

"500 YEARS OF..."

BY:

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SOUTHERN METHODIST UNIVERSITY

February 5, 1992

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INTRODUCTION

My dear friends, it is with a profound feeling of gratitude that I'm before you today. My friendship with members of the faculty of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University goes way back to my years at the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio. I do not at all feel like a stranger coming here, on the contrary, I feel very much at home. Thank you for honoring me with your invitation.

I come to you as a Roman Catholic Bishop and an expatriated Texan. I mention the latter because, while having been born, raised, and educated in Texas, it has been to my advantage in many ways, to have left the state and look at its past and present from an outside perspective. But being a Texan, also helps me, I believe, to look at New Mexico from an equally objective point of view. I am happy to be in this position which allows me to be both an insider and an outsider in both states.

I. THE QUINCENTENARY AND THE U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS

Let me give you an example of the enigma of the quincentenary in New Mexico. A statue of Juan de Oñate is being completed in Juarez, Mexico. It was commissioned by the New Mexico state government with federal funds. The entire project was conceived and promoted by a Hispanic citizen from northern New Mexico around the area of Española. The plan is to bring this expensive statue of one of the conquistadores of the southwest in procession up the Rio Grande valley to Española and is to be set in an area just next to a Native American reservation. There is

much debate around this equestrian statue and its placement next to the reservation is seen as an insult and there are threats that the statue might not make it as far as Española. Some even think that the Apaches in our southern part of the state might ambush the procession, and even if it makes it all the way to Española, the elegant foot of the high-stepping horse might be cut off as a symbolic reminder of the mutilation that Oñate and his men did at the village of Acoma many years ago. I can very well understand the position of the people with a Spanish background in northern New Mexico. They are very proud of their heritage and cultural achievements. They are proud of the fact that they have maintained their cultural traditions over the centuries. The Spanish-Americans of northern New Mexico are concerned that their part in the Europeanization of the southwest is sometimes forgotten in the history books. But then there is the side of the American Indians who can never forget the atrocities committed by the Spaniards, particularly the mutilation that took place in Acoma in the seventeenth century. For anyone who would want to commemorate 1492 in New Mexico, it is a terrible struggle to decide to "celebrate," "commemorate," "reconcile," or to simply forget. No matter what position one takes, there will be strong opposition.

At this point, I would like to share this quote with you from a noted author: "Chronic remorse, as all the moralists have agreed, is a most undesirable sentiment. If you have behaved badly, repent, make what amends you can, and address yourself to the task of behaving better next time. On no account brood over your wrongdoing. Rolling in the muck is not the best way of getting clean." This is not from a noted spiritual writer nor from some moral theologian, but the opening lines of the novel by Aldous Huxley, Brave New World. This quote from Aldous Huxley tells me that "rolling in the muck" is parallel to living on the negatives of the past in such a way that one might intend to create guilt trips. I learned a long time ago that it is useless and unhelpful to create guilt trips in the minds of people over anything that has happened. Racism, for example,

is not cured by keeping on telling people that they are racists. I do not think that what is being said at this conference has the intention of creating a guilt trip for anyone, nonetheless, the bad things of the past need to be brought forth and openly discussed.

The good thing about all this is that all of a sudden history becomes an important ingredient in conversation. Excellent debates have taken place and most importantly, consciences have been made sensitive to the negative things that are being discovered in the history of the Europeanization of the Americas. We in the Roman Catholic Church at the National Bishops' level have struggled with this debate. Several years ago, preparations began for the observance of the quincentennary of evangelization of the Americas. What ensued was a debate that took place especially at committee level with those bishops and others who were charged with the task of producing a document on behalf of the entire body of U.S. bishops. I was not on the commission (thanks be to God!), but I understand that there were heated debates and intense dialogue. I understand that there were moments when the committee almost broke up and its members were ready to throw up their hands in utter frustration. Finally, it was the strong influence of Bishop Donald Pelotte, an American Indian himself, who reminded the other members of the commission that the Pope himself had made a very strong statement during his 1987 visit to Phoenix, Arizona regarding the approach to the task of interpreting the 500 years of Europeanization. The Pope had called us to ask forgiveness from God and from the native peoples for the wrongs endured.

