

The Challenge to the Church at Large (3 of 3)

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AETH

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This morning and this afternoon we have been speaking of the challenges facing the Latino Church in the United States. In the morning, we dealt with the challenges having to do with the transitions which Latinos and Latinas are experiencing, not only as individuals, but also as families and as churches. In the afternoon we dealt with the more specific issues related to leadership development in and for the Latino Church. Tonight, we must turn to the wider issue: the challenge of the Latino presence, not only to the Latino church, but also to the church at large. If it is true, as Paul says, that we are all members of the one body, and that "if one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor. 12.26-27), then the challenges that the Latino church is facing are not only its challenges. They are challenges before the entire church. And the joys that the Hispanic church may experience are not only its joys. They are the joys of the entire church.

For this reason, while speaking this morning and afternoon I was not able to speak of the challenges facing the Latino church in abstraction of the manner in which these too are challenges for the church at large. This is particularly true when it comes to the subject of this afternoon, leadership development. You may recall that when speaking of the issues of leadership development and theological education for the Latino church I repeatedly spoke of the larger enterprise of theological education as a whole and of the place of the Hispanic church and population within it. You may also recall that I made it clear that this was a challenge, not

only for the Latino church, but for the church at large.

These may have sounded like difficult challenges. But tonight, I wish to speak of an even greater challenge. It is the challenge to the church at large to receive the contributions of the Latino church.

Allow me to explain a bit better what I mean by referring to the passage from Paul I have just quoted. You may recall that in that twelfth chapter of I Corinthians Paul is comparing the church to a body. We usually take that passage to mean simply that there is room in the church for a variety of people and for a variety of gifts. And that is true. But the passage says much more than that. The passage also says that each part of the body needs the rest. "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (v. 21-22). In other words, it is not simply a matter of the head saying to the feet: "OK, there is a place for you here." It is also a matter of the head saying to the feet, "I need you," and of the eye saying to the ear "I need you." If this is true, when we speak of a particular part of the church we are not speaking only about its concerns, its challenges, its joys; we are speaking about the concerns, challenges, and joys of the entire body.

But even more, we are speaking of the dependency of each part of the body on the other parts. The head cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you," because without the feet the head can

go nowhere. The head must acknowledge its dependency on the feet, the hands, the eye, and the ear. Without them the head is disconnected; it cannot move; it cannot feel; it cannot see; it cannot hear. And this is true to such an extent that "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable."

In brief, it is not only the Latino church that needs the support of the church at large, it is also the church at large that needs the Latino church.

And here comes the most difficult part: It is not only the Latino church that has much to learn from the church at large, it is also the church at large that has much to learn from the Latino church. This is difficult for Christians in the dominant culture for over the last one hundred and fifty years the church in the North Atlantic—particularly the church in the United States and Great Britain—has been the source of much of the Protestant missionary enterprise throughout the world. In this the North Atlantic had great success. Indeed, in the first half of the twentieth century William Temple, who would later become archbishop of Canterbury, declared that the greatest event of the previous century—the nineteenth—was that for the first time in history the Christian church had become truly universal. He was right. Early in the nineteenth century Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa was limited to the edges of the continent. By the end of that century, there were strong churches in every country in the region. Early in the nineteenth century, Christian presence in China, Japan, and Korea was practically nil. By the end of that century, the situation had changed drastically. The same is true of the islands of the Pacific and

the remote lands of Mongolia and Manchuria. If any movement in the history of the Christian church could claim success, it is the Protestant missionary movement of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

But by the middle of the twentieth century things had begun to change, even though most of us did not notice it. The very success of the missionary enterprise was resulting in churches overseas that were sufficiently strong to claim that they were fulfilling the three great goals of the missionary movement usually known as the “three selfs:” self-government, self-support, and self-expansion. Not only that, but many of these "younger churches" were showing amazing vitality.

By the end of the twentieth century it was clear that, if the nineteenth had produced a truly world-wide church, the twentieth had resulted in the development of an unexpectedly different church. Elsewhere I have described how these changes have altered the map of Christianity. For our purpose here, a few round-figure statistics should suffice:

- At the beginning of the twentieth century, roughly half of all Christians lived in Europe. By the end of that century, that figure had been reduced to a quarter of all Christians.
- In 1900, four out of every five Christians were white. A hundred years later, two out of every five Christians were white.
- In 1900, the language most commonly spoken by Christians was English. Now it is Spanish.

