"Latino/a Spirituality and the Universal Call to Holiness"

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An advertising slogan for a Hispanic television channel in southern Florida claims that the network is “as American as flan.” This clever marketing technique reveals a new way to approach the Hispanic future of the United States. With the news that Hispanics have become the country's largest minority, it becomes all the more difficult to ignore the reality that underlies the results of a census. Even before the recent rancor about immigration reform began to grip the nation, the press in the United States had begun to pay more attention to the changing Hispanic population. The context for Hispanic ministry is changing. What was once commonly named “the Hispanic presence” lies at the juncture of divergent realities—a widespread recognition of a growing population that manifests considerable racial, ethnic, and economic diversity as well as increased anxiety about the visible presence of its undocumented and unassimilated members.

Even when this social transformation receives a favorable evaluation, both the Church and the larger society in the U.S. continue to disseminate falsehoods of various sorts. The prejudices cannot be attributed solely to the social blindness of non-Hispanics in the U.S. or to the success of proselytism by Pentecostals, even though both of these dynamics are prevalent (for a balanced treatment of the latter, see José Antonio Rubio, “Bearing False Witness,” in Cuerpo de Cristo, 213–27).

Hispanic Catholics in the U.S. must also take stock of the new situation. Within our own community, one frequently encounters shortcomings in faith formation and a shocking ignorance of our own spiritual heritage.

The slogan “as American as flan” displays the genius of public relations. Perhaps the larger U.S. population will come to accept Latino/as, flan, and Telemundo in the way that they accept piñatas or home run kings from the Caribbean. The challenge Hispanic Catholics face in the domain of religious identity is quite distinct from that of marketing. A spiritual heritage is ultimately not a commodity that can be bought or sold, for it presupposes a reality an entire people take to heart.
Even public recognition does not suffice to establish a tradition. For example, in 1997 the U.S. Postal Service paid homage to Father Félix Varela as a social reformer and journalist. The government honored Varela by creating a 32-cent stamp bearing his image. One does not slight the cultural value of such civic recognition by noting that buying a stamp and grasping the total impact of a follower of Christ are two separate matters.

Who was Father Félix Varela (1788–1853)? He was a Cuban philosopher who escaped to New York City after a threat of persecution by the Spanish crown forced him to flee his homeland and Spain. While in New York, he was recognized as a champion of the new Irish immigrants whom an upsurge of anti-Catholicism threatened. Varela is just one example of prophetic Hispanic Catholics (see Mario T. García, “Catholic Social Doctrine and Mexican American Political Thought,” in Cuerpo de Cristo, 292–311). There are no “experts” in the path to holiness. What we encounter in the witness of holy women and men is a concrete life. This model can help believers respond in their own way to the universal call to holiness. In such figures we see the point of intersection of the traces of Christ’s own love for humanity etched into the plane of human history. Exploring the Christian past is no longer the work of committing facts and dates to memory. What counts in our exploration of the past is the encounter with real women and men of faith.

**The Hispanic presence as a blessing and a prophetic witness**

The expanding presence of Latinos and Latinas in the U.S. requires a new approach to pastoral ministry. Some in the Church believe that the “problem” of the Hispanic presence will ultimately resolve itself. I am not referring to overt antagonism to Hispanic congregations, Masses, or fellow parishioners. I am referring to well-meaning proponents of Hispanic assimilation. Such persons assume that the new influx will accommodate itself to the pattern of “Americanization” that Western European Catholics underwent in the first half of the twentieth century. For such Catholics the new demographic explosion will not mean any major modifications to the face of U.S. Catholicism nor its forms of expression (see Charles Morris, American Catholics). Seen from this perspective, the phenomenon of Mass in Spanish or other pastoral initiatives that serve Hispanic parishioners are merely provisional. The dominant model of the parish, its style of celebrating the Mass, and other aspects of this paradigm will return in one or two generations once the current wave of immigrants is incorporated into the mainstream. In this view the Hispanic presence represents no more than a current obstacle to pastoral planning.

What the U.S. Catholic bishops wrote in their 1984 document on the Hispanic presence radically opposed the model of assimilation. The bishops began with these words (which are repeated in another document published eleven years later): “In this moment of grace we recognize that the Hispanic presence in our midst is a blessing from God” (*The Hispanic Presence*).