There were members on the commission who on the one hand, wanted the document to be triumphalistic and celebrative in tone. At one point, the title of the document became "Sounding the Jubilee Horn." It was just too much for some of us who wanted to avoid any kind of triumphalistic approach and that a more contrite spirit be incorporated into the document. In other words, we believed that at the core of our message should be an act of contrition on behalf of

the Church and those representing European societies for the elements of invasion that accompanied the Christianization of the Americas. These are some of the things that we said in our December, 1990 statement entitled "Heritage and Hope": "The encounter with the Europeans was a harsh and painful one for the Indigenous peoples." It described the introduction of diseases, cultural oppression, injustice, disrespect for native ways and traditions. "The great waves of European colonization were accompanied by destruction of Indian civilization, the violent usurpation of Indian lands and the brutalization of their inhabitants." The pastoral letter went on to say: "Many of those associated with the colonization of the land failed to see in the natives the workings of the same God that they espoused." (Origins, CNS Documentary Service, December 6, 1990, Vol. 20: No. 26)

Even so, the pastoral letter goes on to describe the positive aspects of the arrival of the Europeans. "The Gospel did in fact take root....it cannot be denied that the interdependence of the cross and the crown had occurred during the first missionary campaigns by way of contradictions and injustices. But neither can it be denied that the

expansion of Christianity into our hemisphere brought to the peoples of this land the gift of the Christian faith with its power of humanization and salvation, dignity and fraternity, justice and love."

In November of 1991, a year after "Heritage and Hope," the bishops at their annual assembly in Washington voted overwhelmingly in favor of a statement on Native Americans on the occasion of the 500th anniversary. The name of this document is: "1992: Time for Remembering, Reconciling, and Recommitting Ourselves as a People." (Origins, CNS Documentary Service, January 9, 1992, Vol. 21:No. 31) Allow me to summarize the contents under each of those titles.

I.A Time for Remembering.

In this first section, we repeat the apology that we had extended to the Native Americans the year before. "In this quincennial year, we extend our apology to our native peoples and pledge ourselves to work with them to ensure their rights, their religious freedom, and the preservation of their cultural heritage." We remind ourselves that the religious spirit or spirituality of native people in the Americas did not begin 500 years ago but centuries before in their prayers, chants, dance, and other sacred celebrations of native people. This section repeats the call to Americans to better understand the role of native peoples in history and to respond to the just grievances of our Native American brother and sisters. We repeat that this is a great opportunity to reject all forms of racism. While in this section, we remember the past, we state that the challenge of this historic year is not simply to look back but to look around at the current situation of the native peoples and to

look to future challenges for our Church and society in responding to the aspirations of Native Americans.

II.A Time for Reconciliation.

We asked that the faithful in the United States seek genuine reconciliation between the essential traditions of Catholic faith and the best of the traditions of Native American life, each respecting, shaping and enriching the other. This, we say, is to be done in all aspects of our liturgical, pastoral, and spiritual lives. The fear, the prejudice, and insensitivity towards native peoples is deeply rooted in our culture and in our local Churches.

III.A Time for Recommitment

The American bishops recommitted themselves in this statement to stand with the native peoples in their search for greater justice in our society. We committed ourselves to be advocates with native leaders in this effort, not simply advocates for their needs. In other words, we have committed ourselves to walk with the Native Americans in their struggles for dignity and justice. We pledged support from the bishops' various agencies of assistance to home missions.

What I have given you from the United States Bishops' point of view is just one small sample of the enormous amount of study, research, symposia, discussions, and writings that have taken place in the past few years and will continue throughout this year and in the forthcoming years.