These changes are difficult to see on a day-to-day basis, and therefore they often go unnoticed. Furthermore, the North Atlantic is so accustomed to being the center of Christianity that it is often blinded to what is taking place. A couple of years ago, a friend of ours who was spending a sabbatical in Cambridge heard a lecture whose address began, “Now that Christianity is receding throughout the world . . .” That was probably true if the world is Cambridge or even if the world is Great Britain. But it is palpably wrong from a global perspective. Here was this professor, an outstanding scholar in her own field, whose Anglo-centered perspective was such that she could not see what was really happening in the world around her. She could not see it because what was required was not just some statistics that could be added to what she already knew. What was required was a radical paradigm shift. She had to learn to think of the world and of the church in a radically different way. And in this rethinking, she would have to relearn much that until then she had taken for granted.

What is required of the church at large in this country today is nothing less than a similar paradigm shift. We have to learn to think of the church, no longer as a body whose center is in Great Britain or the United States, but as a new polycentric reality.

Allow me to explain this a bit more and to provide a few illustrations of what I mean. When I was growing up, the center of missionary work for the Methodist and the Presbyterian churches was in New York. The boards in New York would send hundreds of missionaries throughout the

world. Today, those agencies or their successors continue sending many missionaries overseas. But even so, today there are more Puerto Ricans arriving in New York as missionaries than there are missionaries going out of New York. The Presbyterian church in Korea is mostly the result of the missionary work of Presbyterians in the United States. Yet today on any given Sunday there are more Presbyterians in Korean churches than in North American churches. The growth in Korea has been nothing short of phenomenal. A few years ago, a Korean pastor from Seoul came to spend a sabbatical at the seminary where my wife was teaching. In a conversation I asked him who was tending his congregation while he was here. "Oh," he said, "the other 49 pastors." Then, when I was on the board of one of the oldest and more respected seminaries in the United States and we were discussing the possibility of raising a million dollars to endow a chair in theology, a visiting pastor from Korea offered to raise the full amount in his local church.

The shift has been cataclysmic. And yet, Presbyterians and Methodists and the rest of us continue living as if this were still the middle of the twentieth century. We continue living as if the center of Christianity were still in the North Atlantic and as if that center could not shift.

As a historian, allow me to point out that throughout history the centers of Christianity have shifted more than once. First it was Jerusalem. Then it moved to Antioch and Asia Minor. Then the center was along an east-west axis running along the Mediterranean basin and encompassing the Roman Empire. Then it was along a north-south axis running from the British Isles, through the Frankish Empire, and into Rome. Then, in relatively recent times, it shifted

once again to an east-west axis, running across the Atlantic, basically from New York and Philadelphia to London and Berlin. So, that the centers may shift is not really surprising when one looks at the history of Christianity long term. We are surprised because we never considered the possibility of such a change—just as Jewish Christians were surprised when the church became mostly Gentile, just as Romans were surprised when the church became mostly Germanic and Slav, and just as Southern Europe was surprised when the Protestant nations of the north took the position of leadership.

This time, however, the shift is even greater, for what is happening is not that a new center has emerged, but rather that the church today has many centers depending on what aspect of its work and mission one takes into consideration. If one thinks in terms of evangelistic vitality and growth, there are centers in Korea, in Uganda, and in certain sections of India. If one thinks in terms of theological creativity, there are centers in Latin America, in South Africa, and in the Philippines. If one thinks in terms of money and financial resources, the centers are still clearly in the North Atlantic. Indeed, we all know congregations whose annual budget is larger than the total annual budget of their entire denomination in a country overseas.

But it is precisely this last point that makes it difficult for us to see the changes that are taking place and to prepare for their consequences. We still have the large budgets. We still have the large institutions. We still have the large libraries. We still publish more books than the rest of the church. If someone wishes to do advanced research in theology, the universities that have

the resources are still in Europe and North America. There is a sense in which we still are the center. And this makes it difficult for us to see the degree to which other centers have evolved, and the crucial place they now have in the life of the church.

But the truth is that the entire Christian church throughout the world is in transition. Christians in the North Atlantic are no longer the center. At best, we are one of many centers.

What this means for the church at large today—particularly for the church in the United States and in Northern Europe—is simply that even though it may not know it, it is in transition. We may sing about "the ol' time religion," but the ol' time shape of the world-wide church and our place in it, will never again be the same.

To put it bluntly, the transitions that the church in this country will have to face—particularly the church among the traditionally dominant white population—will be as jarring and as difficult as the transitions I was describing this morning, through which Latino immigrants, their families, and their churches must go.

