Christianity, the burning, divisive question about just how universal God's love is: As you may recall, the theological dispute was resolved in favor of catholicity, the inclusiveness that is a distinctive mark of the Catholic Church. Paul adds a final word on the matter, however, one reminiscent of what we have heard today: "The only stipulation was that we should be mindful of the poor—the one thing that I was making every effort to do." Yes, when everything is said and done, for us theologians now as in early Christianity it is all about "being mindful of the poor!" In addition, this mindfulness is not primarily a matter of sentiment. Rather, it is a hermeneutical stance and preferential option taken as an intelligent, rational response to our experience of faith and our encounter with the living God.

If U.S. Latino theology has anything to be proud of, it is the way in which it followed the lead of the early Magisterium of the U.S. bishops and the first generation of Latino bishops in the remarkable process of *encuentro* that took place in the 1970s and 80s. That teaching echoed many of the insights and concerns of liberation theology and Catholic social teaching in emulation of our Latin American brothers and sisters who were quick to take the vision of the Second Vatican Council to heart and construct a remarkable corpus of ecclesial reflection and theological production.² Their efforts took form in the highly

Deck, ix-xxvi (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992). For the ACHTUS webpage consult (<http://www.latinoteology.org>).

²It should not be forgotten that Pope John Paul II after pointing out some criticisms and concerns about liberation theology in his 1986 letter to the Brazilian bishops went on to say, "we are convinced, we and you, that the theology of liberation is not only timely

influential conferences of Medellín, Puebla, Santo Domingo and, most recently, Aparecida. The Church's gaze turned towards those who are on the fringe, reminding us that God's incarnational love shows itself more in action than in words and seeks to embody itself in the here and now. Is it too simple to say that Christian theology ultimately is the task of focusing on the reality around us in the light of God's revealed love and truth? Is not Christian spirituality understood as "a loving look at the real"? Citing Roberto Goizueta, María Teresa tells us that this contemplation of reality requires keeping our eyes open. On the faces of the forgotten and despised and in the festering wounds of the violated we will find God.

I would briefly like to share my own concerns and vision about U.S. Latino theology in a way that I believe may place this conversation in a broader context and add some critical issues worth pondering. For me the most cogent way to understand U.S. Latino theology and the role it can and should play in the academy and Church today is in terms of demographics. While the handwriting has been on the wall for decades, there continues to be a strange kind of denial going on. We have seen it sometimes in our bishops, priests, deacons, and lay leaders, including leaders in Catholic education and the theological academy. On the one hand, these leaders seem to acknowledge the implications of changing demographics. On the other hand, they also seem to insulate or isolate themselves from its practical consequences.

The hesitation and critique that María Teresa expressed regarding categorizing U.S. Latino theology as "contextual" speaks to this phenomenon. Usually the term "contextual" is used to designate a narrow theology of interest only to the minority in question. There is something peripheral about such theologies and in the final analysis, they have little or no bearing on the hegemonic reality. Like multiculturalism, contextual theology can unwittingly contribute to the romanticizing and trivializing of whole communities and peoples by submerging them in folklore and in a particularity that makes no claim on anyone else.

Nevertheless, something else is happening now that calls into question this benign marginalization in the name of contextualization and multiculturalism. Latinos are close to actually being the majority of Catholics in the United States. Might we not infer from this that inexorably U.S. Latino theology and kindred theologies rooted in African American and Asian American communities, once so many sideshows, may now become the main attraction? Does it not make sense for U.S. theology to engage more vigorously and intentionally with the

but useful and necessary. It should constitute a new state—in close connection with former ones—of the theological reflection initiated with the Apostolic Tradition and continued by the great Fathers and Doctors, by the Ordinary and Extraordinary Magisterium and, in more recent times, by the rich patrimony of the Church's Social Doctrine . . ." See Pope John Paul II, Letter to Brazilian Episcopal Conference, Vatican City, April 9, 1986. This letter is reproduced in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed. Alfred T. Hennessey, 498-506 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990).

