

THE CHALLENGE OF ECUMENISM TO HISPANIC CHRISTIANS
DENVER, COLORADO
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I thank you for giving me the opportunity to reflect deeply on the subject of ecumenism from the Hispanic perspective. I must confess at the outset of this talk, that this is the first time that I have been invited to speak on the challenges that ecumenism presents to Hispanic Christians in this country.

One of the reasons that I accepted speaking to this group is that I simply am not satisfied with what I personally have done over the 25 years of my priesthood and episcopacy to promote the cause of ecumenism. We, the bishops in the era of post-Vatican II, have committed ourselves to further the agenda of the unity of Churches. When I took over as the first bishop of the Diocese of Las Cruces, I recall vividly reciting the required oath to dedicate my episcopal ministry along the lines and spirit of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

By way of a confession, I must admit that having chaired the committees that wrote the U.S. Bishops' letter on Hispanic ministry and, later, the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, ecumenism has not been a priority in Hispanic ministry. It hardly surfaced in the discussions at the third and last national encuentro held in Washington in 1986 and in the discussions leading to the elaboration of the Hispanic National Pastoral Plan approved by the U.S. bishops in 1989. In other words, the reality is that ecumenism does not figure strongly in the way Hispanic ministry is being conducted in this country. This does not mean, however, that it should not be a priority. I myself am strongly convinced that there exists at this time in history an urgency to elevate ecumenism among Hispanic Christians to a higher priority in our pastoral planning at national and diocesan levels.

Before I explain the reasons for my thinking on this matter, let me backtrack a little to that most significant landmark in this century regarding Christian unity. That most significant moment was when John XXIII convoked the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council back in 1959. I remember the moment well. I was just finishing my undergraduate degree as a lay student at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. A group of us students had been studying at the library and after the library closed that evening, we all went to our favorite all night restaurant for a snack. The next day's morning paper was already on the stands and the headlines read, "Pope John Calls for an Ecumenical Council." At that time, those of us who were intrigued by what Pope John was doing, had a very limited notion as to what might ensue from that council.

The newspapers told us about the word ecumenical and emphasized the council's goal of Christian unity. We had no idea that that council would also take on such radical reforms in the liturgy and the sacraments. I would imagine that few in the Church foresaw at that time what would happen to our understanding of such basic dogmas as Church, revelation, the mission of the Church, the role of Mary in the history of salvation, religious freedom, and the role of the Church in promoting peace and justice in the world as a result of Vatican II.

I remember thinking rather naively that one of the main results of this proposed council would be the unity among all or at least most Christians. In the heyday of Vatican II, we all may have been led to believe that Christian unity was just around the corner. It has now been over 25 years that the decree on ecumenism was promulgated, and unless one has followed, as you most certainly have, the important theological dialogues among certain key Christian groups, the perception is that we have not moved very much towards one another.

Nonetheless, if any national conference of bishops has taken the cause of Christian unity seriously, it has been that of the United States Catholic Bishops. One of the strongest committees at

the National Conference is the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs (BCEIA). With regards to the continuing dialogue towards Christian unity in this country, the brightest landmark would have to be the Columbia, South Carolina, event during the visit of Pope John Paul II to this country. Some of you were no doubt present at that meeting. I recall it being said, that only in the United States could such a meeting and event have taken place because of our tradition of religious freedom and the presence of such a variety of religious approaches.

We as a nation, are most certainly not perfect in the tolerance of difference, nonetheless, in the area of religion there appears to be a deep-seated respect among religious groups, perhaps because of our emphasis on the freedom of religion. I do not know what it has been like in the past, but since I have been going to Roman Catholic episcopal ordinations and installations of bishops, leaders of non-Catholic denominations are always prominently present.

From what I have just said, I would deduce two preliminary reasons why ecumenism should be made a priority among Hispanic Christians. The first is that it is an essential component of the Vatican II agenda, and we are after all, Vatican II people. Secondly, since we live in such a multi-religious country, it is imperative that we keep in mind the words of Rodney King last week in Los Angeles, "we all can get along together," and not only as different races but also as different faiths.