This should not surprise us. Throughout Scripture we hear of the pilgrim people of God. In the New Testament, the Greek word often used to describe these pilgrim people could also be translated as the homeless people of God. By its own nature, the church is homeless. An early Christian of unknown name but deep faith put it thus:

Christians are no different from the rest in their nationality, language or customs. They live in their own countries, but as sojourners. They fulfill all their duties as citizens, but they suffer as foreigners. They find their homeland wherever they are, but their homeland is not in any one place. . . They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh. They live on earth but are citizens of heaven. They obey all laws, but they live at a level higher than that required by law. They love all, but all persecute them.

Scripture tells us (as at their best times Christians have known) that the faithful people of God are always the pilgrim people of God. The history of the church confirms it. Scripture also tells us (as at their best times Christians have known) that when the people of God get settled on a land, it becomes more difficult for them to remain faithful. The comforts of the land and the gods of the land turn out to be a source of great temptation. And on this point too, what Scripture tells us the history of the church confirms.

All of which leads me to consider a startling possibility. Could it be that through all the events I have just described God is calling the church in the United States to reclaim its calling as the pilgrim people of God? Could it be that, because society at large was so supportive, because we had so much respect, because we had such large and respectable institutions, because we had so much influence on the culture, we have become too settled? Could it be that God is calling us again to a new pilgrimage?

And if such is the case, could it be that God has created in these United States a pilgrim church, a church in transition, a Latino church, so that it may contribute its experiences as the church at large goes through the inevitable transitions of a pilgrim people? Could it be that, just as

Christians in Angola have much to teach us all on evangelism, the Latino church in the United States, a church in transition of people in transition, can help the church at large find ways to remain faithful in the midst of its pilgrimage?

I am not sure what the answer to those questions is. But I am sure that the entire church—and particularly the church in the dominant cultures of the North Atlantic—is being led by God into a new pilgrimage. Transition is inevitable. The church today is not what it was yesterday, and the church tomorrow will not be what it is today. That we cannot avoid. In this regard we have no option. But there is a point at which we do have an option: we may be brought into God's future willingly and gracefully as people seeking to obey God's will, or we may be brought into the future kicking and screaming. And if that is true, then perhaps the Latino church, a pilgrim people living in a land not their own, a people often marginalized and despised, may help us make the transition gracefully and willingly.

How can the Latino church do this? Quite simply, by offering its experiences of faith in the midst of transition to the church at large.

But this is not the most difficult part of it. The most difficult part is, what must the church at large in the United States do in order to make it possible for the Latino church to make this contribution to it?

This question is much more difficult precisely because it requires the sort of paradigm shift I have been speaking about. That professor at Cambridge, who seemed to think that as Cambridge goes so does the rest of the world, will have a very hard time listening to what Christians in Angola or in Chile have to say to her. In order to listen, she has to be willing to take the risk of a paradigm shift. And this shift is not easy, for we are speaking here of the very ground on which she has built her entire world view.

Likewise, the church at large in the United States has built its entire world view on the basis of a situation in which it was in many ways the center of the world-wide church. This was a world view and a world situation in which others had to depend on us, in which the North American church sent personnel, resources, knowhow, theology, scholarship, to churches all over the world who could not provide any of these for themselves. It was essentially a relationship of one-way dependency. We were the strong ones, they the weaker ones. We knew how, they had to learn. It was a situation which required liberality and sacrifice on the part of the North American church. And so, people raised millions and millions of dollars, sometimes penny by penny. And people devoted their lives to go abroad and spread the gospel.

All of that is still necessary. Whatever resources we have we must share. That is part of what the church as the body of Christ is all about. But there is another side of the coin. The body is not just about each member having a place and a function. And the body is not about one member having all the strength, all the information, and all the knowledge. The body is about every

member needing the rest of the body. The brain cannot teach the eye unless it also learns from the eye. The tongue has difficulty speaking what the ear does not hear.

This is the perhaps most difficult part of Paul's literary image to comprehend and to accept. Tolerance is difficult and the Lord knows how difficult it has been for many of us to learn tolerance. Eventually we learned this and we came to see that there are different cultures, different ways of being church. But it is not enough for the eye to agree that the ear has the right to be an ear. Beyond tolerance there is acceptance: the eye has to agree that the ear is part of the same body. The white, English-speaking church has to agree—to agree wholeheartedly—that it is part of the same church as the Spanish speaking church, as the African American church, that we are all part of the same body, and that therefore, besides tolerating our differences, we must accept each other. But beyond acceptance there is responsibility; the eye is responsible for the ear. What the eye sees, the eye tells the rest of the body, including the ear. The eye is responsible for the health of the ear. In the church, this means that we are responsible for those who are in need—be it physical or spiritual need. It is on this basis that those churches that have resources have traditionally shared them with others. It is on this basis that missionaries have left their homes and their homelands in order to go and preach the gospel elsewhere, and there to strengthen churches that were often weak and in difficulties. But beyond acceptance there is reciprocity. The eye knows that it needs the sounds of the ear. In the church, this means that not only does the church in India need the church in the United States, but also that the church in the United States needs the church in

India. Or, in terms of the subject for these lectures, not only does the Latino church need the church at large, but also the non-Latino church needs the Latino church.

