Hispanics and Theological Education

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I must confess that seldom have I found it as difficult to write a paper as I have found this one. The reasons for this are many. First of all, it is not easy to write a paper in English knowing that one is to deliver it in Spanish, to a Spanish-speaking audience. The sentence structure and even the thought patterns are so different that I find myself constantly asking how I would say the same thing in the other language, and that question intrudes in my train of thought. But that is not the only reason why I have found this task difficult. Another source of difficulty is that the subject of theological education for the Hispanic community in this country lies close to my heart, and that therefore I have too much that I wish to say in too little time. I cannot hope to say it all, but I do hope that this encounter is only the beginning of a long process.

There is, however, a deeper reason for my difficulty. It is my awareness of the difficulty of the task set before this gathering. We are here to try to open channels of communication and bridge the gap between the seminary and the Hispanic community and church leadership. That task is much more difficult than would appear at first sight. To serve as a bridge between the academic theological community and the Hispanic community is a task akin to trying to mediate between David and Goliath. The first thing we must recognize, if we are to have an open and fruitful discussion, is the disparity of the participants. When a seminary community

such as this invites a minority community such as us to share in a dialogue, it is very difficult --I daresay, impossible-- for us to meet as equals. Although the seminary properly thinks of itself as playing a role of criticism vis-a-vis society at large, the Hispanic community, just as correctly, sees the Seminary as part of that society and of its structures of power. As Hispanics, when we hear the Seminary telling us that theological education is important to our ministry, we tend to agree. Part of that agreement comes from our having experienced that it is in fact so. But part of that agreement comes from our having repeatedly heard similar messages through the mass media and the entire educational system of this country. Therefore, it is difficult for those of us who are intellectually aware not to heed the call of the seminary for better theological education for our churches. What is very difficult for us, because the society around us does not tell us how, is to discover and to express just how that theological education for our situation must be different from what is now offered in seminaries, or what our own experience as Hispanic Christians has to contribute to theological education at large.

On the other hand, when an academic community such as this seminary meets with Hispanic leadership, it is easy for that community to express what it hopes to contribute, but it is much more difficult for it to discover what it must do in order to make that contribution effective, and even more difficult to see that the Hispanic community also has a significant contribution to make to the task of theological reflection and education.

Another factor makes our task of communication even more difficult. An academic community such as this lives by its ability to reduce reality to thought and thought to articulate expression. Therefore, when it meets with a group such as ours, it tends to value our contribution on the basis of the degree to which we can express it in traditional academic terms. This may well be as it should be, for such is the task of an academic community. But again, as we participate in dialogues such as this, it is important for the seminary to realize and to keep constantly in mind that it is asking Hispanics to play ball in its park and according to its rules. If the seminary really wishes to hear what Hispanics have to say, it must find ways to play in the Hispanic park and by Hispanic rules. Otherwise, there is always great danger that communication will only take place in one direction, and that that direction be the same in which most communication takes place in our society: from the powerful majority to the relatively voiceless minorities.

It is for these reasons that I say that to try to serve as a bridge between a seminary such as this and a community such as ours is a task as difficult as trying to mediate between David and Goliath. David cannot help but hear the softest of Goliath's whispers And Goliath must perk up his ear to hear even what David is shouting. Therefore, the preliminary question that as Hispanics we must pose to a seminary that seeks to establish dialogue with us, and to open itself to us, is precisely this one: Are you willing to perk ears? We may not be able to say things as articulately as you certainly can. We certainly cannot make ourselves heard as well as you can. But we have some things to say that are just as important as what you have to say. Will

you listen as we struggle to articulate our concerns and contributions, and to make ourselves heard?

Having said that, let me move on to what I consider the great theological struggle through which most of us in Hispanic Protestantism are going. That is the struggle of seeking to discover what it means to be ourselves while also being true to the Gospel. When we first heard the Protestant message, we heard in it a call to freedom and authenticity and the possibility of breaking away from some of the negative features of our traditional culture. But as time has gone by, we have begun to discover that there are also alienating elements in the traditionally North Atlantic interpretation of the Gospel --elements that are not part of the Gospel, but rather of the manner it has been presented to us. Therefore, we find ourselves going back to the theological drawing boards and looking anew at Scripture and at Christian tradition, to rediscover their message, and to find a way to be truly Protestant without thereby acquiescing to the tacit implication that the views and experiences of the North-Atlantic tribe are somehow normative for Protestant theology.

