

"THE HISPANIC PASTORAL PLAN IN LIGHT
OF THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF THE CHURCH"

BY

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"A Century of Social Teachings"

I. BACKGROUND OF THE HISPANIC PASTORAL PLAN

Social justice is at the heart of the Hispanic tradition. It has been providential that from the beginning of the involvement of the U.S. institutional Church with Hispanic concerns - roughly in the 1940's - matters of justice have always received prominent attention. The themes of social justice are woven through all U.S. bishops' statements on Hispanic ministry. In this the Church has been true to the tradition trail-blazed by Leo XIII in his celebrated encyclical Rerum Novarum:

It must not be supposed that the sollicitud of the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests. Her desire is that the poor, for example, should rise above poverty and wretchedness, and better their condition in life; and for this she makes a strong endeavor... (RN no. 28).

The Hispanic Pastoral Plan's concern for justice has a long history. We can trace that concern back to those religious institutes of men and women, individual priests and groups of Hispanic laypersons themselves who, early in this century, saw the need to extend pastoral care and material assistance to the Spanish speaking. We can also cite the Church's social thrust in the U.S. Bishop's Offices for the Spanish speaking in Texas and elsewhere in the 1940's, and on to the establishment of the

Department, then the Secretariat, for Hispanic Affairs of the NCCB/USCC, the Encuentros, the Pastoral letter in Hispanic Ministry of 1983 and finally the Plan of 1987.

But I strongly hold that the origins of this social thrust has deep roots in the heart and psyche of Hispanic peoples. The Pastoral Plan comes from and is written on behalf of a largely Mestizo culture for which justice, liberation and the common good have been at its deepest level of yearning - together with its yearning for God. Justice for Hispanic peoples is both a sacred promise and a mandate. The yearnings for justice, liberation and the common good that are indelibly fixed in the Hispanic soul have their origins in both Spanish and Latin American indigenous instincts, nurtured through the centuries by Gospel teaching.

The spirit of Medellin and Puebla have had a marked influence on the emphasis in the social dimensions in Hispanic ministry in the U.S. Just as cultural phenomena do not know political boundaries, so the thrust for justice in the Church's teachings transcends human-made lines of demarcation. The same Divine Spirit that has inspired our neighbor peoples and their bishops to the south has been at work in our Church as well.

Also influential has been the African American movement for civil rights. The association of preaching and prayer on behalf

of justice, exemplified so valiantly by our sisters and brothers of color, have been enormously inspiring to the Hispanic movement in this country.

So have the Popes, particularly those of the latter half of the twentieth century: John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II. In particular Paul VI in his Populorum Progressio and Evangelii Nuntiandi. In the latter document Paul VI clearly and enthusiastically legitimates the principle of the Synod of 1971 that activity on behalf of social justice is a constitutive dimension of evangelization.

It goes without saying that Gaudium et Spes - that masterpiece of Vatican II - has been the guiding lamp and the uplifting hope for the social agenda that runs through Encuentro processes and their results into the Pastoral Plan.

II. RERUM NOVARUM AND THE HISPANIC PASTORAL PLAN

Both Rerum Novarum and the Hispanic Pastoral Plan are examples of the Church's response to the sign of the times. Rerum Novarum was motivated from the imperative brought, on the one hand, by the latter nineteenth century socialist movements and the difficult threat of unleashed capitalism on the other. The Hispanic Pastoral Plan responds to the immediate social challenges

of a particular group of people. Rerum Novarum is concerned in great measure about the rights of workers to organize for their defense. The Hispanic Pastoral Plan is concerned about the rights of a specific group of people who are anxious to protect their cultural traditions and rights in society and in the Church.

Both the Pastoral Plan and Rerum Novarum attempt to incarnate the Word of God in the World. The U.S. Bishops speaking in unison with those representatives of the Hispanic peoples who came to the III Encuentro - present themselves in the Plan as leaders anxious to be examples of social justice and agents of change that will bring about that justice ideal.

The Plan expresses clearly the mind and determination of the Hispanic peoples: to rise from being victims of an often-times harsh treatment of society, to being agents of change of societal structures that affect their lives.

The message of Leo XIII applied Gospel principle to the situation of his day and in a parallel fashion, the Hispanic Pastoral Plan gives substance and meat to the abstract references in social justice documents of the Church. It localizes the issues. It points prophetically to issues that might otherwise be overlooked by both society and Church.

The passion of Leo XIII that the human person's dignity be respected is echoed in the Hispanic Plan: Leo XIII puts it this way:

"... all are equal; there is no difference between rich and poor, master and servant, ruler and ruled: for the same is Lord over all. No one may with impunity outrage that human dignity which God himself treats with great reverence... The rights of people are the very rights of God, the most sacred and inviolable of rights" (Rerum Noverum no. 40).

