



The Experience of the Hispanic Church in the Americas

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In this year of 1992, Christians naturally think about the experience of the hispanic church in the Americas. With the arrival of Christopher Columbus a half-millennium ago, and the subsequent coming of Catholic friars and priests from Spain and Portugal, the hispanic church in this part of the world had its beginning. It continues until today.

What events or situations stand out like signs in the experience of the hispanic church, marking and setting patterns, warning and pointing the way? One can see them especially in the footholds made and being made by Catholics and Protestants in the New World.

I. AN ENTANGLED BEGINNING

In the first place, the hispanic church had an entangled beginning. Together with the announcement of the Christian message by the European missionaries, other concerns and motives were present, leading at times to counterproductive results.

For instance, Columbus himself was not a missionary but rather a merchant seaman. To be sure, he believed in Catholicism and practiced the faith of a medieval Christian. Even so his experience and training were in ocean sailing, and his dream was to open a trade route between the wealth of the Orient and Europe. His native Genoa was an important shipping and merchant port of the day, and he had grown up with tantalizing stories of spices and silk, of gold and carpets in the Far East, items highly prized by people of means in Europe. Columbus also knew full well that the dreaded Islam dominated throughout the Middle East. Constantinople, within the range of Italian vessels, had fallen to the Turks in 1453. Not just strained but hostile relations prevailed, and this rose as a barrier to free-flowing trade with India, Cipango (Japan), and Cathay (China). As yet no sea route around

the Cape of Good Hope had been found. These, then, were the vocational concerns of Columbus, concerns that he would carry to the New World, that would be brought to bear on all that he did or on all that others did because of him.

Columbus found financial support in the queen of the territory of Castilla, who by her marriage to the king of the territory of Aragon had unified Spain under their leadership. Now Isabella was, to be sure, fervently Catholic and concerned about the welfare of the faith. Nonetheless her husband Ferdinand was, above all, a man of state interested in the development and honor of Spain. Ferdinand had just led his followers in the political liberation of Spain from the Moors, who had dominated the Iberian peninsula for nearly eight centuries. He and Isabella had joined the troops in the field for the assault on the last Moorish stronghold of Granada,

achieving victory in 1492. The concern for the might and glory of Spain would naturally project itself to and become a powerful factor in the Spanish undertakings in the New World.

Related to this, yet another element contributed to the mixed and entangled evangelization of the New World, namely, a papal privilege granted to Spain to govern church affairs in the New World. After Ferdinand and Isabella defeated the Moors and expelled all Jews that same year, Pope Alexander VI rewarded them with the title of “Catholic Monarchs.” And when Columbus returned from the New World with his mind-boggling report, the same pope, as the international authority at that time, established a line of demarcation assigning New World lands to Spain and Portugal; and at the same time gave these two countries the right to administer the evangelization of New World peoples, including the power to appoint bishops. So the missionary church would arrive, not only financed by the state, but also directed by the state, an alliance powerfully reinforced by the world church. The evangelizing church would come as part of a colonizing enterprise. Cross and crown together would project themselves on the New World intentionally and irrevocably.

On the second trip in 1493, Columbus assumed that the lands belonged to Spain, including their native inhabitants. As colonizer, Columbus brought 1500 persons of all trades and professions; the seventeen vessels also carried seeds and farm animals. The lands were divided among the new owners, and the natives were expected to provide manual labor, just as serfs did for the lords of the Iberian peninsula. He had soldiers on that second voyage to maintain order and control in the settlements, and to defend the colonists against the native inhabitants should this be necessary. All of this came when the church came.

La Isabela (Santo Domingo) on Hispaniola (Dominican Republic and Haiti) was the first permanent settlement, although numerous others were established as well. The Caribbean area was the first colony of the Spaniards. They did not find the Oriental traders they sought, but the colony soon produced abundant harvests of sugar cane. Isabella had agreed that the natives could be drafted for occasional work projects. Later she permitted that they belong to the Spanish haciendas for labor, with the stipulation that the natives receive remuneration, humane treatment, and instruction in the faith. However, large-scale abuse of this *encomienda* (grant) system soon surfaced and prevailed, the natives becoming virtual slaves. Priests who spoke out against this, such as Bartolome de las Casas, could not stem

the tide. When the Spaniards realized that the Indians could not supply their labor needs and wants, they turned to the slave trade out of West Africa.

