

HISPANIC LATINO/A THEOLOGY

Topic: Pastoral y Poder: Local Legacies of Authority and Agency
in Comunidades Hispanas/Latinas
Convener: Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández, Catholic Theological Union
Presenters: Gary Macy, Santa Clara University
Theresa Torres, University of Missouri-Kansas City

This session explored ecclesial leadership exercised by women in Iberian and US Hispanic contexts by focusing on examples of local church communities. These examples, through the employment of historical and ethnographic lenses, reveal how women negotiated their own agency and leadership, as well as their relationship with institutional authorities.

Gary Macy's retrieval of historical perspectives provided windows into the legacies of women abbesses who were functionally bishops in medieval Spain. Macy begins with the earliest existent rite for the ordination of an abbess found in Mozarabic manuscripts dating roughly from the seventh through fourteenth centuries. Macy notes that the reception of a miter, a pallium and a staff suggests that abbesses were considered the equivalent of bishops in Spain. While the pallium may refer to the veil as opposed to the episcopal vestment, there is no mistaking the miter, which was most often used by bishops and signifies administrative authority.

Macy recovers the story of the powerful Cistercian abbess of Las Huelgas near Burgos, in Spain. Over the centuries, the women in this position clearly acted as bishops and continued to wear miters and carry crosiers until forbidden to do so in 1873. The Abbess accumulated complete temporal and spiritual jurisdiction over her subjects in the territory, villages and villas subject to Las Huelgas including but not limited to her ability to appoint and discipline chaplains and parish priests, punish heretical preachers as well as any law-breaking secular person, convene a synod and make synodal constitutions and laws binding on all her subjects, religious and lay. Macy attests to the ecclesiastical authority of the abbess by observing that "[n]o bishop or delegate from the Holy See could perform a visitation of the churches or altars or curates or clerics or benefices under the care of the abbess." These abbesses also functioned liturgically blessing and hearing the confessions of their own nuns, reading the Gospel and preaching publicly. Macy concludes that they were considered by themselves and by their contemporaries, to be ordained ministers, and as such, were able to perform certain sacramental functions later reserved for priests and bishops. Macy's contribution leaves open many tantalizing questions that invite further research and reflection.

Theresa Torres' use of ethnographic perspectives provided insights into a contemporary community of Guadalupanas from the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Kansas City. In her case study, Torres explored the dynamics of ethnicity, gender, class, and religious identity in the unfolding situation of contested space. Torres tells the story of a community of Mexican American lay women who attempt to save their parish of Our Lady of Guadalupe from being merged with another diocesan parish. Unable to prevent the merger, these women creatively petition and fund raise in order to preserve the historic church not as a parish but as the Shrine

of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Their efforts are rewarded, yet they struggle to navigate the limitations, especially liturgical, that accompanies status as a Shrine.

Torres recovers this contemporary example of ordinary Catholic women in the church who both confront and exercise power, effectively transforming and subverting dominant values and power structures within religion and in society. Her research documents how women's voices and solidarity made a difference in their community with the potential for further empowerment in the local political arena. These self-described "faithful daughters of the Catholic Church," engage in strategies that at times subvert their pastor, their bishop and his pastoral staff, yet they remain devoted to the religious practices and expressions that sustain their daily living. Torres explains that these Guadalupanas understand themselves to be caretakers of their church but more importantly, "bearers of a religious and cultural heritage passed on to them from their parents." Torres demonstrates how this community of women comprehends their actions as consistent with the ongoing living of the commitments and promises of Juan Diego and their ancestors.

The conversation that followed focused on the multiple intersections in these retrievals of the hidden, forgotten or ignored stories of women claiming, naming and exercising their agency in the church. Across generations, these Hispana and Latina hermanas lived faithfully and their stories challenge narratives that are dismissive of women's ecclesial leadership and the complexity of their relationships with episcopal authority.

CARMEN M. NANKO-FERNÁNDEZ
Catholic Theological Union
Chicago, Illinois