There is a big difference between thinking of the Hispanic presence as a pastoral problem and thinking of it as a blessing from God. The view that looks beyond assimilation is confirmed by the prophetic words of Pope John Paul II in his letter to Bishop Roberto González:

> Based on their rich history and their experience, the Hispanic community can offer a unique contribution to the dialogue between faith and culture in current U.S. society and in this way can open new paths to carry forward the Gospel into the third millennium (*Hispanic Presence*, Letter to Bishop Roberto González, May 8, 1995).

In a culture in which cultural Protestantism and secularism hold sway, the Catholic culture of U.S. Hispanics should not be underestimated (*Hispanic Presence*, 32). For the bishops it is not a matter of promoting *la raza* or *hispanidad* as such. The task of proclaiming the gospel transcends all races and all cultural manifestations of faith. To put it another way: Hispanic culture possesses virtues that promote an authentic disposition of faith, but no culture by itself (Hispanic or Anglo-Saxon) is identical to the gift of grace that leads to Jesus Christ. The essential contribution of Hispanic Catholics, which the bishops call “a providential resource” in the task of evangelization, is rooted in the domain of faith and culture.

The preferential love for the poor and for recently arrived immigrants belongs integrally to this vision of faith. This form of solidarity contributes to the political dimension of the call to holiness. As a consequence the bishops affirm that the Hispanic presence is a “prophetic warning.” In their words, “If Hispanic Catholics ... are not offered a place in the church in which they feel at home, the
loss of their Catholic identity will be a serious blow to the church in our country.” The political parties in the U.S. have not grasped that the Hispanic Catholic is by nature a paradox. The typical Hispanic voter shares the social values and pro-family stance of political conservatives and also shares with progressives the view that the state should commit its resources to lend support to the poorest and to immigrants in need. Seen in these terms, the everyday reality of Hispanic Catholics cannot be translated into either the liberal or the conservative social idiom that dominates U.S. culture today (cf. John Francis Burke, *Mestizo Democracy*). Hispanics can and must keep speaking their own language, not only in the literal sense but also in the more extended sense of upholding the virtues of their community and their own style of life.

**The language of sanctity**

The National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, a document the U.S. bishops approved in 1987, uses the term *la mística Hispaña* or what may also be termed Latino/a spirituality. It extends beyond the scope of this essay to examine the difference between *la mística* and “spirituality” from the perspective of Latinos and Latinas. (Gilberto Cavazos-González, O.P., has explored the question of how the U.S. Latino/a experience requires its own inculturated spirituality in a *New Theology Review* article entitled “*Cara y Corazón* [Face and Heart]: Toward a U.S. Latino Spirituality of Inculturation.”) But in the context of the bishops’ document from 1987 this potentially rich term remains vague and undefined. What the bishops took in 1987 to be self-evident requires greater clarification.


*Novo Milenio Ineunte* was written to introduce the message of Christ to the third millennium of Christian history. The pontiff is quite clear in stating: “First of all, I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness (no. 30).” (The term *santidad* can be translated into English as either “holiness” or “sanctity.” The former, I think, resonates better with those who belong to Christian traditions that emphasize the inward renewal of the individual and the latter with traditions that elevate such individuals in a public way to the status of official veneration. The real point is to see that *santidad* in the imitation of Christ is a personal bridge between the transformation of the isolated heart and the social witness of the Church.) But the Holy Father also recognized that pastoral initiatives undertaken in relation to holiness cannot be preprogrammed:

> At first glance, it might seem almost impractical to recall this elementary truth as the foundation of the pastoral planning in which we are involved at the start of the new millennium. Can holiness ever be “planned”? What might the word “holiness” mean in the context of a pastoral plan? (no. 31)

In light of this challenge, is it even possible to “implement” a universal call to holiness on the level of pastoral planning? The starting point is the awareness that all Christians are called to the way of sanctity:

> This ideal of perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few “uncommon heroes” of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual (ibid.).

The pedagogy of personal holiness must adapt itself to the rhythms of an individual’s existence. In other words, there is no recipe for holiness. The Church beatifies or canonizes people not only for their heroic deeds (which can often be obvious and numerous) but also for the ways in which these holy women and men have applied the gifts of the Holy Spirit to their daily lives.