Another reason why I think that the cause of Christian unity is important among Hispanics, is related to the fact of the existence of long-standing Hispanic Protestant communities in the U.S. and the growing numbers of Protestants among Hispanic peoples. Some Catholic leaders welcome this as the kind of challenge that we Catholics needed to have in order to focus more on Hispanics in this country. In other words, they say, "the competition will do us some

good." Of course it is to be lamented that baptized Catholics have left what we firmly believe is the fullness of the sacramental life and the fullness of Christian teaching. But we need to look beyond the pain of the departure of our brothers and sisters, to the future. What are we called to now?

The strategy that has already been established is ecumenical and is called dialogue. There is an expression in Spanish, "Cuando nos hablamos, nos entendemos" (translation: "It is in speaking with one another, that we grow in mutual understanding.")

The difficulty is that there has been a long and bitter animosity between Hispanic Catholics and all Protestants. I would surmise that the roots of this bitter animosity go back to the 16th century. At that time, the Protestant reformation seemed to have stopped at the Pyrenees. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella drove out the Moors and the Jews, and they were not about to let the Lutherans or any other European Protestant group into their territory. The notorious Inquisition was designed specifically to eliminate and prohibit all heretics. The institution of the Inquisition and its spirit travelled well to the new world and, together with the counter-Reformation, pastoral approaches and catechetical content helped promote that anti-Protestant prevalence among Latin Americans. That is the background for the strong anti-Protestant feeling among Hispanic-Catholics in this country.

Last year I attended an ecumenical meeting of Christian historians from Latin America. One of the papers was given by a Peruvian Protestant minister, Tomás Gutiérrez and the paper was entitled, "Herejes, Piratas, y Locos" (translation: "Heretics, Pirates, and Crazy"). My friend Dr. Gutiérrez describes how in Peru and in Mexico, any pirate from England who was caught and imprisoned, was not judged for his piracy, but for his religious convictions. These pirates were usually English, and as such, were non-Roman Catholics, and therefore heretics. Some of these

pirates, Dr. Gutiérrez found out, refused to recant and suffered consequences of torture and death. When they would not recant of their Protestant beliefs, they were thought to be insane. The most brilliant Roman Catholic theologians would be brought to these so-called heretics and they tried every kind of theological discourse to convince the heretic of his error and of the logic of Roman Catholicism. If they still did not accept what the theologian was saying, then their only conclusion was that this person had to be crazy.

I have heard of violent physical battles that are presently taking place in certain remote regions in Mexico. We are told that Guatemala is already 50 percent Protestant. The people of Guatemala have already elected two national presidents who happen to be charismatic Protestants.

You might well imagine what is happening among our supposedly closely-knit Hispanic families when part of the family turns Protestant. Protestant conversions among Hispanics cause painful and often irreparable damage to the Hispanic family unit. You might well imagine what happens when parents of a religiously-divided family die, what might ensue at the funeral. I have heard in my own diocese of "bi-religious" funerals, where some parts of the funeral are done according to the Roman Catholic ritual and others by according to a Protestant model. Unfortunately these funerals are not always carried out with sensitivity and respect. Often bitterness and tension are the rule of the day.

All of this brings me to the third reason why the cause of Christian unity has to be an urgent consideration in our Hispanic pastoral ministry. The reason is to help Hispanics protect and maintain the family which is one of the great hallmarks of the Hispanic culture. Hispanic

families must be taught that in spite of religious difference, they can still be brothers and sisters and maintain their family ties.

