

"THE AMAZING TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT OF THE U.S. CHURCH"

by

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"The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat of the U.S. Church"

If the organizers of this conference had not assigned me a specific topic, I would have been strongly inclined to speak of the person whose memory has inspired this annual event. I am, of course, referring to Johannes Hofinger, S.J., a man with whom I had the privilege of collaborating in the 1970's in Mexico.

I first met Father Hofinger ("el Padre Juanito," we called him) in Puebla, Mexico. He was already seventy-something, had just begun to learn Spanish, and here he was, lecturing in that language. Shortly after we met, he came to Tehuacan in the state of Puebla because he was interested in our "Catequesis Familiar" (family catechetical) program which a team of us had created. Immediately he asked me to help him write a book...in Spanish.

I learned much from him. May I simply point out two things: he taught me how to make the sign of the cross and how to say the Mass. The sign of the cross he made was a meditation on the mystery of the Holy Trinity...he crossed himself slowly, with his eyes closed -- perhaps in order to avoid all distractions. His Masses were an experience to behold: he smiled beautifully, particularly at the elevation of the consecrated bread and wine. I cannot help but imagine that this was the attitude of Jesus at the Last Supper: a surrender of self in a spirit of joy and gratitude for the privilege of offering himself that others might live...that the world might be glorified with him.

He also taught me about the essential role catechesis has in the life of the Church and particularly in relation to the liturgy. He emphatically spoke of the principle of faith commitment. He put it this way: "You can have commitment without ritual, but you cannot have ritual without

commitment."

Fr. Hofinger taught me that cultural adaptation is not only useful in catechesis, but absolutely essential. In China, because at the time he was there, in the 1940's, the father in the family was more feared than loved. The Chinese father came into the family picture only to punish and to scold the children. When it came to presenting God as Father, this was horribly repulsive and the catechists had to come up with the combined word: "Father-Mother."

Upon reflection on the Old Testament story of Joseph, the dreamer, and his amazing technicolor dreamcoat, I am convinced that all who dream the dream of God for the world, wear a technicolor dreamcoat, a coat of many colors...and Father Johannes Hofinger had a coat like that-- a dazzling, luminous, breathtaking, multi-colored dream coat. No wonder he smiled so much!

I don't know how much you know of Father Hofinger, but he once related to me that he had traveled around the world in connection with his mission sixteen times! He was completely convinced about his now famous, then revolutionary catechetical and pastoral ideas based on the kerygma and leading to the worship in spirit and in truth. He was known for his untiring efforts and numerous projects. (He was a workaholic long before the word was invented.) If he wasn't writing, he was lecturing, or organizing landmark international catechetical and liturgical study weeks. Those international meetings were held in Nijmegen, Holland (1959), Eichstatt, Germany (1960), Bangkok, Thailand (1962), Katigondo, Africa (1964), Manila, Philippines (1967) and Medellin, Columbia (1968).

Those meetings were crucial in the creation of world-wide networks of pioneers in the areas of religious education, liturgical research and pastoral theology. When Vatican II was

convoked, the basic foundations of trust and common understandings had been laid. The meeting in Medellin immediately preceded the extraordinary Latin American Bishops' Conference that turned the Church completely around; at Medellin the Church in Latin America became the Church with a preferential option for the poor. The study week in Medellin, organized by Hofinger, had a profound impact on the direction the bishops took at their conference, according to such people as Father Virgil Elizondo, who was there. The people at both the catechetical study week and at the bishops' meeting had their dreamcoats on. They must have. How can they have done what they did without them?

I invite you to put your dreamcoats on right now, at the beginning of this conference. From the looks of it, you are in for an amazing journey, a magical journey through the land of dreams -- not the illusive dreams of the world nor of ordinary people, but the dreams of Abraham and Joseph of the book of Genesis, the dreams of Isaiah and Jeremiah, the dreams of Joel and Micah, the dreams of Solomon (who wrote a song about his dreams), the dreams of Joseph of Nazareth, the dreams of Mary the maiden mother, the dreams of John on the island of Patmos...and, of course, the dreams of Jesus Christ whose dreaming is unparalleled because he daringly dreamt of the salvation of the world, and about a new heaven and a new earth! Christians all, brothers and sisters...everybody...come, dream a little dream with me...no, come, dream a great big dream with me, and let us begin with the dream and vision of what the Church in the United States can and must be.

