

Why Remember the Past?

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It is a pleasure to be here with you to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Latino Center at Fuller. It is a pleasure, because even from afar I have followed the development of the Center from its very inception. It is a further pleasure because, even though most of you will not remember, I was invited to speak to you almost five years ago, as the Center celebrated its thirty-fifth anniversary! So, I rejoice with you on this occasion.

But even as we gather to celebrate, we must ask, Why are we here? Why waste time speaking about the past when there is so much ahead of us? Why look back to what happened forty years ago, when the electric typewriters that were then considered a marvel are now relegated to museum items? Why look back when we live in a society where the iPhone5 that amazed us a few months ago is now obsolete?

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As I was preparing for this occasion, I saw a comic strip, "Pearls before Swine," in which a man standing with his back to Piglet says, "I am your new neighbor, and I have come to introduce myself." Somewhat mystified, Piglet asks, "Why are you standing there with your back to me?" To which the man responds, "I am a historian. I am always looking backward."

That strip immediately reminded me of a comment my mother once made. My brother was an Old Testament professor. I was a church historian. So, she asked: "When are you boys going to

study someone who is still alive?”

At that point, I did not know what to answer. Today, I would answer along three lines:

First, as Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset remarked, “In order to understand anything human, no matter whether individual or collective, it is necessary to tell a story.” *“Para comprender algo humano, personal o colectivo, es preciso contar una historia” (Obras completas, 6:40)*. Or, as he would say elsewhere, each generation stands on the shoulders of all generations past, and it can understand itself only inasmuch as it understands them.

In other words, to understand the Centro Latino it is not enough to look at what it is today. It is not enough to look at its present programs—programs that its founders probably never dreamt of. It is not enough to look at its plans for the future—plans that count on the support of the entire Fuller community as well as of the Latino community itself. We must also look back to the early days, to the challenges it faced, to the dreams of its founders, to dreams realized, and to dreams thwarted. If we are to understand the Centro Latino today, we must go back to 1964, when the Hispanic American Baptist Seminary was closed, but Drs. José Arreguín, Eduardo Font, and others would not let the dream die. I must go back to a conversation I had with Dr. Jorge Gay in Costa Rica before he came to Fuller, about his dream to come to this country in order to train Hispanic leaders for the church, both in the US and in Latin America. I must go back to another conversation with now Dr. Isaac Canales, about his dream to get a PhD in New

Testament, and to teach future pastors. We must go back to Clifton Holland's study in 1972, showing the state of the Latino church and its leadership.

Things have changed. What began as a Hispanic Program whose purpose was to provide a basic certificate to pastors who had not been able to study much, is now the Center for the Study of the Hispanic Church and Community—*Centro para el estudio de la iglesia y comunidad latinas*.

What used to give only a certificate now grants two- and three-year Master's degrees. What was once the certificate program now has taken the form of collaboration with a number of bible institutes in the region, helping to strengthen their programs and teaching their professors. What was once limited to Los Angeles now has extensions in the Bay Area and in Texas. What was once at the margins of the life of the seminary now stands at the center.

But even so, today's Centro Latino stands on those shoulders of yore, and it cannot understand itself—it cannot be true to its mission—without understanding them. We may be enthused about what we are doing, about our plans for the future, about the new programs, about the entering students. But all of this is possible only because we stand on the shoulders of those who dreamed before us, who labored before us, who sacrificed so that we today can celebrate this fortieth anniversary.

Secondly, I would now respond to my mother by quoting the words of Jesus: "have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living” (Mk 12.26-27)— *“no habéis leído en el libro de Moisés, cómo le habló Dios en la zarza, diciendo: ‘Yo soy el Dios de Abraham, el Dios de Isaac y el Dios de Jacob’? ¡Dios no es Dios de muertos, sino de vivos!”* Our God is not God of the dead, but of the living. Our God is the God of José Arreguín, and of Jorge Gay, and of the many others who went before them and after them. If we believe that we shall live in God, we must also believe that they too live in God. And if they live in God, they are our brothers and sisters whom we must cherish and respect just as we do our sisters and brothers of today.

Times have changed. Many of the early witnesses to the work of the Centro Latino, most of its early leaders and of its first alumni have now passed to the presence of God, to join Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the great cloud of witnesses. We may forget. But the God of Abraham does not forget. The God of Isaac and Rachel, the God of Jacob and Rebecca, the living God of the living, is a God who does not forget us, and who does not forget those who have gone before us. And because God does not forget it behooves us to remember.

Thirdly, we celebrate the forty years of the Centro Latino because our God is a God of mighty deeds. At the end of Deuteronomy, we are told that after giving the Law Moses sang in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel: “remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your father, and he will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you” (Dt 32.7)—*“Acuérdate de los tiempos antiguos, considera los años de muchas generaciones;*

pregunta a tu padre, y él te lo contará; a tus ancianos, y ellos te dirán". The rest of the song of Moses tells of the mighty acts of God that the children of Israel are to remember are the mighty acts of God, when "He sustained them in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste; he shielded him, cared for him, guarded him as the apple of his eye. As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord alone guided him" (Dt 32.10-12a)—"*Lo halló en tierra de desierto, en yermo de horrible soledad; lo rodeó, lo instruyó, lo guardó como a la niña de su ojo, como el águila que excita su nidada revoloteando sobre sus pollos, así extendió sus alas, lo tomó, y lo llevó sobre sus plumas*".

Israel is to obey God because Israel remembers the mighty acts of God. Israel knows God as the one who freed it from the yoke of Egypt. Israel knows God as the one who in the beginning made the heavens and the earth; as the one who called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans. And, as time goes by, Israel will add more to this memory of the mighty acts of God: God is the one who dried the river Jordan, and thus opened the way into a new land that flows with milk and honey. God is the one who gave David the victory over Goliath. When Israel was in Babylon, it was God who made a highway in the desert. Because God is a mighty God who intervenes in the history of the people of God, to know God is to remember the mighty acts of God. And to forget those mighty acts is also to forget the God who performed them.

And so, as we today come to the fortieth anniversary of the founding of the Centro Latino, the

words of Moses still come to us as a word from God: “remember the days of old, consider the years long past; ask your parents, and they will inform you; your elders, and they will tell you” — *“Acuérdate de los tiempos antiguos, considera los años de muchas generaciones; pregunta a tu padre, y él se lo contará a tus ancianos, y ellos te dirán”*.

Remember. Remember that the God who led Egypt in the desert is also the God who accompanied many of our people across the desert. Remember that the God who opened the Jordan so they could cross dry-shod is the same God who led many of our people across another river, so they could cross dry-backed. Remember that the God who led the people out of exile and into new freedom is the same God who is calling and leading our people into new and greater freedom. Remember that the God who brought down the walls of Jericho, and who in Jesus Christ brought down every wall of separation, is the same God who brought down the many walls that the founders of this Centro and their first students had to face.

Remember that the God who went ahead of Israel in the cloud and the pillar of fire is the same God who has gone ahead of us in Jesus Christ, who from the right hand of the Father calls us into the future.

Remember the past, because without it you cannot march into the future. Remember the past, because the God who calls us from the future is the same God who has come to us in the past.

Remember! Remember! Remember!

