

The Hispanic Ministry



Hispanic Strategy Conference
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Allow me to begin tonight by confessing my uneasiness and dissatisfaction with the theme that has been given to me. That uneasiness does not mean that I disagree with the value of setting out in a consultation such as this by discussing the economic, social, and political problems of our brothers and sisters of racial ties. On the contrary, this is indeed the proper starting point. My uneasiness is rather born out of the seeming impression that the injustices committed against us, the discrimination, miserable salaries, high degree of illiteracy, the huts in which many of our brothers and sisters live, all this is the problem to which the church at large is to respond—and in this context this practically means the Anglo church.

No, my sisters and brothers, from the biblical perspective we are not the main problem. When Israel was in Egypt, the true problem was not the Israelites. The problem was Pharaoh. It is possible, and even likely, that there were among the Egyptians some who were concerned over the injustices committed against the Israelites, and they tried to improve the lot of that enslaved people. If it had been today, I suppose that those Egyptians would have called a "national strategy conference" to deal with "the problems of the Israelites." But I repeat, herein precisely lies the error, for the problem is not the Israelites who suffer injustice, but the Egyptians who commit it. And the same can be said on the basis of the New Testament, for when he who was so poor that did not have even where to lay his head was being mocked and blamed, he was not the problem. The problem was the rich, the powerful, the religious; those

whose idols could not endure the Word of the living God; those who gathered in "strategy conferences" to deal with "the problem of Jesus"—and let us not forget that among them there was even one of his very disciples.

It has been said that in this city where we are gathered, the minorities are the majority. This paradox holds true, not only for this city but for the United States as a whole. If one takes into account the large numbers of Blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Jews, women, and other groups who are discriminated against, it is clear that Anglo males are no more than a fraction of the total population of this country. And yet, that minority manages to pose as the majority, to set the standards by which every other minority needs to be judged, and to make us believe that we, and not they, are the problem.

The dominant minority makes use of three main instruments in order to remain in power.

The first of these instruments is their control of the structures of power and economics, of the mass media, of the guidelines by which educational systems are set and measured, and of virtually every other means of creating and shaping public opinion. In fact, the entire educational system of this country has the purpose, among others, of leading all of us to believe that in order to be truly human, we must be like the dominant minority. The Black child learns that his or her is "bad," and that true "culture" comes from Europe and not from Africa. The white girl hears the cruel message that a significant portion of human activities and goals are

forbidden her, for the sole reason of her sex. The Hispanic child learns that his parents are ignorant because they do not know the proper use of English grammar or because their accent is ridiculous. We are all invited to lead our lives with the unattainable and alienating goal of being like the ruling minority—that is, all except women, who are told that they must continue being servile and obedient housewives.

The second instrument that the ruling minority utilizes to keep itself in power is its strategy of dividing other minorities so that a great deal of our energies is wasted, not in combating the injustices of the system, but in fighting among ourselves. White women are told that Blacks are plunderers and rapists, and that they, therefore, need the protection of white males. Blacks and Hispanics are told that the women's movement is simply trying to recover some of the power that the Anglos have lost. We Hispanics are told that after all we are more or less white, so that if we work hard and learn the rules of the game someday, we might be like them. The original inhabitants of these lands are told that they are under the protection of special treaties that distinguish them from other minorities. We are all told that, for the sake of justice, a portion of the pie has been reserved for minorities. We are told that there are jobs, scholarships, government funds, executive positions, and other such "goodies" set aside for minorities, and thus we are made to fight against each other as dogs fight for the crumbs under the table. And all this—let it be said in passing—happens not only out there, in "the world," but also, and constantly, in the church.

This takes us to the third instrument that the ruling minority uses to remain in power. For this instrument is none other than a crass misrepresentation or caricature of the biblical message. This misrepresentation is due to a changing perspective, which makes it very difficult for those who are in power to hear the Word of the living God. Indeed, the Bible is a book written mostly from the perspective of an oppressed minority. At the outset, it tells us of a nomadic and dispossessed people to whom God promises a land. Then it tells us of an enslaved people whom God frees from oppression and guides through the desert to the promised land. After that land has been conquered and the kingdom has been established, it is significant to note that the Bible offers us much less the perspective of the kings and their courts than that of the prophets who criticized royal impiety and injustice. In the New Testament, Mary sings at the beginning of the Gospel according to Luke:

He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.
(1:49-53)