As a historian of the church, it has become clear to me that quite often the most significant events in the life of the church do not take place at the center of things where we would expect them. They take place rather at the edges, at those places where the faith is crossing geographical borders as well as borders of culture, language, race, and class. Have you ever stopped to think how much of the New Testament was written in Jerusalem? Probably none of it! Indeed, much of the New Testament witnesses to the creativity that the church had to develop under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to cross the border between Jew and Gentile. So, our very foundational document is one written mostly at the edges of the church rather than at its center.

Then, just to give another example, by the year 1500 there were many Christians who were concerned over the direction that the church had taken and were calling for a reformation of the church. They expected that reformation to come from the center. They appealed to the popes. But they failed. They called councils of the entire church, of its bishops and other leaders, to bring about that reformation. But they failed. They expected reformation to come from the intellectual leadership in the great universities of Paris and Oxford. But it did not come. Then, in what from the perspective of most of Europe was a small country town at the edge of civilization, reformation came. It came unbidden and even resisted by popes, councils, and by

the distinguished faculties at Oxford and Paris. But it came.

Finally, a third example. The very church which many of us have known, the North American church that took such a position of leadership in the modern missionary movement, did not emerge mostly in Philadelphia or in New York. Nor did it emerge from the great intellectual centers of Harvard and Yale. It was really born in the frontier where Christians and their churches had to face new challenges. Those challenges led, among other things, to a faith that was strongly evangelistic, and it was this evangelistic zeal that led to the United States becoming one of the leading countries in the missionary enterprise.

Now there are other frontiers. Now all over Asia and Africa Christians are finding ways of living their faith in a world that is very different from that of our ancestors. They are learning how to live as Christians in a society that has been little influenced by Christianity. They are learning how to witness in a variety of cultures. All over Asia, Africa, and Latin America, Christians are engaged in a vast enterprise of witnessing to Jesus and to the Kingdom of God both through evangelism and through acts of love and justice.

What is perhaps most significant is that in those settings, as well as in Latino settings in the United States, people are reading the Bible anew. They thought they already knew what the Bible said. After all, they had been taught these things by missionaries that knew the Bible quite well.

But the problem when we think that we already know what the Bible says is that we no longer listen attentively to it. In church someone begins to read the parable of the Good Samaritan, or the parable of the Prodigal Son, and our mind wanders because we already know the end of the story. Or we listen but we seldom hear anything new—anything that is not exactly what we were told that the parable says. And so, while claiming that our final authority is the Bible, we seem to need the Bible less and less. Eventually we develop a sort of summary of what the Bible says, and we take this to be the Bible itself. The Bible no longer corrects our views and attitudes as it should. It is just there, and we respect it; but we already know what it says.

It is at this point that Christians from the margins—Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and also Latino Christians in this country—may well be a resource for our learning to read the Bible anew and to see in its dimensions we had not even imagined.

Allow me to give you some examples of what I mean. I was visiting a Latino church in the Bronx when I learned that the pastor had been preaching a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments and that this particular day he was to preach on the Sabbath. I must confess that I cringed. Ever since childhood, I had heard too many sermons on the Sabbath in which we were given a list of activities from which to abstain: on the Sabbath you cannot go to the movies; you cannot go to a ball game or be part of it; you cannot play cards. As I sat in church, I hoped against hope that this pastor would take a different route. Perhaps he would tell the congregation that they must take a breather from their hectic lives, from the constant rat race,

to rest and replenish their souls. I had heard quite a few sermons on that topic and found them rather refreshing as an alternative to the straight-laced Sabbath that we had been forced to observe in my youth. Or perhaps this preacher would tell us how the church had struggled in support of labor unions seeking a shorter work week.

Then the pastor came to the pulpit and surprised me. He read the commandment: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God." And then he asked: "How many of you have worked six days a week, or even five?" When very few raised their hands, he went on to say: "The commandment is about both work and rest. The commandment is not only to rest, but also to work. And yet, society all around the world is so ordered that many people cannot find work."

He was right. The commandment is not only about rest; it is also about work. The context of the entire Decalogue—and therefore also of the commandment on the Sabbath—is the work of God: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." It is this active God, this God whose work is creation itself, who commands the keeping of the Sabbath.