distinctive reality and ethos of Latinos and other groups of non-European origin? To what extent will the issues, concerns, interests, and methods of the theological academy continue to reflect those of a fading European American audience? María Teresa quotes Orlando Espín and Miguel Díaz on this point using fateful words which I repeat for the sake of emphasis: “U.S. Catholic Theology (and theological education) is at a turning point—either it speaks from the reality and faith of the Catholic community as it exists in the country (50% Hispanic), or it will become increasingly irrelevant to the U.S. Church.”³

In making this point, which I am sure you have all heard before, I am mindful of the longstanding efforts of the CTSA to respond in so many ways to the dramatic shifts taking place in the U.S. Catholic Church. All one has to do is take a look at this year’s gathering to see that the concern I am voicing here is not falling on deaf ears. But we still have a long way to go, since we are at the very beginning of something new and unprecedented. The statistics on racial/ethnic inclusion on faculties and school/university administrations is still really abysmal. We must not give up, but continue working with educators and the broader church and civic community on the project of opening up positions of theological leadership at all levels to the new emergent cultural and racial communities as well as to women.

Moreover, in this connection, I can share with you some developments in another institution, the bishops’ conference that may be relevant to the theological academy as it maps its way into the future. Just six months ago, the Catholic bishops of the United States established the Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church. This committee is staffed by the USCCB’s Secretariat of Cultural Diversity at the USCCB, where I presently work. This committee is one of the largest in the USCCB and comprises 42 bishops, with the majority being of non-European origin (Hispanic, African American, Asian and Pacific, and Native American). The Committee is chaired by Archbishop José H. Gómez, Archbishop of San Antonio. The Bishops Conference has designated five priorities for its own activities over the next five years. One of them is “recognition of cultural diversity with a special emphasis on Hispanic ministry in the spirit of *Encuentro 2000*.” The other four priorities are Faith Formation, Life and Human Dignity, Vocations to Priesthood and Religious Life, and the Initiative on Marriage. The bishops have decided that cultural diversity and contextualization are relevant to all five priorities. Hence, the work of our Secretariat is enormous and we are not sure how we can really accomplish it.

It seems clear to me that the bishops are responding to the reality on the ground that is the dramatic transformation taking place in the churches and society all around us. Cultural diversity has to do with the neuralgic point of

³Orlando Espín and Miguel Díaz, “Introduction,” in *From the Heart of Our People: Latino/a Explorations in Catholic Systematic Theology*, eds. Orlando Espín and Miguel Díaz, 3 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

encounter between a people's humanity, what they most prize and value, the gospel message, and the person of Jesus Christ. The Church must now engage this humanity with its particularities, not only of culture but also of social, economic, and political status. I believe this means grounding the activities of the Bishops Conference in an ever-deepening appreciation of diversity and socio-economic marginalization by taking the contexts of the emerging new constituencies in the Church as seriously as possible. This also means making intercultural awareness linked to Catholic social teaching an everyday feature of the elaboration of programs and projects of the Bishops' Conference and, we would hope, the dioceses, parishes and Catholic institutions that look to the Bishops for leadership and inspiration. One of the more interesting features of this change at the USCCB is the bishops' mandate that the various communities of non-European origin enter into dialogue not only with the European American church leadership but also among themselves. Collectively these communities of non-European origin make up the majority of U.S. Catholics. These communities must now assume more responsibility for their Church and society. The characteristics that stand out about them are their extraordinary youthfulness and the intense diversity among Latinos themselves and even more so among the Asian American, African American, African, and Pacific Islander communities.

In this connection, I was quite taken by Pope Benedict XVI's consistent use of the word diversity in a very positive way along with his vigorous defense of the human dignity of immigrants during his recent visit. More than his words though, the images and sounds of the Mass at National Stadium said it all: the huge multicultural choir and the fabulous combination of Latin, English, and Spanish hymns sung to the beat of bongos and Andean flutes. The sincere joy with which the Holy Father presided over this stellar event may even be a watershed. Something significant is happening in the United States and its has everything to do with the gift of these wonderfully diverse new generations of Americans whose origins are in Latin America, Asia, the Pacific Islands, and Africa.