Remember the Joseph of Genesis: his father Jacob loved him so much that he clothed him in a coat of many colors. You know, many of us have been clothed here and there in our lives and those various times of special dressing have shown us and those around us how much God has loved us. We were clothed in white garment at Baptism and were dressed for the special initiating

moments of Confirmation and First Eucharist. I was clothed with the habit of the Basilian Fathers in the novitiate and then later with the clothing of the diaconate, the priesthood and the episcopacy. Some of you have been at one time clothed as a quinceañera or as bride or groom...and at our death we will be clothed again with the garment of new life, the triumphant pall, the victorious white coat of martyrs, apostles, virgins and other holy women and men.

Anyway, Joseph had a multi-colored coat. This showed how special he was. I feel that our Church in these our beloved United States is definitely gifted by God and that--like all other Churches in the world--we have our own charism, within that universal scheme of Church, a charism that points to the special call that I believe we have in this particular time in the history of the world...and also in the history of salvation.

The musical, "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, describes the dazzling coat of many colors thusly:

It was red and yellow and green and brown
And scarlet and black and ochre and peach
And ruby and olive and violet and fawn
And lilac and gold and chocolate and mauve
And cream and crimson and silver and rose
And azure and lemon and russet and grey
And purple and white and pink and orange and blue.

What a sight it must have been! No wonder the eleven brothers of Joseph were terribly jealous. Later in the Genesis story, as poor Joseph is sold into slavery and taken to Egypt, the marvelous coat is soiled with the blood of a goat and taken to Jacob as a sign that Joseph is dead. The coat of many colors was treated with disdain and hatred.

I would like to point out that the Church in the U.S. 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, or haven't you noticed? 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 martyrs' 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 theirs 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 readily be 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.

Now that we have our technicolor dreamcoats on, let's see what's going on here: the way I see it, the fiber of our faith is meshing together, made rich and strong by the numerous traditions of faith that form the ensemble of our Church. Faith is dynamic, it doesn't just sit there, waiting for things to happen to it--it either progresses or diminishes--it all depends on how we handle the gifts that nurture us, or how we withstand and fight off the poisons and attacks that beset it. We have a wonderful opportunity to use the resources that have been given to us; the U.S. Church, for we have an exciting and noble mission to achieve: we are called to be a great Church so that by what we say and do we shall become the "Gaudium et Spes," the joy and hope of the world. How about it, Church, are you ready to go for it? Say "Yeah!"

When I think of the multi-racial/cultural mix of the U.S. Church, I am immediately reminded of Pentecost where there were representatives from the entire known world at the time; remember those who were there? There were people from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, and Arabia. And they were all filled

with the same Spirit; they were all clothed with a dreamcoat, and together they formed the dreamcoat with which the Church began. You didn't know the Church was a dreamcoat from the very beginning, did you?

But just as at that time the Spirit blew and cast flames of Christ's wisdom and love, so now our Church once more is poised for its own Pentecost: right here, folks in "River City," Louisiana, and throughout our land.

The unfortunate and most tragic circumstance is that this dreamcoat has gotten stained and dirty. Joseph's was stained by a goat's blood; ours is stained by the blood of the racism, secularism, and sexism of our day.

Racism is that pernicious stain on our society that seems to be poking its ugly head again-- just when we might have thought that we were beginning to kill it. In the spectrum of the colors of the rainbow, all colors are good and beautiful to behold--not one is more beautiful than the rest. Similarly, all the sound of all the languages are right and proper; all the dances that the peoples of God dance are in step with the dances of the planets; all the different dresses of all peoples fit...no one group has the right to believe that they are superior or that they have more rights than anyone else.

"Yes, bishop, we understand that, but racism is real, it is here with all its ugliness." You're right. Just look at one example, that of the leadership of the Church. Our leadership, beginning with the episcopal level could definitely use more color; as it is now the colors of the dreamcoat

are not quite that evident. We've got our work cut out for us; let's create diocesan staffs, pastoral and parish teams that reflect who we are...and while we're at it let's be creative in our catechesis and liturgical celebrations in letting our technicolor dreamcoat shine.