The number of examples of holiness that the Church has called to our attention has grown rapidly in recent years. Consider, for example, the new doctor of the Church, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (*La Teresita*), or blessed Father Mariano de Jesús Hoyos (Don Marianito), a Colombian priest from the beginning of the twentieth century. More
recently, Pope Benedict XVI beatified José Anacleto González Flores (also known as the “Mexican Gandhi”) and his eight companions. These men were martyrs of the bloody Cristero War in Mexico from 1926 to 1929 and displayed exemplary Christian fortitude as well as reverence for the Eucharist, a firm devotion to the Blessed Mother, and a willingness to pray for their executioners. (The beatification took place on November 15, 2005. For more information about the holiness of these martyrs, see http://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/saints/ns_lit_doc_20051120_anacleto-gonzalez_en.html [accessed on September 4, 2006]).

Being a saint is a matter of loving as our Lord taught us to love: “To imitate the holiness of God, as it was made manifest in Jesus Christ his Son, ‘is nothing other than to extend in history his love, especially towards the poor, the sick and the needy’” (Ecclesia, no. 31, citing Luke 10:25). The universal vocation to holiness presupposes a change of heart, a metamorphosis (“conversion”), in the language of the New Testament. This transformation takes place not only on the level of the intellect but comprises a renewal of one’s way of life based upon the criteria set forth in the gospel (Ecclesia, no. 26). “Faith that works through love” (Galatians 5:6) is essential to genuine conversion. Asceticism, to the degree that it does not become an end unto itself, can also promote conversion. This total conversion leads us to a new life in which

the gap between faith and life must be bridged. Where this gap exists, Christians are such only in name. To be true disciples of the Lord, believers must bear witness to their faith, and witnesses testify not only with words, but also with their lives. . . . The greatest witness is martyrdom (ibid.).

Catholics recognize that encounter can take place in the prayerful reading of scripture, through the reception of the sacraments, and in the communal experience of the people of God. In the process, however, the Lord does not hide his face. His love endures and offers encouragement through each stage of our individual commitments. He is encountered.

In order to develop a pastoral plan in relation to holiness, we have to learn the “language of sanctity” and be able to translate this language in highly diverse contexts. It appears that Pope John Paul II coined this expression in a speech he gave to Spanish-speaking pilgrims in Rome attending the beatification of Carlos Manuel Rodríguez Santiago, the first Puerto Rican elevated to the glory of the altars and a man affectionately known as “Charlie” (cf. Terto Milenio Adveniente, no. 37 on the “ecumenical eloquence” of the saints). In the pope’s words: “In fact, the Church fully expresses her universal mission when she speaks the language of holiness and especially when she must adopt this language in the contemporary age, in which the Spirit spurs her to a renewed proclamation of the Gospel in every corner of the earth” (from the beatification ceremony of April, 30, 2001. See www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20010430_beatificazione_en.html [accessed on September 4, 2006]) for full text).

The idea that sanctity is a kind of discourse has great relevance to the Hispanic community in the U.S. Each Hispanic has his or her own national background, Marian devotion, and unique path. As a result, the path to holiness among recently arrived Latinos and Latinas will be one that requires a new language of faith suited to the new context. No one will be forced in the process to abandon the traditions or devotions of one’s country of origin, and everyone has the obligation to respect and welcome the traditions of other Hispanics.

There is no single expression of Hispanic popular religion that shares all the traditions of Spanish-speaking lands. Diverse Latino/a customs have become mixed together in the new reality of the United States. For that very reason pastoral agents have much to gain by paying attention to the language of sanctity as a possession Hispanics hold in common. Speaking the language of sanctity is a way to uphold a Catholic common ground within our own community of faith.

Father Félix Varela as a follower of Christ

I think that the model of sequela Christi (“the following of Christ”) that the life and thought of Father Varela offered is of great relevance to the situation of Hispanics in the U.S. today. During his visit to Cuba in 1998, Pope John Paul II often made reference to Varela. It is not hard to understand why the bishop of Rome would recall the figure of Varela in this setting. Varela is known as the “one who taught Cubans how to think,” and no small part of that legacy was his ardent defense of personal freedom. As an elected official of the Spanish Cortes (legislature) in Cádiz, Varela proposed a defense of the rights of the slaves, and for that stance was for all intents and purposes exiled to Spanish rights was his ardent
New York City. As a parish priest in the United States, he helped the poor and utilized his considerable erudition to defend the national identity of the new Irish immigrants. After being named vicar general of New York, he participated in 1837 as a theologian at the Synod of Baltimore. Throughout the period of his exile, he continued to be admired as a man of letters, and he dedicated himself to developing a Christian foundation for a view of tolerance that would apply to the whole American continent.

