

THE MANY ACCENTS OF THE ONE WORD  
THE STORY THAT UNIFIES US  
Phoenix Catechetical Congress  
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Tonight I want to thank you for making me part of your 25th Anniversary Celebration. I asked Bishop O'Brien, "What should I say, Bishop? What should I tell your people?" He said, "Tell them their bishop is doing a good job." After being present at the Mass at the America West Center, and it was a wonderful celebration, I know that the Diocese of Phoenix is one of the great local churches in the world--one of the vibrant centers of faith for so many people. And you who are ministers of the Word that saves, of the Word that gives direction, of the Word that is the lamp for the lives of so many people, I know that you are responsible for keeping that faith alive. Congratulations for the past 25 years.

We have seen and heard of different breads. Each bread has its own story. There are almost as many breads as there are cultures, aren't there? People's bread styles have evolved as their own stories have evolved, as their history has unravelled, as the books of their collective lives are written. I don't know the story of all of these breads. I know more about the tortilla than I do about the other breads. Actually, I know more about the white flour tortilla than the corn tortilla. The corn tortilla has a very, very long history. I would say at least 50,000 years. The wheat or flour tortilla is very young, it's only about 500 years old. When wheat came from Europe to the Americas, people adapted the way of making corn tortillas and they started making white wheat tortillas, and so I guess you could say that the white tortilla is a "mestizo" tortilla. A new composition that is probably only 500 years old, not old when you compare it to the age of European breads that are probably many centuries older than the white tortilla. And the Middle Eastern breads, the bread that Jesus used at the Last Supper, wasn't what we use. It was, we are told, kind of a rough, dark, heavy-grained bread, maybe made out of rye and other grains--the kind the poor would have eaten in Jesus' day.

The tortilla is a symbol for me, the white tortilla with its black spots, it's a symbol of family, of warmth, of love, of God's providence. When I get a nice, warm tortilla right off the griddle with butter melting on it, I remember grandma. And I remember coming back from either work or school or whatever it was, and there was "Mamá Grande". Mamá Grande would have the tortillas all ready. She seemed to time them just right. As we came in the door, we could hear her in the kitchen, and we'd go there and immediately we were handed a nice, warm tortilla off the griddle, and either with or without *frijoles*, it was still delicious. But what came with it was not just a taste or just something for our stomach, what came with it was love because that tortilla was made with love. We knew that with every tortilla, there was an embrace, there was a kiss, there was a gesture of what was in her heart.

But also a tortilla for many of our Hispanic peoples of Mexican-American background (at one time our culture was not readily accepted) was a symbol and a sign of embarrassment. Many of our people talk about when they started going to school in the southwest, their Anglo brothers and sisters would have these nice, neat cut slices of bread, nice white and clean, with baloney or ham or whatever, and here we brought our little burritos, and in those days burritos weren't in vogue, and so the people who brought burritos were embarrassed, so it was a sign of shame and embarrassment. The sandwiches that our Anglo brothers and sisters brought were wrapped in nice wax paper, and they had nice sandwich bags for them. We used the leftover, recycled sugar bags to put our burritos in. And some of our brothers and sisters who are Mexican-American were so embarrassed by what they had to eat, that they went behind the school or went into the bathroom to eat their lunch because of their embarrassment. But now things are different, thanks be to God. The tortilla is now even in McDonald's. The tortilla, as you can see, has quite a history. If I were a writer of children's books, I would write a story about the tortilla and where it's been.

No child should ever be in a position that his or her bread from his or her family is inferior to someone else's bread. It's healthy to think that different people pray for different bread at the Our

Father. What do you pray for when you say, "Our Father...give us this day our daily bread"? Bread comes to mind, the bread that is familiar to you and your culture and your family. The Jews, if they were to pray this prayer, would probably pray for the unleavened bread; the English would pray for rolls or English muffins; the Americans would pray for soft, white bread; others for brown, rough, heavy bread, maybe in the Middle East; some would not really pray for bread. In the Far East, they don't have bread very often but they always have rice, so maybe when they pray for bread they're really praying for rice. You notice what our poor devastated Japanese in Kobe are eating these days, bowls of rice. That is their bread. When they pray for their daily bread, they are praying for rice. Others pray for potato cakes, probably in Peru; others for corn bread, especially in rural and southern America; others for fried bread. I know my Apache brothers and sisters, when they think of bread they only think of one type of bread. When we had World Youth Day in Denver, they put up the Native Americans at a school near the site of the big Mass out in the field. They were there for a few days, and they had enough to eat: they had bread and they had hamburgers and they had all kinds of things; but then they got nostalgic. They said, "Can't we have some fried bread?" So they brought the ingredients and made their own fried bread, and then they were happy; man, were they happy once they had their fried bread.