In the U.S. bishops' pastoral letter on Hispanic ministry of 1983, we cited the division of churches as a major obstacle to evangelization. We referred to "instances of active proselytizing among Hispanics carried on in an anti-ecumenical manner by Protestant sects...(this) reflects an anti-Catholic spirit hardly emanating from the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Hispanic Pastoral Letter No. 12h). I must admit that we who served on the writing committee of this pastoral letter, struggled to draft this part of the letter in a pro-ecumenical manner. In our letter we neither attack nor disparage our brothers and sisters of other Christian traditions, and clearly state that other Christian Churches have been part of the history of salvation. We call for prayer, dialogue, and partnership in efforts of common concerns.

It is unfortunate that recruiting approaches by Protestant groups to our people often include attacks on elements of our faith and traditions. Bishops are concerned that even mainline Protestant groups are actively recruiting members to their churches from among Hispanic Catholics. Neither the proselytism that is going on nor the attitude of some of our bishops create a healthy climate for dialogue, nor for united efforts and collaboration in issues of common concern. A deep-seated preoccupation of mine is that we are not talking to each other about these things. I have never heard of a high level, summit-type meeting of Hispanic Catholic and Hispanic Protestant church leaders. A meeting of this type is of great urgency, because the problem is getting worse. Some of us see this particularly along the Mexican-American border.

One bishop explained to me that perhaps there are different ways of looking at ecumenism. For us Catholics, he explained, ecumenism means dialogue, for some of our

Protestant brothers and sisters, it means permission to recruit from among Hispanics. Whether this is true or not, I am not sure, but the fact remains, is anything being done collaboratively between Hispanic Catholics and other denominations?

There are some efforts being made. The Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio has always had an ecumenical vision. Ministers of all faiths are welcomed to its programs. Some of my own personal involvement in the area of ecumenism have resulted from my long-standing association with MACC. There is an organization that goes by the acronym CEHILA, which stands for the Commission for the Study of the History of the Church in Latin America. For many years, this organization has produced research, books, periodicals, and many publications on the history of the Church in Latin America from an ecumenical perspective. The international meetings that are held regularly in Latin America always include Protestant church historians. "Church" is always taken by CEHILA in the Vatican II sense, that is, it includes all the Christian churches, so that when the history of the church is considered, all denominations are included.

I am glad to see that Hispanic theologians have organized two professional associations that cut across denominationalism. In place now are La Comunidad of Hispanic Scholars of Theology and Religion and The Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS). These groups, together with others, are organizing an ecumenical conference on Hispanic theology to be held in New York, October 11 to 13 of this year. Hispanic theologians and pastoralists from the following religious bodies will be making presentations and conducting workshops: Roman Catholics, Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, Methodists, American Reformists, Baptists, Assemblies of God adherents, Episcopalians, and Lutherans.

Every so often one hears of even grassroots ecumenical efforts. In my own diocese, there is an annual Christian encampment that includes various denominations. It is organized by the charismatic prayer groups of the area. Even though I myself have not had the opportunity to be present at any of these gatherings, one of my priests has and he has not seen any problems arising from these encampments. Many of our dioceses have experienced excellent collaboration among Hispanic Christians of various denominations in such projects as the food pantries, community kitchens, the Habitat for Humanity, and services for immigrants.

There have also been excellent examples of collaboration among community organization efforts, particularly those being done by the network of the Industrial Area Foundation. Communities Organized for Public Service (C.O.P.S.) of San Antonio, the United Neighborhoods Organization (U.N.O.) of Los Angeles, Valley Interfaith in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, and those in El Paso and Houston are proofs that Hispanic Catholics can unite their efforts with their Protestant brothers and sisters in confronting the social, educational, and environmental issues of our day.

For the future I would like to make some very specific recommendations. I see a continuing need for Hispanic bishops to sit on the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Together with this, there needs to be a linking strategy between the BCEIA and the Bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs. There needs to be regular reporting between each of these committees.