Can one actually speak of a distinctively Varelian spirituality? (This topic was examined in a brilliant dissertation that is regrettably hard to access from this country: Felipe J. Estévez, *Spirituality of Félix Varela: An Historical-Spiritual Study of Félix Varela's Pastoral Services to the Catholic Church in the United States 1825–1853*, Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, Roma, 1980; what follows is drawn in part from the condensed version: Felipe J. Estévez, *El Perfil Pastoral de Félix Varela*, Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1989.) This spirituality includes at least three essential characteristics. A first trait was Varela's passion for the truth. He defended poor Catholic immigrants who arrived from Ireland. His writings, above all the two volumes of his *Letters to Elpidio* and his essays in the newspaper *El Habanero* derive from the anti-Catholic crusades of mid-nineteenth century America. He fought superstition with the same conviction that he demonstrated the reasonableness of Catholic thought and faith.

A second characteristic is his conception of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. In light of the fact that this biblical motif would become commonplace in Catholic thought one century later, Varela appears to be ahead of his times as a theologian as well. He promoted the reality of the Mystical Body through his apostolate with the poor, alcoholics, and orphans. In his life the face of Christ became visible in the face of the poor. When Varela wrote that the Church is a mystery of faith and charity, he was not referring to an abstract reality. For Father Varela, in the midst of the poor, the body of Christ had flesh and blood.

The third characteristic of Varela's witness has to do with the relationship of faith and freedom. He believed and fought to show that faith and freedom sustain one another. Rather than posit their incompatibility, Varela argued that impiety destroyed the establishment of a tolerant society. The practice of tolerance in a free society requires a religious foundation. Civil liberty thus comes to be seen as a gift from God. For Varela it is God's will that we treat the other as one who possesses an absolute dignity. Although Father Varela was a man deeply rooted in the intellectual currents and social conflicts of nineteenth-century America, his witness continues to teach Latinos and Latinas today to forge a new American identity for the new millennium.

**Liturgical, popular piety, and the universal path to holiness**

Father Félix Varela has not been declared a saint, but his followers (who included Pope John Paul II) find in him signs of the holiness of Christ. There is thus no need to put holy women and men on a pedestal in order to learn about Christ from their examples. The universal path to sanctity is a path anyone can follow. I will conclude this essay with a reflection on how this universal path lies at the intersection of liturgy and popular piety.

This fascinating and important topic has received renewed attention of late (see, for example, Peter Phan, ed., *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines: A Commentary*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005, as well as the relevant essays in *Cuerpo de Cristo*). The much-cited statement on this question from the Second Vatican Council goes straight to the heart of the matter:

> Popular devotions of the Christian people are to be highly commended, provided they accord with the laws and norms of the Church, above all when they are ordered by the Apostolic See. . . . But these devotions should be so drawn up that they harmonize with the liturgical seasons, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it, since, in fact, the liturgy by its very nature far surpasses any of them (*Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, no. 13).

This passage reiterates a central theme of the Council, namely, that the liturgy is the source and summit of the Christian life. At the same time, it recognizes that the people of God can and should practice "popular devotions" in such a way as to uphold the priority of the liturgy. There was no intention here to prune away legitimate practices of faith, but one can see on balance a hint of suspicion that the popular devotions the people of God practiced could deviate from an authentically Catholic way of expressing the faith. There is nothing
wrong with imposing prudent restrictions upon practices that depart from the faith of the Church, but a one-sided approach that also creates a generic predisposition to disparage all forms of popular Catholicism will not do.

The Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines from 2001 offers guidance on the specific question of how to interpret the teaching of the Council. The Directory is unequivocal about the need to maintain a proper balance between liturgy and popular piety:

Thus, it is important that the question of the relationship between popular piety and the Liturgy not be posed in terms of contradiction, equality or, indeed, of substitution. A realization of the primordial importance of the Liturgy, and the quest for its most authentic expressions, should never lead to neglect of the reality of popular piety, or to a lack of appreciation for it, nor any position that would regard it as superfluous to the Church's worship or even injurious to it (no. 50).