My point is that our discussion of U.S. Latino theology is ultimately a conversation about the shape of U.S. theology to come. The ministry of theological reflection in the Church cannot be relevant, much less survive if it retreats into the contents of the tradition or the universe of those "dead white men" Maria Teresa mentioned without attending to how that tradition is brought forward and given the air it needs to breathe and live. It behooves us then to grasp the opportunities and difficult challenges that new generations and such diversity place before us by becoming more serious than ever about theology as reflection on the reality of God's people as they now are and not as they may have been.

For me, the thought of missiologist Lamin Sanneh places this conversation in the appropriate global context. Sanneh speaks about the contrast between the *heartland* (North Atlantic or Euro-American) church and the *frontier* church, "that is to say, between Catholicism of a top-down variety where the concern is with regulations, conformity, rules, definitions and boundaries, and *frontier Catholicism* with its teeming masses, lively liturgy, poignant prayers and dynamic

spirituality.”⁴ I agree with Sanneh when he says, “the vibrant new face of *frontier Catholicism* because of its sheer numerical weight and cumulative global momentum . . . promises to overtake heartland priorities.”⁵ Among the distinctions Sanneh makes between these two aspects of the one and only Catholicism is one between what he calls “essential Catholicism” and “dynamic Catholicism.” Those of us who have lived and worked all our lives in the frontier church of U.S. Latinos, African Americans, Asians Pacific Islanders and Native Americans here in the U.S. or in foreign lands know exactly what Sanneh means. He goes on to identify this dynamic Catholicism with a “post-Western Christian resurgence.”

I think the rise of Latinos in the U.S. Church can be understood as a chapter in this global phenomenon of a resurgent non-Western Christianity, a truly global Church. Consequently, U.S. Latino/a theology and other two-thirds world theologies are a bridge for U.S. theology in general as it inexorably experiences the affects of theological globalization in its increasing interaction with post-Western Christianity. The bridging dimension of U.S. Latino/a theology stands out especially in the experience of *mestizaje*, the mingling of a pre-Columbian worldview, Spanish, medieval and baroque Catholic faith, with African and more recently European American elements. As my friend, Fernando Segovia noted at our ACHTUS Colloquium, an inevitable implication of globalization as it unfolds is that the U.S. Latino/a discussion of *mestizaje* has become increasingly anachronistic and inadequate as the process branches out in all directions to create unheard-of forms of hybridity.

Many shifts are taking place as the earth keeps moving under our very feet. One of these shifts is the rise of Latinos and other non-European peoples in the U.S. Catholic Church. The other reflects the emergence of a world church in which the majority of faithful are no longer Europeans and North Americans—and all of this happening in the context of an ever-accelerating globalization. A certain U.S. Latino affinity for post-Western theology makes it a harbinger of a larger global shift in the bosom of our nation and Church. However, Sanneh perceives an underlying resistance to taking this post-Western theology seriously on the part of some gatekeepers in the Academy. I quote at length:

There is deep mistrust in the West about the improbability of a new resurgent Christian frontier outside the West . . . The main reason lies in the fact that the enlightenment secularization of the West has advanced to such a stage that the West defines itself now against Christianity as an orthodox commitment. The feeling is that the post-Western world cannot be trusted with the immense liberal gains wrested from Christianity, and so the prospect of Christianity surging without enlightenment constraints provokes deep antagonism in the West, suggesting a gathering culture clash . . . The incredulity is unshakable.⁶

⁴Lamin Sanneh, “Why is Christianity, the Religion of the Colonizer, Growing so Fast in Africa?” *The Santa Clara Lectures*, Santa Clara University, May 11, 2005, 14-15.

⁵*Ibid.*, 17.

⁶*Ibid.*

The resistance to this emergent theology has something to do with a deep suspicion not only among the more conservative, but also or perhaps more so especially among the liberals and progressives, i.e., that Third World Christians cannot appreciate the great accomplishments of Western liberal tradition and progressive culture, especially its inclusivity, social tolerance, and other human gains. Among theological leadership in the West, there exists what Sanneh calls a “prescriptive commitment to liberalism” that he thinks competes with the finality of the Gospel. Years ago Langdon Gilkey reminded us that it is one thing to dialogue with modernity and quite another to be swallowed by it.⁷ If there is truth to Sanneh’s concern there is need to re-engage the dialogue with modernity in a way that takes the visions and concerns of the more traditional non-Western world seriously.

