

## "TIA PETRA'S NOVENA--A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION"

### I. A CASE STUDY--THE STORY OF AN ACT OF FAITH

Many, many years ago, this writer had an experience of faith that he now remembers as one of the most significant moments in his spiritual development. It is the earliest faith experience that I can remember. It is that moment in my early years that I here present as the center piece of this paper, written as a personal reflection on Hispanic faith. Others may find parallels in their own lives.

It was a cold night in south Texas; a "blue norther" had just come through and cleared the sky. In the cool crispness of that evening, we walked a few yards from the home of my grandparents, where my immediate family lived, to the home of Tía Petra and her family. I did not know why we were going to Tía Petra's, after all, after supper we usually didn't have much to do with one another, especially in the winter when it was uncomfortable to leave the house. That night, everyone gathered to begin the novena to Our Lady of Guadalupe. I found out later this was the yearly custom of the extended family. I had probably seen the altarcito in the corner of the main room of Tía Petra's house before but never paid too much attention to it. This time a couple of candles were lit in front of the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and I still remember the pictures of the four apparitions at each corner. I also remember my Tía Petra, a woman whom I had only seen in her role as tortilla-maker, clothes-washer, lunch-maker, and general mujer de la casa. She was a woman with a ready smile and always had a word of encouragement. That evening, she took out a black book, obviously old, with its tattered, yellow-aged pages, that kept falling out. She took out a rosary and began speaking to the picture at an unbelievable speed. I was entirely entranced by the whole scene; I would first look at the image with the flickering candles before it, then look at my family, with their eyes either intent on what

they were saying, or on the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I don't remember just how long the scene captivated me, but I do remember very vividly what happened next.

As we were walking back to our grandparent's home that cold, dark night, I took my grandfather's hand and after walking a few paces with him, he reached down, and for no explainable reason, except for his cariño for me, lifted me up and sat me on his shoulder. I looked up and saw a million stars set against the black sky. It was at that moment that I sensed a special presence of the Someone who made those stars, and in child-like fashion, I surmised that all of those stars had been made for me. It was in that context of devotion to Guadalupe, family intimacy, and the sense of grandeur, that God started reaching out and initiating a life-long familiarity with me. I sincerely believe that my Christian vocation began at that very precise moment...and all in the milieu created by Tía Petra's novena.

## II. PHENOMENOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

Faith is both the reaching out of God to us by means of "sacramental" mediations, such as persons or groups of persons, sacred symbols, sounds, visual images, the emotions and the august grandeur of creation. All of these elements were present at the time of my first act of faith. First and foremost, God spoke to me in the intimacy and security of the extended family. For me, it is an undeniable truth, that a loving and personal God can only take place in a loving and caring environment.

At Tía Petra's, I became intrigued at the centrality of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The image was somewhat familiar; I had seen it before, since she is practically in every Mexican home. But that particular evening, the family members focused their attention to this already familiar image.

I had no way of knowing at the time--since I was an infant--but the central figure of Our Lady of Guadalupe would be throughout my life a permanent source of consolation, strength, and fascination. Guadalupe was to connect me with the history of the Mexican people since its mestizo origins in the sixteenth century. That symbol would help in my arriving at my Catholic Mexican-American identity. The image of Guadalupe was always around in my childhood, and when I had to leave my native state of Texas to go north to the seminary, I carried the image with me. Interestingly, the image was so important in my life, that wherever I was assigned, I made sure that the image was hung somewhere in my house or institution of my assignment and there remained when I would leave.

As I reflect Tía Petra's novena, I am sure that it was there that I discovered the world of the sacred. This happened at the hearing of new and sacred utterances (my Tía Petra's rattling of prayers with the rest of the family responding). I saw objects then that I had never seen before, such as the rosary and the tattered prayer book. I was further impressed by the different bodily postures and facial expressions of my family. It wasn't everyday that my family knelt together to utter sacred sounds. I was sure that something very special and extraordinary was going on, something that had to do with everything else. I couldn't explain it then, but now I know that it was a mountaintop encounter with the invisible God by way of His visible mother.