Sad as it is, the natives of the Caribbean, perhaps fifteen million in number, all but disappeared within fifty years. The majority died of European diseases, others from mistreatment and war. A certain percentage fled to South America. It was almost as bad for the thirty million of New Spain (Mexico), three million of whom remained at the end of the sixteenth century.

Present-day Native American leaders have a telling case in protesting the celebration of the 500th anniversary. Conquest and oppression were immediate results of the Spanish and Portuguese colonization of the New World, and some of the present-day social and economic problems in Latin America can be traced to the unfair distribution of land among the conquerors and to the discrimination against the conquered. Modern followers of Bartolome de las Casas show their concern in the well-known movement of liberation theology. They call for new

economic and social structures. They encourage concrete action in and through Christian base communities, seventy thousand existing in Brazil alone. History will judge liberation theology, in part, as an effort of Latin Catholics to separate their church from alignment with the privileged class.

II. ROMAN CATHOLIC EVANGELIZATION

In spite of the conquest and the oppression of native peoples that accompanied the missionary church in the New World, something positive happened in terms of evangelization.

When Columbus returned to Spain to report what he had found, Pope Alexander VI understood the significance of the discovery for the expansion of the church, and so acted decisively to initiate an evangelization crusade. As already indicated, the commission to carry out the Christian mission in the New World was pronounced by papal bull, issued on May 2 and 4, 1493. The exact wording of that famous commission reads as follows: "We command you by the virtue of holy obedience, that you seek to send to said lands and islands, good and godly, wise and experienced men, so that they might instruct said natives and inhabitants in the Catholic faith and teach them civilized manners."¹

From 1493 on, Catholic missionaries and priests arrived to evangelize. Twelve missionary friars, under the leadership of a Spanish Benedictine named Bernardo Buil, came in that year. In La Isabela they erected the first church building.

Catholic mission work resulted frequently in mass conversions and baptisms. The Franciscan missionary-historian Toribio de Benavente calculated that by 1536, four million persons in New Spain had been baptized by the various missionary orders. By the end of the sixteenth century, non-Christian worship sites had disappeared from the major population centers of New Spain.

But just what was this evangelization like, for instance, in the case of the Franciscans who were the most involved in New Spain? It centered around the *misión* (mission) as distinct from the town and military garrison. The mission was

¹Pope Alexander VI, *Inter caetera*, quoted in Lino Gomez Canedo, *Evangelizacion y conquista: experiencia franciscana en hispanoamerica* (Mexico City: Editorial Porrúa, 1977) 57.

a missionary compound, and at first the friars tried to urge the natives to move away from their communities and establish themselves around the compounds. Later the missionaries left the missions and built churches in the Indian villages. One of the first Franciscans in New Spain, Fray Pedro de Gante, wrote back to Spain giving an idea of the concrete methods employed:

My task has been and is to teach them Christian doctrine generally, conveying it to them in their language, at first in Texcoco and Tlaxcala, and for the last six years in Mexico City and the surrounding towns, and other towns farther away, making tours and seeking to destroy the idols and idolatries.

Aside from this and other tasks of different kinds relating to conversion, which would be too long to tell, I have had and have charge of teaching boys of different ages to read, write, preach, and sing....To teach and indoctrinate these boys, a school or chapel has been made within the site or enclosures of our house, where

continually every day five or six hundred boys are taught.
Next to our monastery we have built an infirmary for the sick among the natives.²

As for the evangelistic message, they taught the rudiments of medieval Catholicism with the special evangelical emphasis of St. Francis. The New World Franciscans belonged to the Observantist division that stood for adherence to the original standards of their founder. They opposed the promotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe, because the appearance was said to have taken place on a hill used previously by the Aztecs for the worship of a goddess, and they doubted the motives of the Indians.

Franciscan evangelistic efforts also took place in Northern New Spain (United States). Before the arrival of the Pilgrims, the friars founded twenty-five missions and erected fifty churches for sixty thousand converts between what became El Paso and Santa Fe. Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, before the American settlement of the west, the Franciscans also established twenty-one missions between what later became San Diego and San Francisco.

Missionary orders led the way in the evangelization of the New World, fifteen orders in all. They flourished until the diocesan organizational structure became well established and the missionaries became subordinated to the parish priests.