III. THE MODEL OF CHURCH IN THE HISPANIC PASTORAL PLAN

The Hispanic Pastoral Plan is not for Hispanics alone, it challenges the entire Church of the U.S. to become Church. The Plan speaks often of the challenge to live and promote "a model of Church" and describes it as being "communitarian, evangelizing and missionary,... and a promoter and example of justice" (Hispanic Pastoral Plan no. 17).

Behind the Plan is the Encuentro spirit that among all institutions that touch Hispanic lives, the Church is their greatest hope. But being allowed to worship and pray in their own language and cultural style will only be a part of the overall task toward inclusion and participation in the life of the Church and society. The role of Hispanics according to the Plan is well-

defined: we want to do our part in the Church's struggle of justice for all. At the same time the Plan challenges the Church at large to make those changes necessary at parish and diocesan level - where things that matter really happen - in order that they reflect principles of justice: in a word justice begins at home.

Perhaps the greatest gift of the Hispanic Pastoral Plan to the rest of the Church is that of Pastoral de Conjunto, the pastoral thrust based on authentic community. The underlying principle of the Pastoral de Conjunto is that of justice.

The model of Church referred to in the Plan is one that above all is JUST. What is a just Church?

A just Church is a listening Church, one that pays heed to the signs of times, to the authentic hopes and dreams of the peoples it serves.

A just Church is a seeing Church - one that acknowledges existing unjust realities and one that condemns them.

A just Church is a compassionate Church - that feels deeply at the level of heartfelt mercy.

A just Church is an acting Church, one that moves from theory to practice, from sermonizing to organizing, from words to action, from promise to commitment, from the lifting of hopes to the fulfillment of dreams.

IV. THE SPECIFIC CHALLENGES OF THE HISPANIC PASTORAL PLAN IN THE AREAS OF SOCIAL JUSTICE.

The challenges for the future as pertains to Hispanics and social justice issues in the Church include:

1. The acceptance of cultural differences and that these be seen as gifts that enhance the common good. The Church must not forget to affirm and integrate all of God's people.

2. A greater participation of Hispanics in leadership and decision - making roles at all levels of the Church.

3. A commitment to act upon the root causes of poverty, racial prejudice and injustice, which involves challenging the institutions and structures of the economic, societal and political life of this country.

4. The recognition of the call of Hispanics to respond in the areas of evangelization, human and civil rights, education and

political responsibility.

5. Create processes that will empower and that will train and develop pastoral agents who will, in turn, empower others.

6. The Hispanic Pastoral Plan calls for small church-based communities, and empowerment through existing and future efforts in the areas of community organizing and economic development, as well as through efforts that support challenges Hispanics and the total Church to recruit new leaders and to encourage new vocations to the religious life, the priesthood, the diaconate and lay ministry.

V. THE PROPHETIC MISSION OF U.S. HISPANIC PEOPLES AS A MINORITY

The Pastoral Plan speaks prophetically - in keeping with what has to be one of the roles that given theological meaning to the presence of Hispanics in the Church in this country.

Minorities have a prophetic mission in the history of the world and its salvation. (The prophet speaks many languages; in the Hispanic Pastoral Plan, the prophet speaks in Spanish!) A minority people play the unique role of questioning the dominant society, lest the dominant group take on the attitude of superiority; lest the dominant group forget that it is made up of

those who were once aliens and perhaps minorities as well; and lest the dominant group become intolerant of difference and multiculturalism. Minorities save the rest of society from the entrapments of smugness and arrogance towards everyone else.

Minorities save and liberate the stronger groups from thinking that the social agenda is over, that wars on poverty, racism and prejudice have been won. Minorities keep reminding us of the ever unfinished business of justice, and that all plans of action are open-ended. Moreover, the test of the legitimacy and merit of any pastoral plan on any topic, by any department of the NCCB/USCC, or by any diocese or parish, is whether it is effective in dealing with the realities facing the minorities that might be present within the parameters of their purview.

Finally, the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Hispanic Minority in 1983, referred to the Hispanic presence as a "gift of grace" for the whole Church. The Hispanic Catholics are here to lend their hands to the task of continuing the momentum began by Rerum Novarum 100 years ago.

The Hispanic peoples of the U.S. hope to figure strong in the struggle of justice for all - not for themselves alone, but for all our sisters and brothers who make up the human family...

We are ready too to join in the efforts for peace, the fruit of the harvest of justice - as Paul VI told us. Our unique Hispanic contribution is exemplified in the words of Benito Juarez: "El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz" ("It is in respecting others that we arrive at peace.")