You and I have a built-in historiography of sorts, and this because we are Christians and heirs of the Christian covenant with its roots in the Jewish covenant. This historiography has been

determined by various factors, including that of looking forwards towards the Messiah or the Parusia when the grandest visions of the greatest prophets will be fulfilled. The past is seen as necessary learning steps in the linear movement towards the Messianic times. History for us Christians is necessarily "salvation history." The prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New, were extraordinarily perceptive in their appreciation of history. Included in their perception were harsh condemnations of anything that the people of God might have done which contradicted the commitment to the Covenant. Looking backward for them was often done with an element of censure but there was no wallowing, as it were, in the mud of the ancestors. Whatever condemnation took place was also accompanied by a call to repent and then start again.

The founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ, must have been profoundly knowledgeable and sensitive to the history of the people to whom he addressed the first pronouncements regarding his Kingdom. Successful and effective teachers always know where their charges come from. Those who have their own selves together must take their own past into consideration and know what forces and circumstances have formed their very selves. Jesus knew who he was, where he came from, and where he was going.

The Church as the people of God has, at the core of its mission and obligation to be historical. The Church exists in order to keep the memory of Jesus Christ alive. Jesus Christ belongs to the past as much as He belongs to the present and the future, and therefore, it is necessary to continually be turning back to the times and places, audiences and first recipients of the Good News of salvation. In the Acts of the Apostles, we have a very clear example of what I am talking about. The primordial preachers of the Kerygma had been so entirely transformed by the events of the death and resurrection of the Christ, that they were bursting with enthusiasm to share what the past events had done for them. But it is also of the essence of Christian

historiography to look to the future. We cannot simply stay in the past and glorify and be glorified by past deeds, no matter how powerful they might have been. There is always a call to look to the future: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up at the skies? The Jesus who has been taken from you will return, just as you saw Him go up into the heavens." (Acts 1,11) A friend of mine in Colombia puts it this way, "we must remember the past in order to remember the present and the future."

II. THE CHURCH IN THE SOUTHWEST AMONG HISPANICS

I was asked to address you on the Church and Hispanics. I am not really an expert on the early part of Christianization or Europeanization in the southwest in the 18th and 19th centuries. My reflections have focused mainly in the past 100 years. Please remember that I speak out of the Roman Catholic experience since you have people among you who are eminently qualified to speak on Methodism and the other church traditions in the Southwest.

The great centers of Catholicism of the continent of North American that had an influence among Hispanics in the Southwest were in the northeast of the United States, especially Baltimore, New York, and Philadelphia, and Guadalajara and Mexico City in Mexico. The distances to the southwest from those centers of Catholicism were so great, that the Southwest was necessarily considered la frontera or the frontier. As people from Mexico moved to the north to what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California, they brought with them the rich traditions of Catholicism from their place of origin. Their spiritual leaders came with them, particularly Franciscan missionaries. It is especially in northern New Mexico where Catholic faith continued to be deeply embedded in the lives and souls of the people. Even though there were times when there were few priests, the faith continued through the laity and family rituals. The rich

symbolism of santos and altares continues even to this day, and the religious art of the area is recognized by such important entities such as the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

Later, the Church with its people and missionaries arrived in places like California, Arizona, and south Texas. In these places too, the Catholic faith became very much part of the society. What the Catholic faith did for the Hispanics in this area was to help them survive and to give meaning for their struggles to exist and make their lives in la frontera. Their faith enabled them to see the reasons for their uprooting from their native places, for the struggles against the Native Americans who were already here, and having to cope with the new geographic and climactic habitat. When the United States took over the Southwest, there was definitely already a Christian civilization with Spanish and Mexican Mestizo roots. There began, however, the new challenge of having to cope with a different culture that had moved westward from eastern, midwestern, and southern United States. Even though we do not like to remember the horrible stories of racism and prejudice suffered by the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans of the Southwest, nonetheless, we need to look at it in order to learn from it.

