

ENVISIONING HISPANIC LITURGY
Challenges for the Instituto at the Beginning of the Millennium
Instituto de Liturgia Hispana Board meeting
February 23, 2001

I. Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to address you, the members of the Instituto de Liturgia Hispana, on issues that presently affect and will, in the future, continue to affect the worship life of the hispanic peoples in our country. To look towards the future and attempt to assess it is much more difficult than looking at the past. Yet it is precisely when we look at the past that we are enabled to look with some assurance into the future.

II. Looking back

The liturgical needs of any people are basically spiritual. By spiritual here I limit myself to the connection of people with God and with other believers. Spiritual, and, consequently, liturgical, needs vary from one generation to another, because changing social, political and economic factors enter into the picture.

Some of us were raised in that extraordinary, that tragic, that dramatic and exciting time of World War II. At that time, we witnessed the “Americanization of Latinos.” I recall that in the 1930's the people of our area of south Texas would celebrate the *dieciséis de septiembre* much more than the Fourth of July. In fact, in New Gulf, Texas, near my home town of Bay City, the Mexican community, working in the sulfur mines, would raise the

Mexican flag at dawn and sing the national anthem of Mexico. My family and friends identified strongly with their Mexican roots.

World War II changed us. Our fathers, brothers, uncles and friends went off to war. Some died for this country, and their caskets came home draped with the American flag. We started waving the U.S. flag with everyone else. We bought U.S. savings bonds, contributed scrap iron, planted victory gardens, and cheered at the movies when victory for our side was depicted.

Our Hispanic veterans came back speaking English, dancing the jitterbug and ordering fried chicken and hamburgers. Many took advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights and went on to college to become professionals. Almost overnight, we became Americans.

Yet there was still the stigmas connected with *la raza*. We faced horrible discrimination and racial bias. Church, prayer and worship through these years had to do with consolation and reassurance. Mass was a refuge, the connection with our Mexican roots and a way of reaching back to what, for some, was a “better time.” Yes, the past often looks greener than the present. In our silent prayer at church our needs for affirmation and acceptance by God were met. It seems that those liturgical needs were simple. We did not expect more from church than what we experienced.

Things are very different now. The Hispanic spiritual needs vary from group to group and from one part of the country to another. The spiritual needs of the Hispanics of southern Florida are different from those of southern California and south Texas.

I can speak more confidently about Mexicans and Mexican-Americans. Most of the Hispanics of Mexican descent residing in the United States at present are not U.S. natives.

Their experience of this country is not the same as that of the generation of Mexican-Americans that I come from.

The political or nationalistic relationship to this country is different... and varied. Patriotism may still be strong to their native country of Mexico.

The economic situation is somewhat different from our generation. While the U.S. Hispanic population is generally poor, there are some who are very wealthy. There is presently a growing professional category that was not there before. Together with this phenomenon is the higher educational level.

Many Hispanics are in this country because of oppression and social and political upheaval in their countries of origin.

All this has, in my opinion, an influence on their spiritual lives. Prayer is different. Reasons for coming together for worship are different. What is looked for in preaching is different. What is expected of the church is different.

The average Hispanic Catholic of today is very much influenced by the Protestant work ethic. Some would say this is characteristic of the average American Catholic. Hispanic Catholics mix more than ever with other groups, of all national origins, of all ethnic and language communities. Again, this is true of all American Catholics. This phenomenon of assimilation or integration into the mainstream of American society will naturally have an impact on Hispanic cultures and their approaches to religion. All our traditions are being and will continue to be challenged in the future.

While worship, especially the preaching part, will be expected to affirm the values of the "American way," we will have to find ways to challenge the pitfalls of this post-modern,

and some would say, this “post-Christian” way. The question is, “How do we help, from the liturgical perspective, to form and maintain Christian, gospel values?”

I believe it is most essential that liturgists reflect on these realities as they go about providing leadership, formational programs, composing music and creating new avenues for Hispanic liturgy now and for the future. We cannot, we must not fail to challenge the new American Hispanic with the consistent teachings of the church on social justice.

I would now like to draw attention to specific areas of liturgical and sacramental concern.

III. Legal matters

A. Canonical

In another time, when marriages and families were more stable, canon law did not affect Hispanic people’s religious lives as it might today. Now there are probably as many divorces and re-marriages among Hispanics as there are among other groups in the United States. For re-married people to participate fully in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, certain canonical conditions have to be met. I am, of course, referring to the process leading to the declaration of nullity, more commonly known as an annulment. This canonical process is probably very strange and new to many of our people. Many may have the impression that annulments are for the rich, the powerful, and those with influence in the Church. Many find it an almost impossible process because of the paperwork and what might be perceived as intrusion into their private lives by strangers.

Those who have never married and are simply living together and who would like to receive the sacraments, might find diocesan and parish policies which they may not have had in their native lands. Some will find it difficult to obtain the documents and paperwork from remote villages and will not meet the requirements of those who interpret Church law in a strict manner. The temptation for these will be simply to keep on living the way they are and deprive themselves of the full liturgical life of the Church.