The commandment is not just about rest. The commandment is also about work, about meaningful, creative work, after the manner of the creating work of God. In past years, many in the church have supported the struggles on the part of organized labor for adequate rest. This

was necessary, for before such practices were limited by law, there were workplaces where laborers were expected to put in seventy hours of work a week.

Once labor laws were changed so that the normal week's work is forty hours we have moved to a different emphasis. Recognizing that we live in a society where there is a constant struggle to "get ahead," and in which people tend to hold more than one job, and to take work home, we have begun to stress the need for leisure, for "quality time" with family, for the recovery of our spirit. This I have repeatedly preached.

But before moving too rapidly to the matter of rest and leisure, we need to dwell on the matter of work, as did that pastor in the Bronx some years ago. Excessive work may be the problem of many in the middle class in the United States, where quite often in order to stay middle class, at least two salaries are necessary. It may also be the problem of many of us who simply are workaholics. But it is not the problem of many others. Lack of work, more than lack of rest, is the problem of many of the poor in the United States and elsewhere. As a very poor person has said about the condition of many in Latin America, "for us to be exploited would be a privilege." There are people—millions of people—who have no land to till and whose work nobody needs. We must keep these people in mind when we read the commandment: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work but the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord."

What that pastor in the Bronx was doing was reading Scripture anew, reading it as a book with a word from God for us today and reading it therefore from his own situation. What he found is not what we usually find. And yet, it is right there, in the Biblical text itself.

It would be easy to dismiss what he was saying. After all, it is quite different from what many of us have been learning and debating for generations about the Sabbath. But if we do so, we must be clear that we are not just arguing against him; we are also arguing against Scripture, in which he has found something that we may or may not have found before, but which is clearly there.

Let me give you a second example. In a small village in Nicaragua, during the time of the Somoza dictatorship, a group of fisherfolk are reading the early chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. This is the first time they have actually read the Gospel. They have heard the story many times, about the birth of Jesus, about the magi, about the slaughter of the innocents. But they have never read it on their own.

This time they do read it on their own. As we listen to them, we are probably hoping that they will come to understand the Nativity story as we do, and that may certainly be valuable. But they actually find in it some elements we have not usually found. One of them says: "You know, those magi do not seem to be very wise. Yes, they know about the star, and they follow it."

But then they go to Jerusalem, Herod's capital city, asking about the new King of the Jews that has been born. It would be like someone going to Managua and going about asking about a new rebel leader that is going to emerge. They don't seem to have any idea what is going on in Jerusalem."

Then, another breaks in: "Actually, they are so out of it that they need a special dream to warn them not to go back to Jerusalem." And another says: "Yes, but still the holy family had to go into exile in Egypt and then came the massacre of the infants." And finally, another: "You know, I wonder how many innocents suffer and die because religious people like the magi are content with a star-gazing religion."

We may not agree with all that these people say. But some things are clear. One is that just listening to them forces us to read anew the story of the Nativity and to read it asking new questions. Another is that no matter whether we like it or not, much of what they are saying they are actually finding in the text of Scripture itself. And a third is that in a number of ways the church has taught us to read these stories without making a connection between the naivete of the magi and the slaughter of the innocents. Indeed, in the traditional church calendar the massacre is remembered on December 28, and the magi come on January 6, thus giving the impression that the latter could not have caused the first.

We can easily discount all of this. After all, in this culture we have been reading and studying

the Bible for generations. We have the best biblical scholars. We have the largest libraries. We are the ones who taught all these newcomers that they ought to read the Bible, and how to read it. We can discount it, because after all we are at the center of things, and they are at the edges.

But we should be careful, lest our attitude be akin to those who in times of old asked, "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" Or like an eye that dares say to the ear, "I have no need of you."

Thus, the challenge before us may be greater than we thought. It is not only, "How do we respond to the growing Latino population?" This certainly is a challenge, as we saw this morning. The challenge is not only, "How can we make certain that the Latino population has adequate leadership?" This too is a challenge, as we saw earlier today. But the presence of the Latino church in our midst poses a greater challenge, and the challenge is, "Can we see the hand of God in what is happening right now in the Latino church? Can we hear the Word of God in the words that the Latino church is addressing to itself, to us, and to the world?"

The God who spoke in Scripture is still speaking to the church—to the whole church—in Scripture. The Lord who opened the way across the sea and the desert is still opening our way into new freedom and new realities. The Lord who led the people into the promised land is still leading us into the future. This is the real challenge. It is not the challenge of the Latino Church. It is the challenge of the Lord of the Church, of the Lord of Hosts, of the Lord who says, "those

who have ears, let them hear." Amen.

