

**WEAVING THE TAPESTRY  
THE TASK OF MAKING THE CHURCH BE IN THE U.S. SOUTHWEST**

By  
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### The Task of Making the Church Be in the U.S. Southwest

#### INTRODUCTION

The task of the Church becoming what it is to be in the U.S. Southwest is the foundational issue of this meeting. I like Thomas Merton's idea of the Church: "The Church is Christ present in the world to reconcile the world to Himself". Our task is to do all we can to allow Christ to reconcile the world to himself here in the Southwest. Our task is also phrased for us by St. Paul: "With all wisdom and insight he has made known the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1, 9-10).

It's true we are supposed to be talking about worship, ritual and what to do inside the temple, but in order for worship to be done in spirit and in truth, it has to be celebrated in the context and out of real involvement in the real world. Worship in the temple is both the beginning and the end of Christian activity. In the temple we celebrate what we have done as instruments of Christ's reconciling things unto himself and see beyond celebration to what has yet to be done. To use the image of this conference, worship is but one of the threads in the totality of the tapestry of God's plan being carried out. And each one of us lives to make a few stitches on the total job; none of us will live to see the tapestry finished in its entirety.

When we consider the multi-cultural make-up of any place or institution, especially when we are referring to the Church, we necessarily have to keep two things in mind: unity and plurality. The first is obvious: we are called to be one flock under one shepherd. We all see the need to identify as one Church. Yet the past one hundred and fifty years or so, because of the spread of the Church to new missionary areas and the establishment of the so-called "new

Churches" in the Third World, have forced us to address the cultural dimensions of Church. The question could be phrased thusly: "How can people of any given culture remain authentic to their culture and at the same time be Christian?"

In the U.S. Southwest we know what the answer is: all peoples are invited to be part of us and we want all to bring the richness of their cultures to enrich the whole Church. That is easier said than done.

My specific task today is to address the question of how practically we might invite the different cultures of our multi-cultured Southwest to come, share their stories, their talents and spirituality, in order to be part of an enterprise that began almost 2,000 years ago.

Like Joseph in the Old Testament who had a technicolor dreamcoat, the Church in the U.S. Southwest is also of many colors. This multi-hued coat of the Church in our country has been getting more and more colorful over the years. It has become a most beautiful coat, the coat that God has willed our particular Church to have. Some countries have a geographical place, a Canterbury, a Lourdes, a Guadalupe, a Fatima, a martyr's shrine, a Compostela, a Jerusalem or a Rome as symbols that characterize their spiritual heritage and that somehow tell their story of faith. Our heritage is our dreamcoat, the composite make-up of a Church that is many-hued: black, brown, white, with our pluriform European background, our Native and Latin American Indigenous roots, our Asian connections, our most recent gifts. Dr. Vasconcelos, an eminent educator from Mexico, used to get sentimental about the Mexican race and say that it was a "cosmic" race because it brought together the Asian, the European, and the Native American to form the new mestizo people of Mexico. I would suggest that we, the Catholic Church in the United States, might be the "cosmic church," characterized not by one particular racial or national genre, but, by just about as many peoples that make up the universal world. It is in countries such

as the U.S. that have seen such great immigration to them, that we can say that the Catholicity or the universalism of the Church can be readily seen.

But it is not just the racial and national characteristics that form the giftedness of our U.S. Church, it is first and foremost the spiritual heritage of faith that all these groups bring to the whole. There is where the gift lies, in the hearts of the believing people who come to live with us. The various peoples bring with them precious jars and barrels, boxes and trunks, baskets and pots, sacks and bags...all full of God's bounty of a victorious faith won by heroic and courageous women and men who have sustained their belief in Jesus and his Church through horrible odds. And every national group has its story to tell, of persecution and martyrdom, of prejudice and oppression: if each group represented here were to place before us their faith story books, what an array of books we would have. We have first of all the dramatic contributions of the Native American peoples with their tremendous wealth of spiritual wisdom. Then there is the centuries-old presence of the Hispanic peoples and the courageous stories of the African-American and Cajun-Catholics. Imagine the stories of faith of the Catholics from England, Ireland, Scotland, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, the eastern European countries such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Croatia, and so on. The stories of faith of the Filipino, the Japanese, the Vietnamese, the Chinese and Indian Catholics, and the others of the Far East--each in their own way--are able to provide us with dramatic unfoldings of their own salvation history.