Our Lord had no place to lay his head, and he spent a significant part of his ministry with the fishermen and prostitutes. And the apostle Paul—the only one among the early leaders of the church who could be said to belong to the privileged class—says, however, that it is precisely the condition of the humble and dispossessed that God uses in order to shame the mighty:

For consider you call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are. (1 Cor., 1:26-28)

But with the passage of years, that primitive church of the dispossessed became, first, the powerful church—in which was seen the power of the Gospel at work; and later, the church of the powerful, and this is precisely the nature of the misrepresentation of the Gospel that today upholds the power of the ruling minority. This misrepresentation is very broad in its scope, and if we had the time, it would be possible to show how it has affected, not only the practical life of the church, but also our doctrine of God, of the incarnation, of the church, of salvation, etc. Let it suffice for the time being to say that too often the church and Christian theology have allied themselves with the powerful and the oppressors and thus has resulted a supposed word of liberation that often sounds more like Pharaoh's word to the Hebrews than like God's Word to Moses and his enslaved people.

This is not to say that the church and the Christian faith have been an unqualified means of oppression and exploitation. Those who argue in this direction forget that it was precisely in the so-called Christian civilization that the modern struggle for liberation and social justice first arose, and that many of its leaders have been either confessing Christians or persons deeply influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition. The reason for this, however, has not been that the church, and Christians in general, have been so enlightened, kind, and good but rather that the church and Christians have had to come to grips with the liberating God of the biblical accounts. The new wine of the Gospel cannot be contained in our old wineskins and is constantly breaking out when and where we least expect it to do so. Over against all our attempts to establish our

authority and tyranny over others, the ever-sovereign God keeps plaguing us with that ancient word to Pharaoh: "Let my people go."

But Pharaoh's heart has been hardened. Pharaoh cannot hear the Word of God so long as he is concerned with building mighty empires, and with his balance of payments, and with his world prestige. It may be that Pharaoh is doomed. It may be that, deafened by his power, he will not be able to hear the divine demand that the future holds for him no more than a series of plagues, and that his end will come amid the flood of the Red Sea or of oil, sugar, and bananas. On the other hand, it may still be that the new pharaohs, like ancient Nineveh, will hear the divine command, and God will repent of the evil that has been in store for the city.

But in any case, what is clear is that Pharaoh cannot hear the voice of God directly. His god is little more than an idol that he has created to sanction and sacralize his power. The plagues that beset him seem to him like temporary setbacks that will be overcome by means of better plans, international diplomacy, and empty promises. Pharaoh cannot see that the purpose of God in history is not the preservation of Egypt, no matter how advanced its civilization may be, but rather the liberation of humankind so that they might become that for which they were created—liberation from sin in all its dimensions, individual as well as social and political. This can only be seen by those whom God is actually liberating from the bondage of Egypt. God speaks to Pharaoh, not in the temples where Pharaoh himself is worshipped, but in the voice of

the oppressed: "Let my people go." Pharaoh either hears these words, or he does not hear the Word of God at all.

It is for this reason that the ministry of oppressed minorities becomes particularly important—and please note, I do not say ministry *to* or *for* the oppressed minorities, but ministry *of* those minorities. Pharaoh is not simply sitting on a throne in Washington or on Wall Street. He has also taken possession of our temples and is constantly attempting to substitute the idols of his power and prestige for the loving and just God of Israel. When the "prophets" speak, Pharaoh often hears little more than the echoes of his own voice. Let us not forget, however, that it is not only the male Anglo-Saxon minority who represents Pharaoh in our society. Inasmuch as each of us buys into the structures of oppression, and benefits from them, each of us is also Pharaoh. Pharaoh is the white woman who profits from the oppression of the Black man. Pharaoh is the Hispanic man who oppresses the Hispanic woman. Pharaoh is the citizen of this country ("United Statesian"?) who profits from the unjust distribution of wealth and opportunities among the nations of the world. In other words, oppression is an insidious reality, which eventually dehumanizes both the oppressed and the oppressor, for the oppressed reaches the apex of his oppression when he begins applying to others the same injustice that is committed against him. And yet, this ought not to be used to erase the distinction between those who are essentially sitting on Pharaoh's throne and those who are wearing Moses' sandals. Pharaoh poses as an Israelite when the wife of a rich and powerful politician appears before television cameras to assure us that she is trying to overcome inflation by serving more

cheese and less meat; or when a government official has the gall to tell us that those who have suffered most from the present economic situation are the stockbrokers; or when middle-class people complain that the price of meat is approaching an hour's minimum wage. It is those who can afford neither meat nor cheese, those who don't even know what stocks and bonds are, those who are not covered by minimum wage laws, who can most authentically speak God's word: "Let my people go." The rest of us—white, black, yellow, red, brown, male and female—can only hear that voice to the extent that we are willing and able to take the side of the oppressed and of God with them—in their struggle for liberation.