As the Spaniards and Portuguese built towns, the parish priests built churches and pastored them. Every town had a towering church on the main square, and larger towns had several churches. In Mexico City, for example, churches were raised every three or four blocks. The churches also founded numerous institutions throughout the continent, especially schools. As early as 1513 the Catholic Church had a bishop in the Americas, namely, of Santa Maria de la Antigua (Colombia). By the end of the colonial period in the early nineteenth century, there were ten archbishops and thirty-eight bishoprics.

So, the Spanish and Portuguese churches, through the missionary orders, evangelized with great zeal and achieved impressive numerical results. Through the parish priests they established a Christian church structure that covers the continent. Catholicism, through its mission endeavors, became virtually a part of

²Pedro de Gante, letter, quoted in H. McKennie Goodpastor, ed., *Cross and Sword: An Eyewitness History of Christianity in Latin America* (New York: Orbis, 1989) 21-22.

the culture, especially the *mestizo* culture. They spread the knowledge of the true God and of Jesus Christ, although the many virgins and saints have distracted from Christ-centered faith and worship.

The Roman Catholic Church maintains that 80% of the 400 million persons in Latin America today belong to this church, admitting at the same time that only one fourth of this percentage practice their faith. Positive developments continue in the contemporary church, such as the application of the reform possibilities coming out of the Second Vatican Council. The meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Council in Medellin, Colombia in 1968, started this welcome process, and not only social but also liturgical reforms have resulted, as well as an acceptance of the principle of religious freedom. This witness has seen a remarkable change in the attitude of the Catholic Church toward Protestants following Medellin, as when a Colombian

priest stated in a national press conference, “The age of sticks and stones is over.”

III. PROTESTANT MOVEMENTS

There is also a Protestant phase in the experience of the hispanic church. It began, in part, with the arrival of European immigrants who settled throughout the continent, mainly in the cities. Chaplains and pastors were then sent from the homeland to attend to their spiritual needs. To begin with, the worship languages were not Spanish or Portuguese but rather those of the settlers. Episcopalians in Rio de Janeiro erected the first Protestant church building in 1819. Lutheran immigrants started arriving in 1824. They settled in southern Brazil, and others took up residence in southern South America, Mexico, and throughout Latin America. Lutherans today number 1,220,000, with 86% in Brazil. In important ways these churches are now beginning to reach out in mission to the general population.

The Protestant church as a mission force among native Latin Americans made its appearance about the same time. It distinguished itself by believing in and bringing an open Bible. This, in turn, enabled the people to achieve a clearer understanding of the gospel message.

Protestant mission work started with a special missionary type known as the colporteur. The Bible societies of Europe and North America sponsored these itinerant Bible promoters and evangelists. Starting in 1813, colporteur James Thomsen traveled the length of western South America, Central America, and Mexico. In addition to promoting the Bible, he persuaded government officials to authorize the establishment of Lancaster Schools, a forerunner of public schools.

Francisco G. Penzotti, born in Italy but established in Uruguay since his teens, further illustrates the character of the first Protestant missionaries. He became a colporteur of the British and Foreign Bible Society, initiating his outstanding career in 1883. He made an eight-month Bible promotion and preaching tour from Uruguay to Chile and back—by mule. He carried out a second thirteen-month tour from Trinidad in the Caribbean down the west coast of South America to Chile, and from there back to Uruguay. He established a Bible society agency in Callao, Peru, while at the same time beginning a congregation that grew rapidly. During his years in Peru, Catholic Church authorities carried out an intense campaign against Penzotti and his work, with verbal attacks from the pulpit leading to an armed attack on his life and to imprisonment. Penzotti also established the

office of the Bible society in Guatemala, from where he made promotion trips throughout Central America, Mexico, and Cuba. Finally the Bible society named him executive secretary of the agency in Buenos Aires before his death in 1925.

When the Bible was unknown by the people throughout the south, Penzotti went from door to door offering it. At night he preached wherever possible or conversed with those who visited him. People of democratic political ideas befriended him and gave him letters of introduction to new towns and cities. Those democratic ideas had spread throughout the continent following the movement of independence from Spain and Portugal in the early 1800s.

The Bible societies fielded colporteurs throughout the continent. In the late nineteenth century, these Bible missionaries carried out distribution through forty-one sub-depots of Brazil alone.

As for the number of Bibles distributed, in 1819 the American Bible Society reported the printing of 2,500 New Testaments, the first society mention of publications in Spanish. In 1990 the United Bible Societies distributed 217 million Bible portions (usually a Bible book), New Testaments, and Bibles in Latin America.