We can only begin to address the possible practical solutions of being an inviting Church after we have considered other basic questions such as the following: To what are we going to invite others to join us? Are we ready to invite? Do we have our act together? Are we really doing what we are supposed to do as Church? In other words, do we have something to offer newcomers, and will they be better off with us, really; will we be open to their possible contributions to our Church life?

## I. THE "HEY, LOOK AT US" ISSUES

Pope Paul VI, in his famous apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, reminds us that evangelization and welcoming go hand in hand. Pope Paul VI makes an emphatic challenge that the Church really portray itself as community. I am sure he had the parish in mind when he said that a community will know that it is evangelizing when the people around it ask such questions as, "Why are they the way they are? Why do they love each other the way they do? Why are they for us?" These are the questions that are automatically provoked by a true and authentic community. When St. Augustine said that he was finally convinced that he should join the Church when he heard the Church singing the Alleluias, he probably meant that those people were truly expressing their love of one another and were singing joyfully in unison because they were present to one another.

The Church as community happens existentially at the parish level. In other words, it is at the parish level where Church really happens; it is there that people share, participate, know one another, and exercise the virtues of compassion and charity. The Church does not really happen at the universal level nor even at the diocesan level; it happens at the local level of the parish. Parish means, "Christ's presence among people. Parish means a set of persons, a community in which and with which Jesus Christ reconfirms the presence of God. It is through the parish that we are directed towards the good in order to lead lives really worthy of human beings."<sup>i</sup>

It is the community that creates liturgy. But it goes the other way around as well. A good liturgy can remind us of our commonality and our call to contribute to the common good. A good liturgy reminds us of the call to exercise social justice in the world. Coming to the one table to eat of the one Bread, drink of the same Cup, and repeat the same Our Father, has to remind us of justice. Let me quote from Bob Hovda, "Where else in our society are all of us--not just a gnostic

elite, but everyone--called to be social critics, called to extricate ourselves from the powers and principalities that claim to rule our daily lives, in order to submit ourselves to the sole dominion of God before whom all of us are equal? Where else in our society are we all addressed and sprinkled and bowed to and incensed and touched and kissed and treated like *somebody*--all in the very same way? Where else do economic czars and beggars get the same treatment? Where else are food and drink blessed in a common prayer of thanksgiving, broken and poured out, so that everybody, everybody shares and shares alike?"<sup>ii</sup>

Let me add to what Bob Hovda says and go beyond his words. Our earthly liturgies point to the dream of the Kingdom of Jesus. The Kingdom points to equality, freedom, and the dignity of everyone. The Kingdom calls for sharing, compassion, and people looking after people, and people looking after those who might otherwise be excluded. In the liturgy, we exercise brotherhood and sisterhood in a pre-eminent way. It is true, we are all equal when we come to worship and to eat at the one table. All of this points to the ideal that before God, all are the same and all should benefit from the goods of the Earth and no one should take advantage of anyone else. All of this is eminently implicit in the words of the Our Father. If God is the Father of all, then no one can be excluded from His table, nor from the harvest of the Earth, no one should go hungry, no one should be ill treated, and no one should take advantage of anyone else. In the dream of God's Kingdom, there is no room for exclusivism, elitism, sexism, nor racism.

Shouldn't our consultative bodies in our parishes be expressive of all this? Shouldn't what we say in liturgy be expressive in our parish life? None of our consultative bodies nor leadership groups should be exclusive in the sense that they are only white, masculine, educated, economically advantaged, and adult.