It is at this point, I repeat, that the theme of this conference is exceedingly important. If it is true that in this country—and in fact throughout the world—the paradox occurs that the minorities are the majority, it follows that a minority perspective on the Gospel—a perspective such as that which we Hispanics can bring to it—is much more than a peripheral commentary or a footnote on the proclamation of the church. What we are to bring to the church, our ministry as Hispanics, is the prophetic word and action that will destroy the idols of Pharaoh and call the church to proclaim anew, to live anew, to suffer anew, the message of the Christian Gospel, that Christ is truly God among us—or even better, that Christ is God truly among us. In other words, my brothers and sisters, our ministry consists, simply and succinctly, in making it possible for the Church of the Disciples of Christ to be truly a disciple of Christ.

One of the clearest proofs of the prejudice and contempt with which we are seen in this society is the manner in which we are considered newcomers in lands that the feet of many of our ancestors trod, and where the tongue of Cervantes was spoken long before that of Shakespeare. The truth, seldom underscored in schoolbooks on history, is that, from the historical point of view, the Anglos, and not us, are the newcomers to these lands. The state of Georgia, where I now live, was ruled centuries ago from Cuba, where I was born. But few Georgians today know that. Nineteen years before Sir Walter Raleigh founded his famous colony in Virginia, the Spanish founded in Florida the city of St. Augustine, which still exists. And twelve years before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the Spanish founded the city of Santa Fe, in what is now New Mexico. In fact, the first Hispanics who became part of this country were not immigrants. It was not they who came to the country, but the country that engulfed them in its expansionist process.

That process began in 1810, when the United States annexed western Florida in order to have an outlet into the Gulf of Mexico, which was then truly and literally the Gulf of Mexico. By 1853 the United States had annexed, through various means that are well known, what has become the states of Florida, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah, besides significant areas of Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. These territories included more than half of what used to be Mexico, and their total expanse was much greater than the total expanse of what had previously been the United States.

Although it is true that still many of us remember that process with a tinge of bitterness, that is not the reason why I mention it here. There is an ancient Spanish saying, "A thief who robs a thief merits a hundred years' pardon." And it is clear that the means that the Spaniards used to gain the possession of these lands were no more honorable than those used later by the United States. The principle that whoever happens to be the first comer to a place or a position has absolute right to it is one of the main excuses for present injustice, and in any case, if we were trying to determine who was here first, that right would belong to the Native Americans—and even then it would be necessary to determine which tribe dispossessed another even before the arrival of the Europeans.

No. The reason why I briefly retell here the expansionist process of the United States is simply to underline the fact that the Hispanic roots in this country are old and run deep, and that therefore we cannot be understood simply on the same basis through which one understands the various waves of immigrants who have come across the Atlantic. We have been in this country for so long, and have retained our identity to such a degree, that it is highly doubtful that we will follow the same process of assimilation by which Swedes, Irish, and Germans have joined the mainstream of American society. Especially now that there is an increasing awareness of our own culture and traditions, it seems safe to predict that we will be around tomorrow, and for as many tomorrows as it pleases God to grant to this country. If we did not lose our identity when we believed that this society was a great democratic potage in which eventually all would be evenly mixed (the "melting pot" theory), much less will we lose it now

that we no longer believe that theory. Although there are still some Hispanics—mostly among those of recent arrival—who believe that assimilation is possible and desirable, the vast majority—including the children of some who believed that they had been completely assimilated—are returning to their historic roots and affirming their own identity, not as something to be ashamed of but as a source of pride and the ground for self-worth.

This process is coupled with a growing consciousness of solidarity among the various Hispanic groups. There is no doubt that each of these groups is different. Those differences are well known. But what is most remarkable during the last few years is the growing sense of community among these various groups.

This growing sense of solidarity crystalizes around two main foci: the social-political and the cultural.