Early the Bible societies began devoting themselves to translating the Bible into the numerous Indian languages and major dialects throughout the Americas. In this they have been powerfully assisted by organizations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators, which initiates its work with painstaking linguistic analysis. As of 1990, the Bible societies had registered 337 different languages or major dialects of the Americas in which a biblical book, a Testament, or the entire Bible had been translated and published.

So, Latin Americans, under no outward compulsion and often in the face of stiff resistance, nonetheless have responded to the Bible. By 1900 Protestant church membership numbered seventeen thousand. By 1967 it reached four million communicants; today, an estimated forty million. Latin American Protestants carry their Bibles with them to church and even to work. They adorn the walls of their temples with Bible verses. They freely testify to the experience of the Christ of the Bible in their lives. They participate in vigorous evangelistic campaigns in public places throughout the continent, with Bible preaching by both pastors and lay preachers.

The Pentecostal churches have taken a commanding lead in church growth in Latin America, even though they did not make their appearance until the twentieth century. In 1907 a group of members of a Methodist Episcopal church in Chile experienced the “baptism of the Spirit,” evidenced by speaking in tongues in addition to the experience of conversion. Following this they soon became separated from that denomination. Traditional Pentecostal churches, such as the Assemblies of God, are very much a part of this growth, totaling sixteen million in Brazil alone.

In time there emerged Pentecostal-like churches that from the beginning were independent of the historic Pentecostal churches. They have developed into a more indigenous kind of church at all levels—evangelism, leadership, leadership training, worship, stewardship, etc. For instance, one Pentecostal-like denomination among the Otomi Indians in Mexico does evangelization in new neighborhoods and villages by securing permission to carry out a community social project all day Sunday, after which they witness and preach before leaving. Men, women,

and children participate in this. In another Pentecostal-like denomination of Mexico, the large mother congregation is led by nine volunteer pastors, one of whom is a high-ranking official in national government. In the same congregation, the pastors have instructed the members not to speak in tongues during the worship services so as not to scandalize the newcomers.

Three-fourths of all Latin Protestants belong to Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like denominations. They too have responded to the message of the Bible. Of crucial importance, they have found in the Bible a gospel of power. Jesus Christ gives them power to cope with disenfranchisement, power over the world of spirits about which large sectors of Latin America have no doubt, power over sin and vice, and over a lethargic response to the Savior and his call to Christian service. One hopes the discovery of the Bible by Latin Protestants will lead to solutions

to the organizational divisions characteristic of this church.

IV. HISPANIC MINISTRY IN NORTH AMERICA

The experience of the hispanic church and the task of hispanic evangelization continue, not only in Latin America but also in North America. The churches here have before them the challenge of the growing hispanic presence. Not only did hispanics come early to this part of the Americas, but also at the present time there is anew immigration wave. Hispanics in the United States alone may now number thirty million, including illegals.

The early hispanic migrants brought Catholicism, and today 73% call themselves Catholic, although here, as in the south, the percentage of practicing Catholics is much less. As for Protestant hispanics in the United States, they now number 20% of the hispanic population or six million. As in Latin America, so in the United States the Pentecostals lead the way, followed by several Baptist churches. Lutheran hispanics total over 30,000.

The hispanics who live in the United States and Canada, particularly the first-generation hispanics, belong essentially to the same culture found in Latin America. They have not changed culturally by emigrating north, at least to begin with. Of course, subcultures exist, both here and in Latin America, and they must be taken into account. Nonetheless, hispanics north and south speak the same languages, either Spanish or Portuguese. They have or desire similarities of lifestyle. Value systems and psychological drives are comparable.

This essentially homogeneous quality of culture has important implications for evangelistic theory and practice. In a word, it gives hispanic ministry and evangelization in North America a special character, calling for a cross-cultural mission approach. This means that the evangelist should be ready to make radical cultural adjustments, the kind the church bodies expect of their missionaries sent to Latin America. They will have before them the task of raising not only responsible but also culturally relevant churches.

To put it in another way, hispanic work in North America calls for a uniquely contextualized approach. Humanly speaking, contextualization is the key to hispanic evangelization. Contextualization means a sensitivity to the hispanic context. It means a deliberate incorporation of the elements of hispanic culture into the evangelistic program, even an adaptation of the program in light of the same.