Our Catholic people in the United States are among the most generous in the world. I have lived in four different countries and travelled to many more, and I have never seen so many service organizations nor so many charitable causes. Millions of dollars each year are given to charity. Unfortunately, our people, including Catholics, do not want to see beyond their charity responsibilities. Many feel that simply by donating to this or that cause, their conscience can be at rest. It is important that we look to the root causes of poverty, hunger, and homelessness. I am disappointed, for example, that so many of our Catholic people disagree strongly against the work funded by the Campaign for Human Development, and in particular, the work of community organizations. So many of our people get very nervous when the poor and the powerless begin to get organized and become empowered.

If the Church in the Southwest is to be truly welcoming to all peoples, then it must be true to its social mission in the world and true to the radical demands of the Gospel. It is unfortunate that in so many of our Churches, we have "tamed" the Eucharist as well as the Scriptures. By this I mean that the Christian message is so often watered down and we seem to echo the gentle message of fundamentalism, that "Jesus loves you just as you are." While it is true that Jesus loves us just as we are, it is also true that He demands strong things of us and that the Gospel was also meant to stretch. A great amount of our liturgical music, for example, pacifies rather than challenges. When I go to Latin America, I cannot help but notice the radical difference in the songs they sing. Their songs are of liberation, justice, equality, and hope. Ours are, to a great extent, gentle and soothing. While there has to be a certain amount of comfort in our liturgy, it cannot all be that; liturgy must not create congregations that are apathetic and indifferent to the world around them.

## II. THE "GETTING ALONG" ISSUES

The welcoming Church of the Southwest has to be more than the society that surrounds it. Pastoralists speak of the Church's challenge to be counter-cultural. In other words, we have a

prophetic mission and sometimes we have to be different from the others if we want to be true to this mission. There can be no exclusions in our Church of minorities, of those who are different from ourselves, of those who are poor (the second- and third-hand car families), the divorced, separated, the unmarried moms and their children.

What is needed is massive educational effort of the people in our Churches. I am speaking of an education towards acceptance and getting along. The only way we can begin to solve some of these problems is if we begin to speak with one another and learn from one another's experiences. It can be pointed out that in so many of our parishes many of our white Catholics have never had a conversation with a black person. In Las Cruces, we just had a funeral this week of a beautiful Hispanic woman. She was so gracious, good, and generous in sharing her talents with all people, and it was through her reaching out to everyone that people got to know of the virtues of the Hispanic woman. Had it not been for her, many people would have gone through life perhaps full of biases against those with whom they were never given a chance to become familiar.

Perhaps what we need is inter-parish or bi-parish programs whereby we can create racial, cultural, and economic mixes. Perhaps twinning is the answer, but not just at the level of financial assistance but at the level of real interchange and dialogue.

Perhaps this suggestion can fit in here also. I often visit prisons and jails and listen to the frustrations of our ministers who work there. Their frustrations stem from the fact that after the inmates are freed, there is no one to continue the ministering to them in the outside world. We need to connect and coordinate the work of our prison and jail ministries to those of our parishes.

### III. THE "HOWDY DO" ISSUES



We have, at all costs, to learn how to avoid turning people away. I am saddened when some of our people turn to Protestant sects for reasons of their own, but I am extremely angry when we ourselves, the Catholic Church of the Southwest, run people out and almost encourage them to leave us by our treatment. I think that there are certain practices going on in our Church that are anything less than welcoming. Let me refer, first of all, to Bishop John McCarthy's November 1, 1992, letter to the priests, deacons, lay ministers, and parish support staffs of the Austin Diocese, "On Refusing Sacraments to 'Nominal' Catholics." Bishop McCarthy raises a very real issue. I know that there is a workshop on this issue, so I will not dwell on it. I simply want to say that I concur most emphatically with Bishop McCarthy when he says, "Other parishes have created procedures which--while in accord with the letter of the law--are so rigid and so demanding that people seeking the sacraments often go away discouraged because they believe they cannot meet the requirements."<sup>iiii</sup> It is unfortunate that some of our parish guidelines are going beyond the Code of Canon Law and creating obstacles to people who in good faith come to us seeking the sacraments.