The social-political focus of Hispanic solidarity comes from the fact that we are becoming increasingly aware of our meagre participation in the decisions that shape our lives. Our participation at the managerial level is very slight in those enterprises for which we work—and this, let it be said in passing, also includes the church. Until a very recent date, politicians have paid little attention to our vote—and, except in those places where we are concentrated in high numbers, they still do. Since our political organization at the national level is practically non-existent, so is the pressure that we can bring to bear on the federal government. For these

reasons, while it is true that we have benefitted from the laws against racial discrimination that have resulted from the Black civil rights movement, it is also true that those laws are applied with less rigor in those places where we are the main object of discrimination.

Pressed by these realities, we are becoming politically more astute. While we do not deny the differences that exist among our various groups, we are increasingly less inclined to allow these differences to lead us to waste our energies fighting among ourselves instead of opposing our common oppression. Some of us are becoming aware of the role played by agricultural interests in California in trying to convince anti-Communist Cubans in Florida that the boycott against grapes and lettuce is part of a great Communist plot. And the same interests try to convince Chicanos that all Cubans are reactionaries who will not support their movement. In this very city, slumlords are finding it increasingly difficult to employ their old strategy of contraposing various Hispanic groups in order to achieve their purposes.

Therefore, what is taking place is that we Hispanics are beginning to unite because of the clear political necessity to do so if we are not to be ignored and crushed. This process, which is just beginning, is one of the most important signs of hope for the Hispanic people. Will it be too much to ask that the church, especially in gatherings such as this, seeks to contribute to this process?

The other focus of our growing solidarity, that is, the cultural focus, is naturally the Spanish language. For many Hispanics in the past, the language barrier was one of the main obstacles that stood in the way of their social advancement. Many parents, seeking to save their children from the difficulties that they had experienced, would speak their broken English at home and set Spanish aside. The church itself followed the same policies, and church schools were not lacking in which students were forbidden to speak Spanish. As education was really a process of socialization, in many communities Spanish was lost as a written language and as an instrument of precise communication and remained as the less developed language in which one could express only those things in the cradle—things that, although less sophisticated, are nevertheless the most important elements of human life.

All this is now passing. Younger Hispanic generations, spurred by the examples of Blacks and other minorities, are returning to their cultural roots. They are insisting on college courses on Hispanic culture, taught in Spanish. In those school systems in which there are large numbers of Hispanic students, pressure for bilingual education increases daily. All around us, we are beginning to discover the North Atlantic myopia from which this country suffers. We see, for instance, that in this very decade one of the most prestigious publishing enterprises of the country dares publish a multi-volume collection under the title of *The Annals of America* in which the work of our Indian, Spanish, and African ancestors is practically ignored. The very name of "American" raises the question: What preposterous conceit allows the inhabitants of a single country to take for themselves and their nation the name of an entire hemisphere?

This process of cultural awakening must be seen as a positive development. By going back to their cultural roots, younger Hispanic generations are gaining a new sense of identity and dignity. They are being liberated to be themselves and to determine their own future by their own values and standards, and not by the goals set by others. This may be threatening to many. It will certainly be dangerous, for freedom always involves a risk. But without such freedom and risk it is impossible to be the full human beings that God intends us to be.

This does not mean, however, that an awakening of Hispanic culture is to be equated with the liberation that God is bringing about in today's world. Culture can be very liberating for those who feel oppressed by values and standards set by others. But there is a certain understanding of "culture" that is little more than another means of oppression. Thus understood, "culture" is the entire set of values and standards that the ruling groups set up in order to authenticate their own power and to keep the rest subservient. "Culture" develops at the high point of a nation or group. The high point of Spanish culture was also the high point of Spanish imperialism; and that culture—including Spanish religion—was used to subjugate the supposedly uncultured people who inhabited this hemisphere. Therefore, although today in this country Hispanic culture may well be a liberating counterculture, we Hispanics must not forget that this very culture was developed and sifted by the pharaohs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In conclusion, it is possible from our tradition we may gain some significant insights into the meaning of the Gospel, and that we may offer those insights to others. But what will be the most significant ministry that we may offer to the church and the world at large will not derive directly from our participation in Spanish culture. It will come rather from our rediscovery of the original liberating Gospel as we participate, jointly with the early church, with Jesus and the Apostles, with Blacks and Asians, in the condition of a dispossessed minority—in the condition of "servant" that God assumed in Jesus Christ.