Some of you may have read the book Rain of Gold by Victor Villaseñor, a book which is more and more considered the Roots of the Mexican-American. The book traces the origins of two families who are uprooted from central Mexico, make their way into the Southwest, and finally come together in California with the marriage of the two protagonists of the book. The epic spans several generations of each family and the description of the horrors suffered by the families during the Mexican Revolution only continue later as they encounter the alien "Anglo-American" culture of the United States. The story is a very inspiring one, one that conveys the deep hope and enthusiasm made alive because of Christian faith.

The unique contribution of Hispanics to the Church and society in the Southwest, and I am speaking mainly from a Mexican perspective, has been that of the Mestizo blend of Indian spirituality and the Spanish Christian spirituality that came together in the 16th century in Meso-America. On the one hand, religion already ran deep in the soul and psyche of the native peoples of the Americas, as we all know. We heard elsewhere during this conference about the culture hero of the Indians in the person of the Coyote. The native Mexicans had as their culture hero Quetzalcoatl, a person of great wisdom and talent who, after being tricked by his rival, Tescatlipoca, into having sexual relations with his sister, immolated himself on the seashore in the presence of all the birds of the air. On the fourth day, he rose from the ashes as an enormous diamond and settled in the sky as the planet Venus, who is there to discern the deep questions of the opposites of good and evil, light and darkness, and life and death.

The Spanish Christians who started coming in the 16th century, brought with them an equally strong faith rooted deeply in Judeo-Christian traditions that had developed over many centuries. The missionaries brought with them an astounding missionary fervor, together with ideas on the Christian humanism and idealism of the Renaissance. The Jesuits, for example, attracted the greatest minds and talents of Europe. Some of Europe's greatest thinkers, writers, musicians, artisans, architects, and agronomists rushed to the New World, seizing the opportunity to share in the construction of a new world. And so, in the 16th century, we have two great spiritual traditions coming together to form the Mestizo spirituality in Meso-America which is so very prevalent in our southwest in the presence of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

At this point, I would like to assert the justification for some degree of celebration during 1992. What we can celebrate is the witness of those in the past 500 years who have stood up for righteousness, freedom, and the dignity of peoples. I am thinking of those who defended the

Indians and the little people of their day such as Las Casas, Motolinía, Zumárraga, De Quiroga, Morelos, and in our own lifetime, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador. These people are witnesses to an acute sensitivity for justice as the will of God. The memories of those people we can certainly celebrate this year.

I am convinced that the survival and continuation of the Christian faith among the Hispanic peoples of the Southwest has been due to the Mexican Mestizo folk traditions as expressed in popular Catholicism. But not only has popular Catholicism been the instrument and conveyer of faith, it has also been the subtle outcry of a people struggling against oppressive forces. Popular Catholicism has been a way that the people have been able to maintain their identity as well as their dignity. The two most powerful symbols in the vast array of images and santos, are those of the Christ on the cross and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Neither of them say anything, so their role is principally that of listening to those who are suffering. Jesus on the cross and the silent Virgin understand, and for people who are in pain, that is all they can ask for and expect, someone who will listen and understand. The symbols also maintain the hope for the rectification of wrongs and the vindication of evil. They are symbols of the hope of a people who know that God in the end will triumph over every injustice and every wrong suffered by any of His children. I found it very interesting back in 1977 when we in San Antonio were part of a farmworkers' march from the missions to the Alamo. Leading the procession were the red flags of the farmworkers' union and on the back of these were sewn the images of Our Lady of Guadalupe. It reminded me of the struggles for independence of Mexico in the 1810 Revolution and later during the Cristero Rebellion of the 1920's against the injustices that ensued after the revolution of 1910, when the rallying cry was "Viva Cristo Rey y la Virgen de Guadalupe."