It is true that people have to be prepared for the sacraments because we can have Christian commitment without ritual, but we must not tolerate having ritual without Christian commitment. There have to be such things as educational and formational programs in preparation for sacraments, but sometimes the way these are presented as legalistic obstacles to be overcome rather than as helps leaves much to be desired. I remember as a young priest observing people going from Church to Church trying to get a Baptism and being told that they had to go for instruction. I worked with an older priest who was a very kind, yet understanding of the need for sacramental preparation. When they had made the rounds and finally come to this priest, he would tell them, "Wow, you have come to the right place. We have just the thing for you. We've got a program that you wouldn't believe. It will bring so much joy and peace to your life. I can hardly wait to get you into this program." The people would go away happy. They heard the very

same thing from him that they heard from the other parishes, but this time, the priest was inviting in the way that he approached it. So much depends on how we tell people about the requirements. If rules are presented simply as rules, of course, they are going to scare people off. Furthermore, if we are simply going to have them fulfill a rule and making that the most important criteria, then we are missing the boat. If we are going to insist on certain steps in preparation for sacraments, let us make those steps of excellent quality. Let us not insist on going to a certain number of classes and then offering something that is mediocre or of a lesser quality. We had better make sure that what we are requiring is going to be good and substantial.

Some of the new immigrants to the Southwest will be coming from places where the rules were not as strict. It is not really their fault that they do not understand nor appreciate our American rules. We should be happy they come to the rectory or office door and regard the situation as an opportunity to evangelize rather an occasion to scold and turn away.

We are being less than inviting when at weddings and funerals we react negatively when it becomes obvious when the majority of the congregation is only nominally Catholic. Again, these are occasions to evangelize rather than to turn off. We, priests, are often tempted on Ash Wednesday, for example, to berate and to get after people because they only come once a year and only to receive ashes. I have learned over the years to smile at Ash Wednesday even though my smiles may not reflect what I might be thinking or feeling. We have to fight the emotions and put on our best face and invite people back. If we get angry on those occasions, then people will be once more convinced that the Church is run by dysfunctional angry leaders.

Much of the Southwest is Hispanic, and I do not have to tell you that the Hispanic culture brings with it a rich, popular religion. Popular religion has a legitimacy all its own. It may not rate theologically as official worship and liturgy, but popular religion has been the nutrient of

millions of people over the centuries, and for many, it has been their only recourse to God. Popular religion is not the same as superstition, fetishism, spiritism, or animism. Popular religion needs to be connected, reaffirmed, legitimated, and welcomed by our liturgical practices. "Parish pastoral/liturgical outreach, ought to concentrate on how to support and enrich the practices of popular religiosity in the home by helping to imbue already traditional devotions with a rootedness in the Scriptures and in the signs and symbols of the liturgical tradition of the church which they often lack. Rather than ignoring or ridiculing these practices, a positive but critical evaluation of them by the church's 'religious professionals' would go a long way in healing the centuries-old gulf which separates them from the 'official liturgy.'"<sup>iv</sup>

I have seen some interesting incorporation of liturgical concepts and practices in Latin America. For example, in Latin American and in the Hispanic tradition, the compadres, comadres, padrinos, and madrinas play a very important role in Christian life. These are relationships between those who receive the sacraments and their sponsors as well as the relationships between the parents of those who receive the sacraments and the sponsors. These relationships are most sacred and are revered throughout the people's lives. They are relationships that begin with the reception of a sacrament in a sacred manner by God Himself.

I am happy to see that throughout the Southwest the Church has finally legitimated the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. It wasn't until a few years ago that December 12 became an official feast in the Church. Now it is common to see novenas, triduums, mañanitas, processions, and fiestas in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. And, oh, I mustn't forget to mention the menudo and pan dulce breakfasts.

The pilgrimage, or peregrinación, is a very significant moment in the lives of Hispanic Christians. Perhaps we should help people prepare for pilgrimages, give them prayer services to

conduct as they go on pilgrimage and welcome them back in the Church after they have been on pilgrimage. We could possibly even have them relate their experiences some time during the liturgy.