Each group, each culture has a unique memory connected with bread. Each remembers when bread was in abundance. This was a time to thank God, when our table was filled with food. And we came and there was abundance, especially in the summer when we harvested from our victory garden. Remember World War II? And the table was full of food, my grandfather would look at the food and would utter a very simple prayer, "*Hijos estamos en gloria.*" My dear brothers and sisters, we are in glory.

And each group remembers when bread was nonexistent, and this was a time to pray desperately for bread.

Ways bread and food are eaten differ. Each group believes its bread and food and the way they eat it is the very best way. I remember when I left Texas to go to the seminary--I was born in Texas, but I had nothing to do with it, it wasn't my fault, that's not a statement of judgment but a statement of fact--but I had to go to Michigan, and there in the seminary they taught me how to eat. They took out this book by Emily Post. They said, "This is the way you hold your fork, and the way you hold your spoon, and the way you hold your knife, and you never put anything on your knife to eat and you never build a little bridge with your knife between the edge of the plate and the top of the table. You put it across the edge of the plate." And they said, "If you eat that way, Ricardo, you'll be eating the best way."

Then I went to Canada, and they taught me to eat there, and it was more or less the same way, and the Canadians said, "That's the way we eat and that's the best way to eat."

Then I went to Mexico to continue my studies, and out in the country in Mexico, they don't have any utensils, they have corn tortillas. Imagine eating soup with corn tortillas with no spoon. It's kind of awkward. They make their little tacos and so on, and they manage to eat their food with the tortilla. And they said, "This is the best way to eat." But in the seminary in Mexico where I continued my studies, they said, "You always form a bridge with your knife between the edge of the plate and the top of the table."

And while in Canada and Michigan they had told me that you eat everything on your plate because you don't want to waste anything, in Mexico, they said, "You always leave a little bit of food on your plate, five beans, because if you eat everything on your plate, then that means that you've made a pig of yourself." The food wasn't wasted because they had real pigs in the backyard and they ate all the leftovers. And they said, "This is the best way to eat."

I continued my studies in the Philippines, and out in the country in the Philippines, they take a clean banana leaf and they put the rice and the fish on the banana leaf and with very clean hands, they eat with their hands. "Bishop, this is the best way to eat."

And then I went to visit my missionary friends in Japan and in Hong Kong and they ate with sticks. They taught me how to eat with sticks. "Bishop, this is the best way to eat." And I learned the best way to eat in Japan and China.

When I came back, finally returned to my home area, to San Antonio, the capital of Mexican Americans, I ate the way I did as a child, the Mexican-American way: with a piece of tortilla in one hand, an American fork in the other, I made little taquitos, and that's the best way to eat!

But actually, here really is no best way to eat, there's no best food, even though always our own food is always the best food, whether its country fried steak, or Polish sausage, or Chinese noodles. It's best and everything is special where you are. From the point of view of God, there are no people who are inferior or superior. There's no way of eating that is inferior or superior. Everything is special from the point of view of God.

With God there is no best color either, whether the color of one's skin is purple, or black, or yellow or white, whatever, or my own. I call my color "Acapulco Brown," and it's the most beautiful color. And this is an expensive color. People spend a lot of money to get this color. They even fly from Chicago to Phoenix to get this color. They even fly to Acapulco to get this color and spend thousands of dollars getting there, and then when they get back, they lose it. I have it all the time. Primo Romero asked me, "Have you been out in the sun?" "No, I was born with this color." He should have known better.

My point is that there's no best color, no best language, no best anything. There's nothing special because everything is special in the eyes of God. There's no best way of singing, there's no best way of dancing, even though Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers thought they were the best. Then you go to the Ballet Folklórico or you go to the Philippines or to Africa and see the way they dance. Some people dance, some people stomp, some people move, some people jump, some people waltz,

some people polka, but all of it expresses the joy that's deep in our hearts. And what is the same is what is in our hearts and how it's expressed can be done in many, many different ways.