This is a task **we** must do. No one can do it for us. We would be remiss were we to ask or to expect an institution such as this to do this for us. Furthermore, we would again be falling into the same trap of allowing the dominant culture to do our thinking for us.

But this is not a task we can do without the tools that an institution such as this can offer. In order to rethink theology, we must first know what it is that we are criticizing, understand its origin and implications, and then correct it. Most will agree, for instance, that a knowledge of the original biblical languages is a great help as we seek to critique traditional interpretations of the message of Scripture. And what holds true for Biblical interpretations is also true of systematic theology, history, and the various fields in which theological disciplines are applied to the practical life of the church.

Therefore, what we must ask of seminaries in encounters such as this is to offer us and our people the sort of theological education that supports us in that task. Unfortunately, much of the theological education that we have been offered in times past has not done this. Let me give a number of examples, from various areas in the curriculum, to illustrate what I mean.

When I went to seminary, longer ago than I care to admit, we had a good professor of pastoral counseling, and I am grateful for much that he taught me. But as years have passed, and I have been made aware of a number of realities that I did not know then, I have also become aware that much of the pastoral counseling that I was taught, and many of the books I read, were based on assumptions that I could no longer hold. The main such presupposition was that the purpose of counseling was to help the person become "well adjusted. " If someone came to us to discuss a problem, we were told, our task was to help them clarify the situation and cope with it. Later, I have read books that take issue with the non-directive sort of

counseling that I was taught, and I am certain that the point is well taken. But still, as a Hispanic in a country where my people are usually placed in subservient roles and under conditions of injustice, I must insist that most often my task as a pastor, both in counseling and in other activities, consists, not in helping people adjust, but in affirming the rightness and justice of their apparent maladjustment. When my people have problems, even what seem to be personal problems or family problems, I cannot assume that they are indeed purely personal or limited to the scope of the family. I must deal with the personal dimension of the problem, but I must make it clear that there may well be good reasons for them to have problems, for them to be maladjusted. I certainly will not wait until all societal problems have been solved in order to deal with the individual. But I must also keep in mind constantly that behind my parishioner's problems stands a fundamental dehumanization to which she or he has been subjected, and that to adjust to such dehumanization is both sinful and unhealthy.

But then there is another dimension in which the entire discipline of pastoral counseling always seemed strange to me. As a pastor in a Hispanic congregation, I could probably announce that I have office hours from such-and-such to such-and-such a time, and that during those hours I shall be available for counseling. And then I would probably sit, and sit, and sit, and I would be most fortunate if one parishioner came to me for counseling during an entire week. And perhaps I could decide that this was because my people needed to grow used to pastoral counseling and insist on my announcement. And perhaps two people would come during the next week. And meanwhile, members of my congregation would be living,

and dying, and hurting, and rejoicing, and very little of this would come to my office during my “counseling” hours. And perhaps, if I insisted on what I was taught, I would come to the conclusion that we as Hispanics were missing a significant part of what it means to be the church. But then, were I to look around at what is happening in my congregation, I would realize that my congregation, at least part of the time, regards itself as a therapeutic community. When people hurt, it is not the task of the pastor as pastor to help them heal. When people doubt, it is not the task of the pastor as pastor to strengthen their faith. When people seek a sense of forgiveness, it is not the task of the pastor as pastor to provide that sense. All this is the task of the community, and the pastor is called to do it, not on his or her own, but as a member of the community of healing, faith, and forgiveness. In short, pastoral counseling as it was taught to me, based on the model of the psychological therapist, buys into individualistic and privatistic values and perspectives that may be very true of the North American white middle class, but are not true of must Hispanic congregations, and are certainly not true to the Gospel.