Newcomers seeking the sacraments, encounter conditions or requirements unheard of in their native countries. We insist that people register and use envelopes for our collections before they or their children receive the sacraments. We know that some of our diocesan or parish policies go beyond the requirements of canon law itself.

When we reflect on these situations, we can better understand why so many people resort to popular religion instead of accepting the official prayer life.

B. Civil

Along the U.S.-Mexico border we experience the ever-growing intrusion of border officials into the daily lives of our Hispanic people, including those who are citizens or legal residents. We sometimes have to file official complaints to the Border Patrol, for example, when they park their vehicles in front of our churches just before, during, and right after our church services. Church attendance is influenced by such prominent presence of the Border Patrol at or during liturgical events.

We have the added problem when a young man and a young woman waiting for legalization decides to marry. Their legal process will be delayed by several more years when they contract marriage because this will break the immediate relationship with the parents who are the original sponsors. Some of our ministers struggle with the possible solution for people in these situations to go through a “secret marriage,” in order to avoid legal sanctions by the U.S. government. What is meant by a “secret marriage” is a marriage performed by a minister of the church without a marriage licence. The only other option they might have is to delay their marriage until they obtain the proper documentation.

IV. Co-relating popular religion and liturgy

We have been talking about this co-relation since we began the Instituto many years ago. I am not sure if we have gone very far in this area. While many of us have written on the topic, I am not sure if we have made any inroads in either the appreciation by the Church in this country of Hispanic popular religion, nor have we integrated it into the liturgical life to any great degree. The ground, in my opinion, is still very fertile for there to be an

effective bringing together of popular rituals surrounding passages of life with the liturgical life of our people. Our most successful connection has been between the *quinceañera* and the liturgy. But even here, more sensitization needs to be made. I believe more could be done to incorporate the popular rituals at birth, coming of age for young men, marriage, and death. What is needed also is more attention to pilgrimages, patronal feasts, processions, and novenas.

I recognize the challenge we have before us with the establishment of the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a hemispheric feast. For some, devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe has been too closely associated with Mexican nationalism. Guatemalans, for example, are sensitive to this reality. Canadians know very little or nothing about Our Lady of Guadalupe. We have a lot of educating to do on this new Feast of America.

V. Hispanic cultures – a multi-dimensional reality

The multi-dimensional reality of Hispanics is a national phenomenon. We used to think that Mexican-Americans and Mexicans were in the southwest, Cubans and Cuban-Americans in southern Florida and Puerto Ricans in New York. Now, we are all mixed together everywhere. I understand that there are strong Mexican communities all along the Atlantic seaboard and that Salvadorans are present in enormous numbers in Los Angeles. I have even heard of Mexican indigenous groups in Dallas and in New York City.

These realities present challenges for Hispanic liturgists. How are we going to ensure that the liturgical needs of all our Hispanic peoples are met and their religious sensitivities

respected? This multi-cultural presence calls for careful selection of music, creation of environment and art, and precision in the use of language.

While on the issue of language, we need to address that of bi-lingual or multi-lingual liturgies. We have all experienced such liturgies either successfully or unsuccessfully. This issue will have to be faced with the greatest sensitivity.

How this is done will have to be resolved in every local situation. In all times and places, the people themselves need to be involved in the process of planning and carrying out of the liturgy, after all, liturgy is of the people and for the people.

VI. The preparation of liturgical ministers to meet the needs

The area of formation of liturgical ministers is one of the most important concerns of the Instituto. If we are going to have an impact on the liturgical life of this country from the Hispanic perspective, then we must be alert and anxious to contribute to the formation of liturgical ministers. Every one of them. I am thinking of the formation of priests, deacons, acolytes, lectors, extraordinary Eucharistic ministers, musicians, creators of environment and art, and everyone in any way taking part in the leadership or service of the worshiping assembly. I am referring here not simply to the developing of skills for the practical implementation of good liturgy, but also to a more deeply theological and cultural understanding of Hispanic religious tradition and liturgical needs. For this to take place, I think we must continue to focus on the training of professional liturgical thinkers. We have not yet begun to fill the enormous gaps that exist in the world of theological academia with

regards to the inculturation of liturgy and, in particular, of the inculturation of Hispanic liturgy into the life of the Church.

I dream of Hispanic American teachers of theology at the great theological centers in North America, and Europe, including the great universities of Rome. Until this happens our efforts will be seen as unprofessional and we will be seen as of ethnocentrists. In other words, we will not be taken seriously until we have spokespersons at the highest academic levels.

It goes without saying that priests, in spite of the consultative structures that may be in place, still control what happens in liturgy, especially in the sanctuary. This should point to the absolute necessity of bringing our concerns for Hispanic liturgy to the forefront of the formation of future priests. Hispanics are present in almost every diocese in the United States. Their liturgical needs are to be met as much as those of any other group.

