

Hispanic Worship

(3 of 5)

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Hispanics at Worship

(3 of 5)

The subject assigned for this afternoon is “Hispanics at Worship.” Before going into the subject itself, some explanations are in order. The first is that I intend for this session not to be purely theoretical but also practical and devotional. In other words, rather than just talking about worship, we will first talk about it and then practice it. This means that this presentation will be shorter than the rest, for we must allow time to move to the chapel and try to practice there what we preach here.

The second explanation is simply that I dare not speak of Hispanic worship as a whole. Latine churches –Catholic, Pentecostal, and everything in between–worship in ways that combine their various theological traditions with their own Latin cultures, each in its own way.

Finally, a third preliminary explanation is that the briefness of this presentation does not mean it is not important. Nothing that we do or hear in this event is more important than worship. As a historian, I am convinced that nothing shapes the life and thought of the church as much as its worship. The church was worshipping Jesus and the Holy Spirit long before the doctrine of the Trinity was shaped –actually, even before the word itself was used.

Therefore, what I intend to do is much less than a description, but also much more. It is much less because I will begin with only some general comments about Hispanic worship. It is much

more because after those general comments, I will dare to be somewhat prescriptive rather than descriptive. In other words, after saying something about Hispanic worship and how it is changing, I will very briefly mention what I would hope to see in all Hispanic worship –and in all Christian worship, for that matter. This means that I risk criticizing some of your actual practices –which fortunately I do not know. I am banking on the friendship and the trust we have built to make some comments that may be critical of some of our own practices. Fortunately, after the service in the chapel there will be an opportunity for open discussion and thus clarify any misunderstandings.

Let's move then to the general description. If there is a common denominator to Hispanic worship, it is joy. I surmise that this is evident in most of the churches that we who are here represent. Part of that is due to traditional elements in our own cultures. Part of it is due to charismatic and other similar experiences. What we often do not recognize is that it is not only in our most exuberant forms of worship that joy seems to be reborn. That rebirth is an almost universal phenomenon, evident in the most diverse traditions, and expressed not only in shouting and acclamation, but also in the very words that are said and sung and the gestures that are part of worship. Communion services that began with calls for guilty self-examination, “all ye who truly and earnestly repent of all your sins” ... now open with invitations to the feast “this is the feast of God for the people of God”; or “they will come from the East and West, from North and South, and will eat in the Kingdom of God.” A similar shift has been developing in

Catholic churches ever since the Second Vatican Council. In many churches, Catholic and Protestant, guitars, maracas, and tambourines join organs and harps.

When considering these developments, it is important to point out that joy is being recovered not only because of charismatic influences but also because of historical studies and discoveries regarding early Christian worship. Because of such studies, we now understand why to this day we refer to breaking of the bread as “*celebrating communion*”: because communion was, in fact, celebratory.

But now I dare leap into the prescriptive. Since time is short, I will express my thoughts in very succinct terms, in the form of a list of desiderata or wishes.

My first wish is that in churches where the service is divided into a time of praise and a time of preaching, that the two will be clearly interconnected. I wish that the pastor or preacher would not simply let the worship leaders sing and say whatever they like without any connection to the Scripture to be read or the subject to be preached. Likewise, I wish that the sermon would build on what has been sung, done, and said, connecting it to Scripture and to the life of the church. Frankly, still on this first point, I wish that we would question the division between praise and preaching, which actually has no basis in Scripture nor in tradition. But that requires more time than we have here.

Let me try to be clear in what I mean. I am convinced that praise is absolutely necessary in every worship service. Worship without praise is not worship. My difficulty is the opposite: When we separate praise from preaching, we imply either that worship is possible without praise or that preaching is not worship. We also tend to preclude expressions of praise at other moments in the service. Should a personal testimony not be celebrated with song and adoration? Couldn't the collection of an offering, and the fact that God has provided us with something to offer, lead to an act of praise? When we are about to leave the service, should we not praise God for sending us in mission to God's world?

Then, my second wish is for a service that repeatedly reminds us that we are not a collection of individuals but members of a single body, the body of Christ. Worship is not primarily about my relationship with God; it is primarily about God, secondly about God and us as the body of Christ, and only thirdly about God and me. If someone complains, "the service said nothing to me," we should answer: "Perhaps it said something to us, or it said something to someone else. For that, let God be praised."

If we had more time, it would be interesting to explore the connection between the present "worship wars" and an understanding of worship as primarily an individual relationship with God that, therefore, has to have something to say to me. I have to like it. I have to connect with the music. I have to get what I came for.

Among the central doctrines of Christianity, probably none has lost more ground and significance in recent times than the doctrine of the church. Due in part to the prevailing individualism of our culture and society, we have forgotten the full meaning of the word “member.” A member is part of a body and cannot live without it. Paul said it very clearly: “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” A finger apart from the body is no longer a member, and because it is not a member it will soon cease to be a finger. What makes you a member of the church is not simply adding your name to a roster, like you add your name to the supporters of the Humane Society or to the list of subscribers to National Geographic. What makes a person a member of the church is being grafted into the body of Christ. Thanks to that grafting this new member is now being fed by that body as a finger is fed by the blood of the entire body.

This second wish leads me to a suggestion: In our singing and praying. Could we use more plurals such as “we,” “us,” and “our,” and less singulars such as “I,” “me,” and “mine”? Try it for size: This following Sunday, when you gather as the body of Christ to worship God, keep count. How many of our songs are in the singular, and how many are in the plural? I am not saying that we have to abandon or undervalue expressions of personal relationship with God. I am saying that we have to make certain that our communal life is also expressed in song and prayer and is thus fortified. Review much of what we sing, no matter on what side of the worship wars we stand: “Oh Lord, my God, when I...”; “Oh love that will not let me go...”; “I once was lost, but now I’m found....”