Therefore, what we as Hispanics must ask of an institution of theological education that declares itself to be interested in helping us is: Are you willing to explore with us what strange shapes pastoral counseling, and the teaching of it, must take in order to be true both to the Gospel and to who we are and where we stand in this society? And this question, which I now ask of pastoral counseling, must be posed of every other item in the so-called “practical” field.

But the issue goes far beyond that, for we must also pose questions with reference to every other field of the theological curriculum. Take, for instance, the field of systematic theology. Far be it from me to say that traditional theology is useless. Indeed, I have spent practically my entire adult life studying the development of that theology, and intend to spend most of whatever number of days I still have on it. But, having said this, it is necessary to recognize that most of the theological tradition --at least most of the Protestant theological tradition of the last four centuries—is white, male, North-Atlantic theology. It may be very good theology. But it is still an ethnic theology alongside other possibilities, and if as Hispanics we measure ourselves and our churches on the basis of that theology, we will find it alienating and oppressive.

Within the field of systematic theology, we could take any of a dozen doctrines to show this point. Simply as an example, let us take the doctrine of sin. When I first studied theology, I was told that the fundamental sin is pride. Hundreds of theologians could be quoted affirming that this is so, for, was not the promise of the serpent in the garden, “You will be like gods”? To wish to be like gods: That is the root "hubris,” going beyond the limits of one’s station in life, trying to break the limitations set by the fates.

This notion of sin is a very easy thing to accept if you are a minority. After all, the entire society around you is constantly reminding you of your proper place, and if you commit anything approaching hubris, there will soon be someone to slap you down. It is also a very

convenient thing to accept if you do not wish to pay the price of the struggle for your own humanization and that of your people. Freedom does not come cheap and is not always fun, as the children of Israel discovered when they missed the leeks and the onions of Egypt. Therefore, as I move among Hispanic people, I find in many of us a willingness to accept this understanding of sin. If sin is to think highly of yourself, then that is certainly not a great temptation among migrant laborers or residents of the barrio.

But then I look again at the story in Genesis. Whoever put those stories together must have been aware that the other story, when speaking of creation, affirms that God said: Let us make humankind after our own image. And God created humankind after the divine image. “Male and female God created them.” You see, when the Serpent says, "You will be like gods," it is not promising something new. They were already like God. The temptation then is not to think too highly of themselves, but to ignore the image of God that is already in them, and to act as if that image were not there. The greatest sin, the initial sin, is not an act of hubris, but an act of false humility born out of lack of faith. When we think too lowly of ourselves, we are inclined to think that our obedience does not count for much. And therein lies the root of sin.

So, I can go back to my undocumented taxpayers, and to my migrant laborers, and to my tenement dwellers, and say: “do not think too lowly of yourselves. Do not allow the image of God, which is in you, be desecrated. To do so would be a great sin. Stand for your rights and

for those of your fellow human beings. Organize. Protest. Claim your place under the sun. That is what God wants you to do. That is why you were created after the divine image.

This is just a minor example of the re-reading of theology that we as Hispanics must do. It is a difficult task, for we lack the resources and tools, and too often, when those resources and tools have been given to us through theological education, they have been given to us in such a way as to lead us not to question the content of the theology we have been taught, and its possible implications for our people. My friends, we must re-read all theology, from the doctrine of God to the last issues of eschatology. In so doing, we shall find much of value in traditional, white, theology. And we will also find much that we must either reinterpret or reject altogether. In order to do this, what we must ask of an institution such as Union Theological Seminary is that it gives us both the intellectual tools and the psychological and material support that we shall need. Most of the tools we shall need are already included in the standard theological curriculum of seminaries. Where most fail, however, is in providing an education that is affirming and encouraging to Hispanics, rather than alienating.