More and more our country is becoming Spanish-speaking. The Church is becoming more Spanish-speaking. We need to maintain the pressure for the preparation of those involved in liturgy to know Spanish. Equally important is the familiarity with and embrace of the rich religious traditions of our peoples and for them to recognize the multi-cultural Hispanic presence in this country. It will also be important for them to be aware of the various degrees of participation in the Church. Similar to other groups, some Hispanics are more “churched” than others. I daresay the majority have received the two sacraments of Baptism and First Eucharist, and that is about it. The majority have yet to be fully initiated into the Church.

We have to do something with the fear that many of our Hispanic peoples have toward pastoral leaders, especially of bishops and priests. I am concerned that we have far too many in leadership positions of the Church who are intolerant to anyone who is different and whose ecclesiology or faith expressions are different from their own. This can be true of native U.S. priests as well as foreign priests who can have an elitist regard of themselves and their idea of worship. To be admired are those who are successful in making the cross-cultural transition and, thanks be to God, there are many of these.

VII. Towards a more welcoming Church

We, the Catholic Church, often fail in welcoming newcomers. Let us not forget that the theme of welcome and hospitality is key to the understanding of God reaching out to his people since the time of Abraham to significant moments in the life of Jesus and in the life of the early church. God enters into the lives of his chosen people through the hospitality of Abraham. Jesus invites us to “come and see” where he lives. He has gone to prepare a “place for us” in the house of his Father. St. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the paramount importance hospitality plays in their Eucharistic life. The Church waits with open arms for the second coming of Jesus and welcomes him with the words at the end of the Book of Revelation, “Maranatha, come Lord Jesus!” Why don’t we get the message? Welcoming and hospitality are indispensable and must be extended to all, rich and poor, foreign and native, to those like us and to those completely different. We need to exemplify at all times and everywhere that we mean it when we say, “Many faces in the house of God.”

Many of us have been using the Rito de Iniciación Cristiana para Adultos. I believe that the translation of the American version of the RCIA has been well received, but I think

as more and more Hispanics experience a non-Catholic childhood and upbringing, there will be a greater need for this ritual in the future. In other words, more Hispanic Protestants will be coming to our door, and we need to be prepared to welcome them in every way, especially through our ritual.

Of particular advantage is the Hispanic Catholic tradition of *padrinos* (sponsors) and *compadres*. These are sacred relationships that begin on the occasion of the reception of sacraments such as baptism, confirmation, first Eucharist, and marriage. *Padrino* relationships also begin with sacramentals, such as when something is blessed such as a car or a nativity creche. To call someone *padrino*, *madrina*, *comadre*, *compadre* can be a constant remembrance of a moment of grace in the past and which continues to have significance in our present.

In passing I believe we made an important distinction in the RICA between *padrinos* and *esponsorios*. The *padrinos* are those special persons chosen to witness a sacrament. The *esponsorios* refer to those persons who accompany us on the journey of faith leading to a sacrament. I think the *esponsorios* can also play a role after the sacrament is received to ensure that the person who has been initiated in the Church, for example, will continue to feel part of that Church.

A special challenge is the welcoming of Hispanic Protestants and Evangelicals. In point of fact, some of these may not wish to be welcomed by us, yet we must extend an open door in spite of any negative feelings they might have towards us.

An extremely delicate moment may arise, for example, at the funeral of a person whose family is separated along denominational lines. Many of us have experienced either a

good or a bad handling of a situation such as this. Some refer to these as a “bi-religious” funeral.

In our part of our country it often happens that a family is accommodated with a Protestant vigil service and a Catholic funeral Mass the next day, or vice versa, a Catholic vigil is held followed the next day with a Protestant funeral. These are occasions for extreme sensitivity, and the only way to handle them is for the family to decide how the funeral will be conducted. For good reasons, some of our pastors will not allow Protestant preachers to do a eulogy during a Catholic funeral. For one thing, these can be prolonged or may contain references that are offensive to Roman Catholics.

VIII. Promise of the Encuentro

We should be very proud of what happened in Los Angeles at the Encuentro in July, 2000. Not only was it an expression of welcome on the part of the Hispanic people of the United States toward other groups, but it was also an occasion for us to express our rich faith and cultural legacy. It was, indeed, a national moment of grace for all of us from everywhere to have an opportunity to show forth the many faces of God. The Encuentro showed what is very possible, but it also showed us how difficult a task we have ahead of us. The Encuentro was a celebration of song, dance, and artistic creativity. It was beautiful. It was exciting. It was unforgettable. But the Encuentro also pointed to the enormous needs for all of us to come together to relate our stories, to dialogue, to reconcile, and to become more Church in spite of our differences and in spite of the troubles we may have had with one another over the years. I look forward to a successful dialogue that must someday take place between

Hispanics and African Americans, Asian Americans, and others. It is important that liturgists from the various groups come together for this kind of dialogue, and discover the common ground that we share.

If the Instituto is faithful to the realities that confront the needs of Hispanic peoples, it will attract new and fresh membership, new and fresh ideas, and will be effective in the enhancement of the liturgical and spiritual life of our people.