#### IV. THE "WE'RE GLAD YOU CAME" ISSUES

There is a place in our Churches in the Southwest for bilingual and multi-lingual liturgies. There are times during the year that lend themselves for these kinds of multi-lingual and multi-cultural liturgies. May I suggest that the feasts of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving, as moments when we can celebrate liturgically the richness of the pluralism of the society and Church. The Fourth of July would be a good time to celebrate the arrival of new immigrants and the achievement of citizenship of parishioners. There is certainly nothing wrong with having multi-lingual liturgies. Before Vatican II, we had masses where the following languages were always used in the United States, Latin, English, Greek, and Hebrew. No one is going to tell me that using various languages in the liturgy is something invented by modern-day liturgical crazies.

It will be a welcoming gesture to different peoples if we have our bulletins, diocesan newspapers, and religious education materials in more than one language.

The welcoming process isn't just for the time when people are approaching the Church. It lasts a lifetime. We need to follow up with those who enter the Church. The welcome does not stop when people are in. Remember the message of the Little Prince, "We are responsible for the rose we tame."

We have to make sure that the newly-arrived will be invited to share the richness of their spirituality and the richness of their journey of faith with others in ministry. We need to treat those who are coming in as adults and not as individuals who need to be spoon fed. Our response,

for example, to the Hispanic presence has to be more than a patronizing one. The Hispanic presence deserves more than simply a pat on the head. The Hispanic presence has something to offer and needs to be taken seriously. It is unfortunate that we are often biased against people who have an accent different from our own, or who make grammatical mistakes. If people cannot speak our language, then we turn them off and think that because they don't speak the way we do, that they have nothing to offer us. The Hispanic or any other cultural presence, Vietnamese, Irish, German, French, etc., have a richness of faith that needs to be shared, and we all need to be enriched by one another. Their message has to come to the heart of our parish life and must be made as part of our treasure box. All people need to feel that they are part of something to which they are contributing and to something that offers them meaning and a sense of the importance of their lives.

Our parishes and diocesan chanceries, pastoral centers, schools, universities, and missions, need to establish personnel policies that will reflect the multi-cultural richness of our Southwest. If "affirmative action" is a bad phrase, then let us use the word, "multi-cultural enrichment" as something to aim at.

## CONCLUSION

In closing, I would like to share a story which I heard recently from Fr. Edmundo Rodríguez, S.J. The story goes like this: Once upon a time, there was a couple, a man and woman, window shopping at a mall. They noticed an unusual sight, a man with long hair, a beard, and wearing a long white robe. One told the other, "Is that who I think it is?" They approached the store, and sure enough, the sign over the store said, "The Jesus Store." They went inside and asked the man, "Are you the person we think you are?" "Yes, I am the Lord Jesus."

Jesus asked them if they wanted to buy anything, and they said they'd look around. It was one of those stores where you fill out the form to designate what items you'd like to purchase. The items around the store were labeled, "Peace," "Justice," "A Drug-free Society," "No Poverty," "No Domestic Violence," "No Unemployment." The couple chose a few things such as "Peace" and "No Homelessness." They brought their filled out form to Jesus and asked Him how much it was. He said, "You have made some very good choices!" He told them that these items were very expensive and gave them seeds. He said, "You go out and plant these seeds, take care of these seedlings, water them, nurture the plants." The fact is however, you will not see the results during your lifetime, even though you might work very hard at bringing these things to fulfillment. The couple got very discouraged and went away without the seeds.

In a way, you at the Southwest Liturgical Conference this year have been at "The Jesus Store." I hope all of you have purchased some seeds and that they are choice items such as the ones that belong to Jesus' store, which is another way of saying, the Kingdom of God. Good luck, God bless you in your planting and in your nurturing of the seeds of justice, peace, and love. Thank you.

#### ENDNOTES

- i. Gary Bradley, "The Parish: Sacrament of Presence", Franciscan Communications, Los Angeles, CA, 1982.
- ii. Robert Hovda, "The Mass and Its Social Consequences", Liturgy '90, April, 1991, p. 12.
- iii. Bishop John McCarthy, "On Refusing Sacraments to 'Nominal' Catholics", Origins, November 19, 1992, pp. 392-394.
- iv. Mark Francis, CSV, "Hispanic Popular Piety and Liturgical Reform", Modern Liturgy, October, 1991, p. 17.