"HTI's Collaborations at Princeton and Beyond"

Peter J. Casarella, *DePaul University*
HTI’s Collaborations at Princeton and Beyond

Peter Casarella

Dr. Peter Casarella is Professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University. He serves on the Selection Committee for HTI and is former president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States (ACHTUS). He co-edited a volume with Dr. Raúl Gómez Ruiz entitled Cuerpo de Cristo: The Hispanic Presence in the U.S. Catholic Church (New York: Crossroad, 1998) and edited Cusanus: The Legacy of Learned Ignorance (Washington: Catholic University Press, 2006). He is currently working on a book which has the working title: Von Balthasar: The Centrifugal Politics of Culture.

From April 19-21, 2007, I had the distinct pleasure of accompanying HTI scholars Néstor Medina (Toronto School of Theology) and Jacqueline M. Hidalgo (Claremont Graduate University, California) to an international gathering of theologians as well as several influential religious journalists. The meeting took place at the Center of Theological Inquiry (CTI) in Princeton. HTI and CTI are neighbors, both located on the campus of Princeton Theological Seminary and separated only by Speer Library. Our journey across the street, so to speak, represents one of a few recent collaborative initiatives that have brought these two institutions closer together. It was also a good opportunity for me to evaluate firsthand the uniqueness of HTI’s mentoring program.

The scholars at CTI were largely unfamiliar with HTI, so I underscored the fact that HTI is the only venue in the U.S. where Latina and Latino doctoral students receive active mentoring in their field. I explained that the students come from diverse institutions in which they are being trained in Systematic Theology, Biblical Studies, Christian Ethics, Philosophical Theology, and
other specializations. In a few cases, a doctoral student may have one or even two Latina or Latino professors at their own institution. In many cases, however, the student’s only real contact with Latina/o theologians is through HTI. So the stipends, the funding for visits by the Latina/o mentors to the students’ home institutions, and the week-long summer program in Princeton serve to build up a community that supports the personal, intellectual, and spiritual formation of the future theologian. Without HTI the entire discipline of Latina/o theology would be greatly impoverished. With HTI there is a comunidad that can nurture these young individuals with wisdom, resources, and support at a critical juncture in their lives and careers.

At CTI, I emphasized the thoroughly ecumenical aspects of HTI. Mentors and students include Latina/o Presbyterians, Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, and many other Christian groups. HTI is a compelling witness to the breadth of Latina/o theology. That breadth is equally cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. A Canadian Latino with a Guatemalan heritage such as Néstor might find himself in conversation about postcolonialism with a Costa Rican New Testament scholar from the Midwest such as Jackie. Jackie brings her considerable expertise in Biblical hermeneutics to the study of the apocalyptic dimensions of El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán.

In the context of HTI, one witnesses a free exchange of the differences that mark the Latina/o community in the U.S. as a group whose diversity is barely captured by the term multiculturalism. At HTI sharp differences are shared and become part of the experience of enrichment. HTI shuns the label of the monolithic Hispanic and works actively to encourage doctoral students to consider the vastness of Latina/o experiences and the rich possibilities for collaboration with non-Hispanic theologians.

I suspect that the theme of intra-Latina/o diversity was a new idea to many of the participants at the gathering at CTI. I also think that when many HTI scholars find jobs, they will face the new challenge of imparting their ecumenical experiences from HTI to older colleagues in seminaries. These scholars may not have had such intensive collaborations of this sort in their formative years.

Another noteworthy point of convergence between the two Princeton neighbors concerns the global perspective. All recipients of HTI grants are encouraged to explore the work being done in their field by scholars in Latin America. As a consequence, new alliances like that of Latina feminism and indigenous theology move to the center of their research. The work of HTI thus extends, complements, and enriches the global perspective that has been a hallmark of CTI. With such shared goals in view, the prospects for future collaboration seem both rich and timely.