No doubt historians need to be favorable towards those who helped the Hispanics in the Southwest, particularly those in the Church. To be commended by historians are those religious missionary men and women who came to serve the poorest of the poor, especially through efforts in education and medical care. Many who became prominent in various professional fields such as education, politics, business, and also in religion, received their start from religious men and women who saw in them enormous potential.

The difficulties that I see with the institutional Church in the Southwest, is that it was late in coming to the defense of those people who belonged to the Church and who were being wronged by being excluded from full integration into our democratic society. In Texas and in portions of New Mexico and elsewhere in the southwest, particularly in the small towns, there are usually two churches. One for the Mexicans and the other for the Anglos. It was unfortunate that this separation took place. It is unfortunate further that the Church could not have expressed itself as a model of unity and a unified Body of Christ by incorporating all peoples under one roof. Perhaps the language problems could have been accommodated by a type of bilingualism. I know that it is easy to look backwards with objectivity, nonetheless, the separation that occurred cannot be seen other than scandalous.

There have been good moments in the Hispanic people's struggle for integration into the American way of life. Thank God for Archbishop Robert Lucey of San Antonio who began reaching out with the Church's influence and institutions to the Mexican-Americans in the state of Texas. He was the first Catholic leader to speak in favor of the farmworkers of Texas. Throughout south Texas, we are discovering what appears to be a paradigm during the era of the struggle for civil rights. Very often things came to a head over homecoming queens and cheerleaders in some of our south Texas high schools. The important and positive aspect of the paradigm is that

frequently the pastor identified with the people's struggle and the parish became the rallying point.

It is to the credit of the Roman Catholic Church that Hispanic bishops began to be named to the episcopacy after 1970. Of the 15 bishops of Texas, four are now Hispanic, including the highest-ranking Catholic prelate in the state of Texas, Archbishop Flores of San Antonio. It was indeed a great moment of jubilation for the Mexican-Americans of Texas when Patricio Flores became the Archbishop. I will never forget being at the historic moment in San Fernando Cathedral when the papers for his installation were signed. Archbishop Flores was surrounded by Hispanic priests as we witnessed the signing over of the powers in the diocese by the older non-Hispanic group of Church officials.

In more recent years, the Church leadership in the Southwest has taken on a strong role in the advocacy for Hispanics and the poor in the Southwest. Effective organizing efforts, such as those done by the Industrial Areas Foundation have brought not only hope for the people, but have been effective in bringing a better life and opportunity to many of our Hispanic people. I am very proud that the Churches of the Southwest have been responsible for much of the successes. Of special note also, has been the work of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project, which has restructured the political scene throughout the Southwest. I will refer to its founder, Willie Velasquez, later in this presentation.

III. THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH IN THE SOUTHWEST

I have firmly believed for a long time that there is a theological meaning for the presence and migration of Hispanic peoples to this country. There are really two meanings. The first is in

order that Hispanics with their deep Christian faith, are here to contribute with their deep Christian spiritual traditions to the evangelization of American culture. I remember what Pope Paul IV said about evangelization, that its goal is to make the Gospel reach down to the very roots of a culture. We must aim to Christianize cultures. This has happened in the past, such as in medieval age and even in modern times we have examples of just how Christian and deeply spiritual peoples can be. I have been very impressed in my visits to Europe in areas such as Croatia, Bavaria, areas in Spain and France, in the Philippines, and throughout Latin America where Christian and Gospel values permeate everything. In such atmospheres, children are quick to pick up the Spirit and grow in the wisdom and grace of their Christian parents.

Hispanic cultures have indeed been evangelized, and in many instances it would seem that the evangelization has gone down to the roots. We lament that traditional Christian values might be disappearing from our American society. We need something to help us along in making sure that those values survive in order that succeeding generations may profit from them. The mission of Hispanics is to contribute to the continued evangelization process of American culture.