I would see a tremendous urgency for a summit meeting that includes United States Catholic Hispanic bishops, Catholic bishops from Mexico, members of the BCEIA, and representative Protestant leaders, including Hispanic ministers. Perhaps this kind of meeting needs

to be held without too much fanfare and away from the Mexican border. I would suggest that such a meeting be held in Washington and sponsored by the BCEIA and the Bishops' Committee on Hispanic Affairs.

Nonetheless, even if we are able to organize these things, problems will remain. We have examples in our own area where some of the Protestant evangelical groups absolutely refuse to be involved with anything Roman Catholic, even when it comes to joining hands in dealing with common social justice and charity concerns. Part of it is because of their extreme anti-Catholicism and the other is a world view which is different from our own. There is simply no interest on the part of these groups in dialogue or collaboration with Roman Catholics. Both they and ourselves need to recognize that Catholics and evangelical share many things in common, including the reverence for the canonical scriptures and belief in the Trinity, the incarnation, the redeeming death and bodily Resurrection of Jesus. We also share common moral teachings such as our opposition to abortion and the defense of traditional family values.

Hispanic Protestants are often new converts or children of converts and express an energetic zeal for their Protestant faith. Many of them are very disciplined, have left unacceptable lifestyles and now read the Bible. There is something admirable about them, and something that we Catholics need to emulate. Hispanic Catholics, on the other hand, have a rich and profound spirituality that has been handed on from generation to generation. Our Church provides us with a sacramental and ritual system that has enormous potential in nurturing that faith. In other words, Hispanic Catholics and Protestants have something to contribute to each other. Hispanic Catholics need to be more evangelical and evangelicals need to be more Catholic. We each tend to have our own imbalances and could be corrective of one another. In a recent article, Father Avery Dulles, S.J., says, "many Protestants have focused too narrowly on God's word in Scripture, and

some have fallen into fundamentalistic literalism. Catholics can help evangelicals to achieve a deeper grounding in tradition, a richer sacramental life, a more lively sense of world-wide community, and a keener appreciation of socio-political responsibility" (Avery Dulles, "John Paul II and the New Evangelization," America, February 1, 1992). What Father Dulles says about ecumenism in general can be most appropriately applied to the Hispanic religious world.

If I could open my heart to our Protestant brothers and sisters, this is what I would tell them. "Be sensitive and respectful of the people you may be anxious to convert. While their faith may not be very articulate and its practice lacking, they are believers and there is in their religious experience, a real personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Please remember that the Catholicism of Hispanic peoples is a constitutive component of their culture and personal identity. However you might present your own beliefs, be careful not to create a hatred and rejection of their past: the faith of parents and ancestors, the traditions and world of symbol that have had such life-giving effects for so many lives, and that have given meaning to life, death, the world, and the spirit."

I like the approach that some of our Roman Catholic missionaries take in countries that are mostly Moslem, Hindu, or Buddhist. There these missionaries respect the native non-Christian religions and make it their goal, not to proselytize nor convert, but to make them better Moslems, better Buddhists, better Hindus. It would be beautiful if those who are presently aiming to convert Roman Catholic Hispanics to some other tradition, would take a similar approach and help us make Hispanic Catholics better Catholics. It would be equally beneficial if those Catholic pastoralists with an evangelizing thrust would also be respectful of Hispanic Protestants whose religious preference may have been inherited from many previous generations. This would be the best way to avoid further partitioning and division among Christians and would lead to a powerful witness of a united Christian Church.

As we look to the future, we have to acknowledge that the evangelization of the past 500 years has hardly been ecumenical. We must raise our eyes to Jesus who still calls upon us to be "one flock under one shepherd." As a minimum we are challenged to be respectfully "ecumenical." However, we should lament the fact that we are divided and pray together for a deeper insight into the broken Body of Christ, acknowledging our own sinfulness. We are challenged by John Paul II to creatively implement a "new evangelization" for the next 500 years. It is time to dream, plan, and implement programs that will lead us to greater unity. I beg you, in conclusion, to continue to challenge us Bishops to keep the issue of ecumenism among Hispanics alive.