The Directory offers guidelines for pastoral agents to make judgments regarding whether popular devotions are in actual concord with “the primordial importance of the liturgy.” (The central concern seems to be the preservation of the centrality of the Paschal Mystery of our Lord in all pious exercises of faith. This criterion accords rather well with the focus on the crucified embrace of the Lord in Latino/a popular Catholicism; see, for example, my article as well as the book by Roberto S. Goizueta cited below.) More importantly, the Directory includes statements that could help to lift the veil of suspicion that obscured the evangelizing potential of popular devotions: “For its part, popular piety, because of its symbolic and expressive qualities, can often provide the Liturgy with important insights for inculturation and stimulate an effective dynamic creativity” (Directory, no. 58, citing the Puebla document discussed below).

The Directory also recognizes other authoritative sources for guidance on the matter that emanated from the Apostolic See and regional episcopal conferences (no. 2). In this regard, it is extremely important to recall the historic 1979 meeting in Puebla of the Latin American bishops with Pope John Paul II. In the bishops’ document, they treat the relationship between religiosidad popular (popular Catholicism, popular piety) and evangelization in terms of their ability to complement one another. They specifically cite the need to recognize the pastoral task of “promoting the cross-fertilization (mutua fecundación) between liturgy and popular piety in order to be able to channel with lucidity and prudence the deep desire for prayer and charismatic vitality that today is being experienced in our countries” (Third General Conference of CELAM, Puebla, 1979, no. 465).

Latinos and Latinas in the U.S. also maintain a fervent devotion to the cult of saints. Much could be said about the public dimension of this devotion and especially the diverse processions that bring Latino/a popular piety into the streets of many urban settings in the U.S. (See, for example, my essay “The Painted Word,” The Journal of Hispanic Latino Theology 6 [November 1998]: 18-42.) But the relationship between the universal call to holiness and the royal theology of the saints is also epitomized by a vignette recounted at an academic gathering by the saintly Cuban bishop from Miami, Agustín Román (the story is taken from Raúl R. Gómez, eds, “Veneration of the Saints and Beati,” in Phan, ed., Directory, 121–22).

Bishop Román recounts how a young mother and her daughter enter a local church and gaze with admiration at the stained glass depictions of individual saints. When a catechist in the same parish later asks the girl about the identity of the saints, the child blurs out: “The saints, the saints, the saints are the windows of the church!” After considerable laughter at the child's naiveté, the little girl offers a startlingly apposite explanation: “The saints are the windows through which the light of Christ enters the church.” The anecdote and visual image reveal how the saints—official and unofficial—inform the life of the faithful. To situate the life of holiness equally in the everyday sphere of domesticity and in the public liturgical life of the Church is no diminishment of the role of the parish or liturgy in the Christian life. On the contrary, following the holy women and men of God leads one ineluctably into the sanctuary of the church for both private and public prayer. We invoke and partake of the communion of saints in the Eucharist because we know they accompany us on the daily journey of faith.

The universal path to holiness is un camino. The notion of un camino appears in countless hymns Hispanic Catholics sing and which one can translate into English as “path.” The Spanish word,
however, maintains better than any translation a direct link to the act of walking (i.e., caminar). (This point is basic to the argument of Roberto S. Goizueta's book Caminemos con Jesús.) Walking through a city is a very different experience from taking a bus or battling traffic in one's own vehicle. When you walk, you are easily distracted. When you walk on the street, you are accompanied whether you like it or not by the poor, the elderly, those hurrying home from a night shift, and many others. Taking a walk is a very public act.

Félix Varela and other holy women and men of God teach us how to walk with Christ. In this respect, it is important to recall the lesson from the New Testament regarding the "way" Christ showed his followers, for the Greek term (hodos) the New Testament writers used conveys the dual sense of a concrete road and a path of learning (cf. John 14:6; Acts 16:17; 18:25; 18:26). There is a path to Christ in the Church because Christ is the path of the Church. Holy women and men of God illuminate this path and help us to follow to the Lord.

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References