The second meaning is that of a prophetic nature. What I wrote several years ago, I still own: "Every minority group has a prophetic role to fulfil in relation to the dominant group. This can happen in any part of the world, where there is a minority vis a vis a dominant group. Dominant groups tend to fall into behavioral and attitudinal patterns that speak of superiority, smugness, arrogance, and intolerance of those who are different, of those who have the defiance to contradict their 'way.'

"A minority group challenges a predominant way, and questions the absolutes, values, criteria, priorities, and all that the dominant group takes for granted as the undeniable for ever and ever best: the mere presence of a minority group makes the dominant group take a second

look at itself. This process of discernment is always valuable, since the dominant group may either judge itself as limited or deficient or discover that there is nothing wrong with itself in this or that aspect."

"Hispanics offer as their first contribution precisely this function of prophet. This is a contribution in the line of assessment, evaluation and self-criticism, which any individual or group must periodically undergo as a condition for continued significant existence. The United States has been able to be open to all kinds of cultural exchanges for the enhancement of its dynamic development." ("What can Hispanic Catholics offer the North American Church?" New Catholic World, July/August 1990, p. 180)

For the Church, Hispanic culture offers a variety of Christian cultural expressions. The Hispanic peoples are here to offer their own Christian humanism, their way of personal interrelating, of relating to God their way of prayer and worship, of relating to nature, relating to the earth, the cosmos, to life and death, and to life beyond death.

Finally, one of the things to be lamented of the Church in the Southwest is that in the past it probably has not exercised its full potential to eradicate the false gods of today, such as secularism, racism, materialism, sexism, and consumerism. For one thing, we have not educated our own Christian communities regarding the serious and essential obligation we as Church have towards the poor of the world. I am still deeply troubled as to why we the Christian Church or Churches all together with all the influence that we could have mustered, could have allowed the things that happened in the tiny country of El Salvador in the past several years. Why did we allow such atrocities to happen? I ask myself why we have not been able or willing to unite all mainline churches and Catholics together in our fight against all kinds of injustice and violence.

The credibility of Christianity is very much at stake as we approach the end of the first 2,000 years of evangelization. One of the sure ways in which we have of regaining our credibility is that we become united in the struggles of our present humankind against all the dehumanizing forces at work in our society. Some say that our society is deteriorating very fast. We have lost our deep reverence for life. We are beset by any number of addictions, families are breaking up, suicide is rampant, and we are losing more on our streets through violence of Americans versus Americans, than we have lost in recent wars. 1492 awakened a spiritual fervor and perhaps the greatest missionary enterprise in the history of Christianity. Perhaps 1992 is a good place for our own spirits to be reawakened and to forge into the future united in hand and heart in order to confront the life-taking forces at work.

I would like to briefly relate to you the story of Willie Velázquez. Willie was the founder of the Southwest Voter Registration and Education project that had an enormous impact in the restructuring of the political scene in the Southwest and other states in the United States. Almost singlehandedly, Willie Velázquez, restructured politics in such a way that those who previously had no voice, or little voice, became educated and empowered in order to promote their own causes and participate in decisions that affect their lives and those of their children. Willie got cancer a year and one-half ago, and the last night of his life, as he was dying, he told his wife that he would not make it through the night. He went to sleep and later in the evening he woke, smiled at his wife and friends and said, "I am going now, I don't think I can make it." He closed his eyes, opened them again, and said, "Que bonito es el nuevo mundo," (How beautiful is the new world.) He repeated those words, "Que bonito es el nuevo mundo" and died. To this day, his family and friends do not know exactly what Willie meant with those words. They don't know whether he meant how beautiful is the new world of the saints and angels in heaven, or whether it was the

new world as envisioned by Jesus for the future, or whether he saw how much better off the world was because of his own efforts. The words and life of Willie can certainly inspire us to work for a better world.

Let us together continue to be encouraged by the letter of Ephesians, Chapter 1, verse 10, that we "bring all things in the heavens and on earth into one under Christ's headship." Thank you very much.