"The Mozarab Cross and Latino/a Spirituality: Are They Walking on the Same Path?" Response to Raúl Gómez-Ruiz's Mozarabs, Hispanics, & the Cross

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Response to Raúl Gómez-Ruiz’s Mozarabs, Hispanics, & the Cross

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Peter Casarella received his doctorate in 1992 from the department of Religious Studies at Yale University after completing a dissertation on the theology of the word of the fifteenth-century Catholic thinker Nicholas of Cusa. He is Professor in the Program of Catholic Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, and this year was named the founding Director of DePaul’s Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology.

Raúl Gómez-Ruiz has written a learned and timely book. Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross surely merits the coveted HTI Book Prize. More importantly, it should be read by all Latina/o theologians. In it they will discover a vast treasure that contains coins of rare vintage as well as some newly minted ones—the history of the Iberian peninsula from the Celtiberians to twenty-first century Spaniards, the origins of the Hispano-Mozarabic rite and the history of its Good Friday Procession, an ethnographic study of the symbolic dimensions of the cross in the context of that particular ritual, and a comparison of the Mozarabic and contemporary Hispanic spiritualities of the cross. I even made some discoveries of my own in reading the book. I did not know, for example, that the cross processed through the streets of Toledo contains no corpus. In other words, the procession highlights a bare cross without an image of the crucified Saviour. Gómez-Ruiz makes the fascinating suggestion that the very absence of the corpus allows the participants to appropriate for themselves the ritu-
al and cultural meaning of this central symbol.¹

Gómez-Ruiz’s book is so vast in its scope that a full analysis would require a much more comprehensive treatment than I can offer here. Its broad and generous consideration of the interplay of history, culture, liturgy, and theology is, in my opinion, the book’s greatest strength. By focusing on just a few issues raised by this book, I hope to draw attention to some of the questions that arise from a consideration of the interplay. First, I will consider the issue of what Mozarabic identity might mean to Latinas/os. Second, I want to explore the symbolism of the cross in the book. Third, I will comment briefly on the form of liturgical theology being proposed in Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross.

The treatment of Mozarabic identity in the book is amply documented with Iberian history, liturgical history, a social analysis of the contemporary experience, and ethnographic encounters. According to his presentation, the Mozarabs who come together in Toledo during Holy Week (some hailing from Madrid and other parts of Spain) have a strong sense of communal identity and tend to be politically and religiously conservative. Their ownership of their own history pervades the ritual meaning of the event and includes multiple dimensions of cultural memory. I found it significant that Gómez-Ruiz highlighted both the agreement of 1101 with King Alfonso VI that granted Mozarab Christians certain forms of noble status and the desamortización (divestment) in 1834 that formally rescinded their nobility.² The first act marked the beginning of a de facto tolerance of a religious rite that had been banned by the liturgical reform of the recently deceased Pope Gregory VII. The fuero or concord was made possible because of the support that the Mozarabs promised the king in the Reconquest of Spain. The second act eliminated the tax structure imposed upon Mozarabs for the sake of maintaining their noble status and with it the need to maintain detailed genealogies of Mozarabic membership. But there is much more to the history. For example, the ritualized slaughter of priests, including Mozarab priests, during the Spanish Civil War contributed no doubt to the strong sense of connection with those who died for the faith. Gómez-Ruiz mentions that all of the Mozarab chaplains in Toledo were killed and many nuns exclaustrated but does not explore as fully as possible the nationalist counterdynamics to violent persecution that still linger among the Mozarabs as a result of the atrocities committed against priests during the Civil War.³ The post-Vatican II revival of the liturgical rite in Spain required a reconstruction of outdated genealogies as well as a formal determination of what constitutes membership in the community (calidad mozdrabe).⁴ Throughout this complex history there are many reasons for the Mozarabs to sense a communal identity that apart from liturgical acts receives little or no public acknowledgement by their fellow inhabitants of the city in which they live.

But can this unique tradition of mozababía or Mozarabic identity in Spanish be compared to Latina/o identity? Gómez-Ruiz’s answer is affirmative and, interestingly, is not based upon the cofradías or lay groups in the United States (e.g., el Señor de los Milagros or the Penitentes in the Southwest) that more strictly parallel Mozarabic practices. His comparative analysis focuses on these elements: 1) a devotion in the form of accompaniment to a fully human Christ who displays human weakness in his humiliation; 2) an acknowledgement of a need for mediators before the throne of God in the form of saints, martyrs, and even the liturgical presider alongside a firm commitment (pace Arius) to the divinity of the Son of God; 3) the central symbolism of the cross as a form of meaningful and on-going self-sacrifice; 4) the mutual penetration of daily life and the ritual activity of the liturgy (e.g., flower offerings in liturgical events); 5) the public display of liturgical events as a public response to a subaltern social status; and 6) the turn to liturgy as a source of personal and communal identity.
I have no problem with any of these individual elements, for I think each one manifests precisely the kind of commonality Gómez-Ruiz seeks to demonstrate in the book. But there are also disparities that are worth mentioning. The most obvious is the Hispanicization of Latina/o identity that comes to the fore as a result of this analysis. This is plainly acknowledged in the book’s introduction but would also be a good topic for further probing since many Latinas/os have only a faint and/or dismissive sense of their connection to Iberia, and those US Hispanics such as Gómez-Ruiz who identify with that heritage are often underrepresented or ignored in the works written by Latina/o theologians.\(^5\)