The well-known missionary policy applies, namely, that the announcement

of the gospel be free of extraneous cultural baggage. Such baggage distracts from the message, and even hinders it. This policy becomes doubly important in the case of hispanic work in North America because of the dominance of the culture of the missionary or the minister. In this case it is easy for the missionary to be carried along by the dominant culture, perhaps in the name of nationalism, or because of the reluctance of the immigrants to express their feelings in a strange environment.

The principle of contextualization and the need to cross a culture barrier affect numerous and important aspects of the evangelization task. For instance, the evangelist will find that some elements of the hispanic culture will coincide with the evangel he or she hopes to proclaim. This applies because Catholic missionaries have already sown much of the good seed in the hispanic world, which facilitates a more personal response to the gospel. It is as Jesus explained: "Sower

and reaper...rejoice together. For the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps’” (John 4:36-37).

Every person and every people have the right to hear or read the gospel in their own language. This also means that, whenever possible, the evangelist should be a native Spanish or Portuguese speaker. Such persons would know the language and the larger culture of the hearers. Of course, non-hispanics can learn the hispanic languages and culture. Even so, Latins for Latins is the best policy. In this connection, those engaged in hispanic evangelization in North America may look for unexpected resources. They will find that Latin workers in the south will show themselves willing to assist in the evangelization task in the north. In addition, those charged with hispanic evangelization in North America can benefit from the experience of their own missionaries who have done service in Latin America and now, for one reason or another, have withdrawn from that area. It is a waste of resources to fail to use those ex-missionaries, given their extensive training and valuable experience.

Contextualization applies significantly to the content of the evangelistic message. Even though the gospel is one and unchangeable, nonetheless that one gospel has different facets, and the evangelist must know the people well enough to choose the right emphasis. Again the words of John in his first epistle, “God is love,” most often appear in the chancel area of Protestant temples in Latin America, because the message of love shown in saving grace reaches them. Then, the Pentecostal stress on the gospel as power, as already indicated, fills a felt need of hispanic people.

At the level of means and methods, Latins want an open, enthusiastic, and sincere announcement of the gospel. They believe in the importance of religion and expect the evangelist to exhibit a freedom to speak and live the message. They admire a bold personality and leader.

This kind of evangelist will find ways to announce the good news not only inside but also outside of the churches. In Latin America the churches have taken the gospel to the people directly in several effective ways, such as the house meeting. Such meetings are occasions for church members to invite relatives, neighbors, and friends to a clear presentation of the gospel according to the Bible. It is not the occasion for worship, which might make some visitors uncomfortable. On the other hand, testimonies of faith by church members, spoken or sung, would fit the purpose of the evangelistic house meeting. In time, preaching points and

even mission congregations can result from the house meeting. In my work in Latin America I made frequent use of the house meeting for evangelism.

A second evangelistic method often used with positive results in Latin America is the open-air meeting. I know of Sunday afternoon meetings in the park for evangelistic preaching that have gone on regularly for fifty years. This method consists of evangelistic preaching, testimonies of faith, special musical numbers that not only draw a crowd but also reinforce the gospel message, and always an invitation to attend the nearby sponsoring church following the open-air meeting. Frequently a group, often a large group of church members, attend this meeting to encourage the listeners.

Another evangelistic method used by Protestants in Latin America is the evangelistic campaign. This may copy the practices of well-known evangelists such as Billy Graham. On the other hand, it has a parallel in the political rally and in the Catholic outdoor mass, commonly

used in Latin America. It gives added visibility to the churches and the gospel message. It also gives a needed testimony to Protestant unity, since it frequently has the sponsorship of different, sometimes many, denominations.

Finally, Latin churches frequently turn the Sunday morning worship service into an evangelistic opportunity. They know that a significant percentage of those attending worship services are newcomers, so they make a point of including an announcement of the gospel. Then by using simultaneous audible prayer, they provide an atmosphere of encouragement to a visitor touched by the message to respond by joining in with a penitential prayer. This kind of prayer has a parallel in Catholic worship services. These churches also invite newcomers who want counseling to stay after the worship service.

It must be added that Latins everywhere expect of their churches an involvement in the amelioration of the ever-present culture of poverty of which they are a part. For them this is a logical accompaniment of Christian faith and ministry.

To conclude, the definitive sign for the experience of any church is the gospel of Jesus Christ. So St. Matthew saw and heralded "the sign of the Son of man" (Matt 24:30). All events and developments pass or fail in the light of the same. The hispanic church will find its fulfillment in this good news of God.