In this connection, I would mention something I heard Robert Schreiter say recently at a conference on lay ecclesial ministries, something that we, as the Vatican II generation people may find a little hard to take. He noted that Catholicism’s resistance to modernity and its ambiguous relationship with it is one of its strong points today, because it gives Catholicism a common cause with non-Western cultures that take issue with certain aspects of the modern project with which many of us in the United States so ardently identify.⁸

I want to suggest that the post-Western theology that is being born, one that takes cultural, socioeconomic and political factors seriously, will hopefully be ecclesial, finding strength and inspiration in the Catholic Tradition, while at the same time breathing new life into it. While the existential hierarchical Church and its structures will always fall short of the Christian ideal, Latinos tend to be at peace with the human side of the Church despite a long history of institutional sin and abuse. While there are notable distinctions between Latino popular Catholicism and its official version, in reality there is no abiding opposition between them. Living with this ambiguity is normal for Latinos as it is with other non-Western cultures. That is why I hope that the ecclesial character of this theology will endure. Roberto Goizueta, quoting Leonardo Boff, reminded us of this several years ago: “We should not view the grassroots church as running parallel to that of the larger institution . . . The antagonism does not lie between community and institution . . .”⁹ I note this too, because current studies show that the retention of Latinos in the Catholic faith is actually among the highest for any

⁷Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 37-45.

⁸Robert J. Schreiter, in the closing address at The Summit, National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), Orlando, FL, April 23, 2008.

⁹See Leonardo Boff, “The Theological Characteristics of a Grassroots Church” in *The Challenge of Basic Christian Communities*, eds. Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, 139 (Maryknoll: NY, 1981), quoted by Roberto Goizueta, “United States Hispanic Theology and the Challenge of Pluralism,” in Deck, *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, 2-3.

religious group in America. While the movement of Latinos to evangelical and Pentecostal churches is quite real, there seems to be a ceiling on defections that does not go beyond 20 percent or so. The real challenge for retention of the Catholic faith among both Latinos and European Americans is the same: the allure of “the good life” of the secularized U.S. mainstream with its handy but misguided separation of spirituality from religion.¹⁰

This emerging theology may also stand in contrast to a modernity that approaches faith in an excessively rationalistic and pragmatic way. This instrumentalism of faith can push in the direction of free-market capitalism (neoliberalism) or a vague Marxian utopia. Such instrumentalism is alien to the underlying spirit of the people’s faith with its unswerving emphasis on God’s initiative before and beyond all forms of human initiative. The particular gift of Latino theology may be found in the way it sheds light on the process by which the contents of the faith become life and are incarnated in custom, ritual, and human expressivity. This strongly performative element in Latino Christianity provides a rich source of inspiration for making faith real, concrete, and engaging. Perhaps these are some of the reasons why Cardinal Avery Dulles, writing in *America Magazine* just after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (*America*, Dec. 3, 2001) suggested that they might have the effect of shaking U.S. culture out of its hedonism, individualism, and consumerism. In his opinion, U.S. Catholicism has not made a major impact on U.S. culture either in the past or in the present. Rather, it has succumbed to the lure of materialism, “opening up a chasm between faith and culture.” Now he suggests that “the flow of immigrants from Catholic countries, especially Latin America, has the potential for opening up the church’s influence on American culture.”

It is on that note that I want to end these reflections recalling María Teresa’s vision of U.S. Latino/a theology as a faith-filled theology that sheds light on reality by preferentially opting for the poor. As we celebrate the gift of new generations of U.S. theologians, as well as ACHTUS’s twentieth anniversary, we are reminded of how a theological truth that was enunciated long ago by Mary of Nazareth—that God chooses the poor and lowly to confound the proud and powerful—echoes down through the ages, bringing with it new life and possibilities for all of us.

ALLAN FIGUEROA DECK

*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
Washington, District of Columbia*

¹⁰I base these observations on data that surfaced in the recent Pew Religious Landscape Survey (2008) and a CARA study that was carried out for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in February 2008. In addition Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell are working on a massive study tentatively titled *American Grace: The Changing Role of Religion in American Civic Life*, in which these matters will be discussed in detail.