Jesus did not teach us to pray: “My Father, who art in heaven ... Give *me* this day *my* daily bread. And forgive *me my* trespasses, as I forgive those who trespass against *me*. And lead *me* not into temptation, but deliver *me* from evil.” Even when we pray alone, we pray to God as *our* Father. Should we not do the same when we are together?

Then, my third wish: I wish that in every service worshipers were led to experience once again the astounding grace of God, leading us to a new life and a new mission. This third wish has to do with an entire sequence that the early church generally followed, and we have forgotten. It is a sequence of confession of sin leading to the experience of forgiveness, which then leads to reconciliation, and reconciliation resulting in a renewed mission. Allow me to take those in order.

First, confession of sin. Joy does not mean forgetting that we are sinners. We acknowledge this in much of our praise, which we address to God precisely because, even though we are sinners, God forgives us, cleanses us, regenerates us, gives us new life. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn 1.8). If we forget this, our joy becomes shallow. Note, however, that, just as our faith is not purely individual, but also communal, we are sinners, not only as individuals, but also as participants in an unrighteous and unjust society. We are complicit in that unrighteousness and injustice. But Scripture says, and we agree, that confession leads to grace and forgiveness. “If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1.9). When we ignore this, and

attempt to move from grace to grace, ignoring our communal wretchedness, as if we had nothing to confess, and no need for repentance, the joy of forgiveness begins to erode.

True confession does not lead to despair, for the moment we speak a word of confession we hear a word of grace. Day after day, as we return as prodigals from a distant land, our heavenly Father rushes to welcome us with open arms. That is our true joy: the joy of reconciliation!

Reconciliation with God, however, has immediate consequences for reconciliation among us. “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars: for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (1 Jn 4.20). Thus, the process that begins with repentance resulting in confession, then to grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God, leads to reconciliation among us. This is what the early Christians signified by what was called “the kiss of peace,” and in many churches today is “the passing of the peace.” We do something similar in many Latin churches, often singing “Dame la mano. Dame la mano. Dame la mano y mi hermano[a] serás” –give me your hand, give me your hand, give me your hand, and my brother [sister] you will be.

If we see this action, this passing of the peace, within the context of the entire sequence –repentance, confession, absolution, passing of the peace– it becomes very significant. It is not simply the result of our liking one another; it is a sign that, because we are all reconciled with God, we are ready to be reconciled among ourselves. And not only with those we like. We are

all members of a single body. Therefore, we may not like one another, but we must still love one another. As I age, my knees are becoming more and more troublesome. They hurt me and limit what I can do. Therefore, I can truly say that I really do not like them. I wish they were different. But I cannot say that I hate them, because they are part of me. If I hate them, I hate myself. If we are all members of a single body, that does not mean that we will automatically like one another. But it does mean that we must love one another, that we must be reconciled with one another. Any wall we build to exclude the other is a wall that we build between ourselves and God. How can we say that we love God, whom we have not seen, when we do not love our brother or sister whom we have seen?

The reconciliation with one another that results from our reconciliation with God is not just an expression of our feelings. It is the sign and the creation of a new reality, of a new people, of this strange, and perhaps even outlandish, community that through the power of the Spirit Christ has been grafted into his body.

There is joy in this; there is peace; there is reconciliation; there is this new reality that we call "church." This certainly is a reality of joy, of gratitude, and therefore of praise. But it is not a reality of privilege. As John says, Christ "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." Of the whole world!

We who through confession, repentance, and above all the grace of God are reconciled with God, have the responsibility of bringing reconciliation to the world. This is not just a calling to do something. It is a calling to **be** something. It is a redefinition of who we are. I Peter puts this in words so often quoted that we do not stop to think about their radical significance: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.” A royal priesthood!

These words were not addressed to powerful, famous, successful people. They were being addressed to common people; people such as ourselves; people like those who gather in our services week after week. And they are royalty! Royalty? Yes! Royalty because through repentance, grace, and reconciliation we have been adopted as children of the King Most High.

But we are also a priesthood. The main function of a priest is to approach God on behalf of the people. As a royal priesthood, our main task is to bring the world to the throne of God in prayer.

For this reason, in early Christian worship the act of reconciliation –the kiss of peace– was normally followed by a special prayer eventually called “the prayer of the people.” This was essentially an intercessory prayer, bringing the entire world before the throne of God. Christians certainly prayed for their church, for its leaders, for the sick and the dispossessed among them. But that was not all. As a royal priesthood, they prayed for other believers in distant lands; they prayed for exiles working in salt mines, for prisoners, for sailors facing storms, and for workers of the land. They even prayed for the emperor who persecuted them and for those who carried

out his orders. They prayed, not because of who those people were, or because they liked them or approved of their actions, but because of who *they* were, a royal priesthood, God's own people, called to bring all God's creation before the throne of God.

This takes me to the last of the wishes I have for today's Latin worship: that our prayer be characterized not so much by their length as by their width; that they be prayers not just for ourselves and for our church, but also for the entire church and all of creation; not just for those with whom we agree and who are our friends, but also for those with whom we disagree and who may even be our enemies; not only for those people in power whom we like or with whom we agree, but also for those whom we dislike and with whom we disagree.

Later there will be time to see whether we agree or disagree on these various points. But now it is time for more important things. It is time to be glad and say: "Let us go to the house of the Lord" (Ps 122.1). See you there!

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