### III. THEOLOGICAL ELEMENTS

The following theological themes and concepts regarding God and the act of faith were all very much present at Tía Petra's novena.

God reveals Himself. This is the basic principle of the revelation of God as described in the Dogmatic Constitution Dei Verbum on Divine Revelation: "It pleased God, in His goodness and wisdom, to reveal Himself and to make known the mystery of His will." (cf. Eph. 1,9)

The God of Jesus is the God of love. He loves from afar, but He is also very present. In other words, our belief is in a transcendent and immanent God. In the Old Testament, God is so near that in His teophanies he actually speaks directly to patriarchs, prophets, and kings. In the New Testament, the Risen Lord wants to assure His disciples of His protective nearness: "Do not fear, it is I" (Mt. 14,27). In both Old and New Testaments, the ambivalence of transcendence/imminence recurs again and again. At the call of Moses,

the Lord is so close, that the two talk to each other, but at the same time, the Lord maintains His distance: "Come no nearer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Ex. 3,4-5). At the transfiguration, Jesus is transformed totally and becomes "totally-other" in an awe-inspiring gesture...yet there is a familiarity created and Peter is prompted to say "Lord, how good that we are here! With your permission, I will erect three booths here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah" (Mt. 17,4).

The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe also reflects the transcendence imminence of divine revelation. Our Lady speaks tenderly and lovingly to the indian Juan Diego. They carry on some beautiful conversations together. Yet when one examines the image left on Juan's tilma, one notices that, while the face is that of an indian maiden, there are other signs that reflect that she is from somewhere beyond, and not of this world. The tilma shows Guadalupe dressed in a mantle filled with stars; the sun is behind her back; and there is a black moon under her feet.

Another theological element that I could share that was present at Tía Petra's novena was the way in which the act of faith occurred.

The beginning of the process of faith is always through the mediation of someone else. We believe because others believe. Faith is therefore "caught" by way of the witness of those close to us. Furthermore, the act of faith involves a whole person: psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually.

#### IV. BIBLICAL REFERENCES AND PARALLELS

Upon reflection on tía Petra's novena and my own act of faith, I see somewhat of a parallel in the Scriptures with Abraham and the promise of a progeny that would "number the stars." Abraham and I have something in common, we both experienced the transcendent God as we beheld the cosmos.

I also see a parallel between my first act of faith and Moses and the burning bush. My "burning bush" was the scene of my extended family gathered around the candle-lit image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Like Moses, I was surprised by what was happening, and at the same time, captivated. The God of Moses was the God of Tía Petra's.

If it is true, and I really believe this, that my vocation to the Christian life and to the priesthood came that night, then the experience has parallels in the "anawin," the little people in the history of salvation. God's revelation and purpose so often happen in the Scriptures by way of the young, humble, and poor, such as David, Saul, Isaiah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna, to name but a few. I am now the Bishop of Las Cruces, then I was a three or four year-old child of a migrant family.

I am sure that there have been times in my life that I had fearful images of God, of someone who judges severely, but I have never really failed to believe that the God who is and will be forever is a loving one, such as described in John 3,16: "God so loved the world, that he sent His only Son."

The Scriptures often relate the mystery of vocation both in the Old and New Testaments. We don't know exactly why God chose the Jews, nor why He chose Abraham, Moses, or Jacob. At the moment of initial vocation, there is no reason why the prophets were chosen, for some admitted their ignorance and their unworthiness. The same thing happens in the

New Testament with Peter who stumbles around, with Philip who questions everything, and with Thomas who doubts it all. Paul admittedly relates his own wrestling with his having been called, since he did not witness the resurrection at the historical moment in which it occurred. Those of us who have been called to priesthood often question, "Why me?" and in my case, "why did God choose me, there are so many others with far greater intellectual, spiritual, and human capacities". That is the mystery of vocation.