Another source of stain on our dreamcoat can be the secularism of our time. We as Church could get side-tracked by the wiles of the world--and become a people of God--too set on getting rich, too trendy, too materialistic, too bureaucratic and leave behind the mission to the poor--and to be poor. In order to give credibility to the Church's teachings on social justice we have to be counter-cultural, and challenge this all-too-consumeristic society. We need to say by the life styles we choose to live, that it is much more important to be than to have; that it is more important to use one's power for others than for oneself, that it is more important to use our gifts, personal and communal, for the total Church and community than just for our limited turf.

Another source of stain on our dreamcoat can be the sexism of our time. Tragically, we are one of those institutions that need to confront more and more the gender issues of our day, be honest and resolve all we can, as a witness to reconciliation, peace and justice. This is an area where there is so much anger and bitterness, and with reason. Too many women have been hurt, particularly in recent years, as we grow in our understanding of what it means to be called and gifted to mission and ministry. In this area too, we have much to model to other particular churches in their world, for many of the people in other countries are beginning to recognize the burden of gender prejudice women in their societies have suffered and continue to suffer.

Joseph became the savior of his people in time of famine. The U.S. society, as it fast approaches the next century, is undergoing a famine of its own, a famine of a spiritual nature. The society of our time hungers and thirsts for those things which can nurture its spirit. Our

people have sought for satisfaction in all the wrong places and all the wrong ways. Possessions, pleasure, power, prestige, chemical escapes have dulled our spiritual acumen and have deprived our soul of the food that it needs to keep the interior life-systems alive.

And this is precisely where the fundamental mission that we as Church in this generation have...to enable the people of our nation to rediscover their faith and reawaken in their hearts their belief in a God who really cares...and what incredible resources we have with which to take on this mission...the dreamcoat made dazzlingly beautiful by the profound and rich spiritual heritage of all our peoples.

Let us do some daring in our dreaming for our Church for the future. Call it evangelization, or catechesis, or pastoring, or anything you want...but let us believe in our dreams, that just as Joseph's came true, so ours will too. What exactly should we be dreaming about? I dream that our catechetical leaders, writers, teachers, publishers, pastoral musicians, liturgists will figure out how we are to take the colors on the palette of God's people and present the message of the gospel with a new excitement and power. And that we do it in such a way that the person of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom will be reawakened in us, in our Church and in our society.

We have yet to capitalize on the gifts of our multi-cultural Church. We need to bring together everything God has given all our peoples: our respective faith stories, songs, poetry, icons, our distinctive ways of praying and other ways of relating to God. Can you imagine what our Church would be like if we took our European spiritual roots, combine them with the Native American heritage, symbols, and concepts, and then add the African American spiritual tradition...just to begin...and then add, for spice, the elements of the faith traditions and celebrative styles of the Hispanic peoples? And do you know something? We will be in a fantastic position to

celebrate the kaleidoscope of our Church and world.

We might even help create a world absent of violence and abuse, a world of people respecting people, honoring difference instead of fearing and merely tolerating it.

Our world could use some dreams. Dreams are based on faith and hope. We don't dream in a vacuum. We dream on the foundations of belief and hope on the basis of the conviction that we are not alone and that we will, in spite of it all, triumph as the lamb slain on the cross.

In the musical by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber, the story of Joseph ends with the song "Any Dream Will Do" sung by Joseph himself. It goes like this:

I closed my eyes, drew back the curtain
To see for certain what I thought I know.
Far, far away someone was weeping,
But the world was sleeping. Any dream will do.
I wore my coat with gold lining,
Bright colors shining, wonderful and new...

The light is dimming and the dream is too.
The world and I, we are still waiting,
Still hesitating. Any dream will do.

And Joseph sings "Give me my coat, my amazing colored coat. Give me my coat, my amazing colored coat." It is not clear in the musical, but it's clear in our world--the people out there are waiting for a dream, and we the Church have a dream for it...the dream of Jesus.

Jesus gives us a glimpse of his dreams in the beatitudes. He talks about his dreams when he announces and describes the Kingdom of God. The remarkable thing about Jesus' dreams and the dreams of humankind is that they are in harmony with one another. Dreams are aspirations, and any authentic human aspiration is in keeping with God's will for humankind. What we human beings want for ourselves coincides exactly with what God wants for us...as long as that dream is

an authentic dream...one that, if it comes true, will enoble, elevate, inspire, and promote what in potentiality God has planted in us. Yes, Joseph, any dream will do...and our prayer is like yours, that we get back our coat back, our amazing colored coat. Amen.