Let me mention a few examples. First of all, there is the question of our bilingualism. Until very recently, most seminaries have refused to see our knowledge of Spanish as a significant asset for our theological education. When they have begun to do so, it has generally been, not because right at their doorstep there are thousands who speak Spanish, but because recent theological developments south of the border have given Spanish a new aura of intellectual

respectability. As Hispanics in the U.S., we rejoice in the development of a Latin American theology that has forced at least some in the North Atlantic theological establishment to listen to it. And we are glad that this has given our language renewed status in theological circles in the U.S. But still, we must ask, why is it that so many in theological education in the U.S. are more interested in the poor across the border than they are in the poor at their doorstep? Shouldn't Christian theologians who live in New York be interested in Spanish, not so much because important books are written in it, but rather because some of the most important people from the perspective of the Gospel, the needy neighbors, speak Spanish? As Hispanic pastors here and in other cities in the U.S., we must claim the importance of Spanish, first of all, because it is one of the languages in which the cry of the poor is most often heard in this country. To be able to hear that cry must be an asset for faithful theological reflection. It must be at least as important as being able to read profound tomes in German.

But there are other reasons why our bilingualism must be affirmed. The denial of the significance of Spanish is also a denial of the value of Hispanics and our traditions. For us as Hispanics to begin to re-read theology, so to speak, in Spanish, we must begin by denying the usual negation of our traditions and their value. In the field of theological education, what we must ask is that educators, whatever their field, examine anew their teaching, both in method and in content, to see how that denial can itself be denied.

For me, a clear example of this is in the study of ancient languages. Take Greek, for instance. There are structural similarities between Greek and Spanish that make a knowledge of Spanish an asset for learning Greek. And yet, I have not yet met a professor of Greek, even those who have a number of Hispanic students, who has taken the time to explore those similarities. And they spend hours trying to explain to us the difference between an imperfect tense and an aorist, or the need for adjectives to agree with nouns, or the function of gender, etc. Would it be too much to ask that professors of Greek, instead of simply telling us what Greek is all about, took the time to listen to us and try to discover some of the ways in which they could use our knowledge of Spanish in order to teach us Greek?

Then, there is the question of the teaching of history in a way that surreptitiously denies our significance. Are you aware that in the most widely used book on American church history, the invasion and dismemberment of Mexico is mentioned only in passing and that the occupation of Puerto Rico is not even mentioned? Would it be too much to ask that the history of Christianity in the U.S. be taught in such a way that our ancestors and traditions are taken into account? As a Methodist, I grew up hearing sermons and speeches about Wesley. In seminary and thereafter, I have heard many lectures about how he was influenced by Zinzendorf, or by William Law. But have you ever heard a lecture, or even a mention, of the significance of a certain Gregorio Lopez for Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection? Would it be too much to ask a professor of Methodism to be interested, not only in the German and British figures around Wesley but also in Gregorio Lopez with whom perhaps we can relate much

better than with William Law or Peter Boehlert? Would it be too much to remind such a professor that Wesley himself studied Spanish?

Finally, still in the field of history, as Hispanics we must ask why is it that when most North-Atlantic church historians come to the sixteenth century, they think of the Reformation and hardly ever pay any attention to the events that were taking place this side of the Atlantic. Two major events took place in the history of the church in the sixteenth century. One was the Reformation The other was the enormous colonial expansion of Spain and Portugal, whose result we Hispanics are. The jury is still out as to which of these two events is most important. As Hispanics, we cannot but suspect a North-Atlantic bias when church historians, Catholic as well as Protestant, tell us that the sixteenth century was the time of the Reformation and merrily forget the other momentous events that were taking place at the same time.

We have been invited to this institution today to begin a dialogue as to our needs in theological education, and how this seminary can respond to them. For that, we are grateful. There was a time, and there are places, not so long ago nor so far away, where such an invitation would not have happened. At the same time, however, we must insist that the first thing we need from an institution of theological education is to recognize our contribution. We have insights into the meaning of the Gospel and into the life of the church past and present, from which an institution such as this could profit. And therefore in this unequal dialogue between David and Goliath, as we ask Goliath to perk up his ears to listen to us, the

first thing that Goliath must hear us saying is, “Our voice may be weak, and you may find it difficult to understand us, but if you listen carefully, we too have some things to say that may be of help to you.”