In the Scriptures, particularly in Luke and John, Mary has a unique place in the history of salvation. Her presence in the Scriptures never takes away from her Son Jesus Christ, He is always the star, or the sun, and she the moon, reflecting only the light that she receives from her Son. Perhaps my first act of faith is parallel to the placing of the mother of Jesus in John's Gospel at the beginning of his earthly mission at the wedding feast of Cana. She later appears in John only at the end of the Gospel, at the foot of the cross. The mother of Jesus in John seems to provide the framework for the entire Gospel. While she is not mentioned in the in-between chapters, by placing the mother of Jesus at the beginning and at the end, she seems to be nonetheless always present, but in the background. In my own spiritual journey, the mother of Jesus has always been there, caring, nurturing, understanding, and oftentimes, simply listening.

#### IV. THE REALITY AND FUNCTION OF HISPANIC POPULAR CATHOLICISM

Hispanic popular Catholicism, even in these post-Vatican II times, with the emphasis on the official prayer of the Church in the liturgy, still has a strong and active presence. It affects people in deep and indelible ways, as it has in my own life. The impact of Hispanic popular Catholicism does not go away, even after a highly sophisticated theological European-centered education, as is the case in all of us North American priests.

I am very convinced that popular Catholicism connects us with our past ancestors. Our acts of faith are not historically disconnected, but part of a continuous flow of faith that reaches back hundreds of years. This, of course, is part of our Judeo-Christian heritage, for we firmly believe in the same God of Abraham, Moses, Jacob, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. But our faith is also the faith of Juan Diego, Santa Rosa de Lima, San Martin de Porres, Oscar Arnulfo Romero and Tia Petra. It is the faith of the Spanish missionaries, of the converted indians of Mexico, of the mestizo people that began in the 16th century, of the insurgentes of the war for independence of 1810, of struggling peasants under Porfirio Diaz, and of the revolutionaries of 1910 and of the Cristeros of the 1920's. To remember the faith of ancestors, is to remember the gift of faith and the burden that is connected with it, that of the responsibility to keep the faith burning alive and passing it on to the succeeding generations. My faith then, has significance, not only for myself and for my salvation, but for that of salvation of those whom I do not know because they are not yet born, but whom I will know in the new heavens and in the new earth.

Hispanic popular Catholicism is also a conveyor of faith and values. It has a formative influence on people. It influences in the person's prioritization of his or her life. It is a subtle yet real influence on one's societal relationships. It speaks of an invisible world of fairness, equality, respect, dignity, happiness--where things are right. The symbolic world

of popular Catholicism is a constant reminder that wrongs will be righted, that justice will prevail, and that God will "remember."

V. CONCLUSION

It is the hope of this writer that the preceding personal reflections will assist the reader in ascertaining what is unique about Hispanic spirituality. The subject is both complex and intriguing, as I have attempted to describe in another article. ("Hispanic Spirituality," Social Thought, Summer, 1985) Other Christian cultural groups might see parallels to what we describe as "Hispanic." Perhaps it is a matter of focus and emphasis that the Hispanics' place on specific aspects of faith or devotion. For most Hispanic Catholics, the modus operandi of faith and the processes of conversion take place in the context of popular Catholicism. It is through popular Catholicism that the world of the sacred is entered and whereby it is experienced. The richness of that gift is what Hispanics bring to the liturgy, the official prayer of the Church. We cannot come empty handed to the altar of God and to the house of the family of God when we come for worship. It is what we learn at home, in the family, from the close and intimate people in our lives. It begins in all of us when we are infants and is nurtured throughout our lives as we grow in stature, wisdom, and grace.

I hope that this paper has emphasized that the phenomenon of Hispanic popular Catholicism is most real and undeniably powerful. I owe Tía Petra my profound gratitude for placing me on the threshold of faith and for giving me the trajectory of my vocation.