The other disparity has to do with the conservadorismo or hard conservatism of the Mozarabs.\(^6\) There are Latinas/os~and I am not speaking here about sympathizers with Spanish nationalism in the United States—who would embrace a different sort of hard conservatism as a result of their experiences of marginalization and persecution in the United States. But on the whole this is not the basic pattern of Latina/o social thought, even if one restricts one’s attention to the views of Latina/o Catholics.\(^7\) On the other hand, there is indeed a shared sense of being excluded from the mainstream of society that binds Mozarabs and Latinas/os. If that is the case, then it seems that the sense of exclusion, which is obviously an impetus for social and political action, nonetheless needs to be considered in terms of the distinct social and political contexts of the different groups in question. Once again, we see that all politics is local. Moreover, the desire to fight against exclusionary politics can yield varied results. There is no single political program that results from a liturgical identification with the oppressed, which is not to say that the liturgical act is a purely spiritual and therefore a-political reality. Liturgical dynamics and political participation are intersecting planes of human existence. One cannot separate them; nor can one conflate them.

I turn now to my second main point, namely, the symbolism of the cross. Here I would like to foreground two small details that seem rather central to the overall analysis: the Mozarabic cross as reliquary and the use of the cross as a monstrance.\(^8\) Together these might seem as the least Reformed aspects of the devotion; however, what I want to demonstrate is that Mozarabic practice with its medieval roots is not necessarily an antithesis of post-Reformation sensibilities. Even though the historical origin of the presence of a relic of the true cross in the Mozarabic chapels of Toledo is a murky story, it is clear that the lignum crucis processed by the Mozarabs is thought to be some form of a remnant of the wood upon which Christ himself died. For Gómez-Ruiz this is no mere detail but a confirmation of the real spiritual presence of the dying Lord in the midst of the suffering people. Gómez-Ruiz is inadvertently reiterating a point made in Patrick J. Geary’s groundbreaking work on the theft of relics in the Middle Ages.\(^9\) Relics of saints were not just magical talismans in the Middle Ages. Likewise, the Mozarabic reliquary is a form of presence, i.e., a public acknowledgement of the need for personal penance and a proclamation of the saving power of God’s merciful act of submission and its cruel means of accomplishment. By the same token, the functional use of the cross as a virtual substitute for the Eucharistic host carried under palio by priest through the streets surrounded by incense and other liturgical symbols is hardly a mere throwback to pagan practices. This too is a form of presence ritually enacted through the thoroughly unmodern prayer of a liturgical procession. The localization of Christ’s presence in the space of daily urban life strengthens the social bond and simultaneously commits the participants to a more direct form of encounter with the living Lord, the only source of human salvation.\(^10\)

In conclusion, I would like to return to the point where I began, namely, to highlight the refreshing and stunning breadth of Gómez-Ruiz’s study. It would be too simple to treat the dynamics of existence simply from one frame, and many scholars recoil
from the multidimensional challenge that arises once one recognizes the presence of more than one frame of meaning in the daily life of a people. Gómez-Ruiz has taken the challenge several steps further. He looks at how history, society, liturgy, theology, and the symbolics of ritual formation all contribute to the ways in which people come to identify themselves in the world and make meaning of their lives. The lasting contribution of Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross is not the welcome achievement that he brings multiple disciplines to bear on his subject. The text offers more than a smorgasbord of interdisciplinarity. In other words, Gómez-Ruiz does not shirk from the daunting task of looking at these multiple frames of reference in their relationship to one another. We all owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude for this graceful and thought-provoking study. ¡Raúl, que Dios te lo pague!

NOTES


2 See, for example, Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross, ch. 3.

3 Gómez-Ruiz discusses this in Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross, 42. More gruesome details as well as a comprehensive analysis can be found in Julio de la Cueva, “Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition, and Revolution: On Atrocities against Clergy during the Spanish Civil War,” Journal of Contemporary History vol. 33, no. 3 (July 1998): 355-69.

4 Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross, 6-7.


6 Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross, 43.


8 See, for example, Mozarabs, Hispanics, and the Cross, 122, 165, 170-72 et passim.


10 On this point I think that Gómez-Ruiz’s analysis should be compared to the thought of the social theorist Michel de Certeau.