The Word of God can be heard in many different accents in many, many different languages, but it's always the same Word of God that brings us to the same faith rising from the same baptism, because there is one Spirit, and one Grace and one Word that unifies us, and that's what makes our church.

The great gift of the United States' Church is precisely in the unbelievably diverse composition of this church of ours. Everybody on the planet is represented in our church. Dr. Vasconcelos, an eminent educator from Mexico, used to get sentimental about the Mexican race, and said that theirs was a "cosmic" race because it brought together the Asian, the European, and the Native American to form the new *mestizo* people of Mexico. I would suggest that we, the Catholic Church in the United States, might be the "cosmic church", characterized not by one particular race or national genre, but by just about as many different people as make up this planet. That is the gift of the United States' Church.

What are we going to do with this technicolor dreamcoat, as I call it, of the church of the United States? Well, we should learn to appreciate this multicolored, multihued, rainbow-colored, technicolor dreamcoat. We need to rejoice in it instead of lamenting why other people can't be like us. We must rejoice in it, and we must celebrate it. The racial and national characteristics of its people form the giftedness of the U.S. Church. Moreover, it is first and foremost the spiritual heritage of faith that all these groups bring to the whole that is important. It's not just that we're different colors. It's the faith that all these different colors, races, and groups bring to the totality of what the church is. There is where the gift lies, in the hearts of the believing people who come to live with us. These people bring with them their precious jars and barrels, boxes and trunks, baskets and pots, sacks and bags, all full of God's bounty, of a victorious faith often won by heroic and courageous women and men who have sustained their belief in Jesus Christ and his church,

sometimes through horrible odds. And every national group has its story to tell, of persecution and martyrdom, of prejudice and oppression. This, too, we need to appreciate and learn from.

If each group represented here in this church in Phoenix were to place before us their faith storybooks, what an array of books we would have. We have, first of all, the dramatic contributions of the Native American peoples with their tremendous wealth of spiritual wisdom. I have great admiration for the faith of the Native American people, and I often think that maybe they have in their hands and in their hearts the salvation of the rest of us. Then there is the centuries-old presence of the Hispanic peoples; and the courageous stories of the African Americans, especially those who made the torturous journey to this country. It may be a story of oppression, but it is also a story of heroic faith because they captured the spirit of liberation found in the Psalms and Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the prophets; and they captured the spirit of Jesus who preached his inaugural address as in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 4, that this is a time of liberation. And it was Jesus that made them dream of freedom. Witness their beautiful, faith-filled hymns where they could find freedom in praising Jesus.

We have also the courageous stories of the Cajun Catholics. I hope that Phoenix has a good dose of Tabasco sauce in the Cajun Catholics from Louisiana. Imagine the stories of faith to be told by Catholics from England and Ireland and Scotland and Spain, Portugal, Germany, Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, the eastern European countries such as Poland, Croatia, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania. Those are all countries with all kinds of wonderful stories of faith. The Filipino, the Japanese, the Vietnamese, the Chinese, the Indian Catholics, and others of the Far East, have their faith stories to provide us with dramatic unfoldings of their own salvation history, if we but listen. And brothers and sisters, all of these people, all of these stories are here in the United States of America, and that's what makes our church in this country so beautiful.

Now, I hope everyone has a technicolor dreamcoat on. The way I see it, the fiber of faith is meshing together, made rich and strong by the numerous traditions of faith that form the ensemble of

our Church. Faith is dynamic, it doesn't just sit there waiting for things to happen to it--it either progresses or it diminishes--and its dynamic depends on how we handle the gifts we have received. How are we going to handle this diversity of colors? How do we withstand and fight off the poisons that attack and beset it? We have a wonderful opportunity to use the resources given to us by God in this Catholic Church of the United States, for we have an exciting and noble mission to achieve: we are called to be a great Church so that by what we say and what we do we shall become the *Gaudium et Spes*, "the hope and joy of the world."

When I think of the multi-racial cultural mix of the U.S. Church, I am immediately reminded of Pentecost where there were representatives from the entire known world at the time. Remember those who were there? People from Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, Libya, Rome, Crete, and Arabia. The Church wore a dreamcoat from the very beginning, for they were all filled with the same Spirit. And they all got the same message: the message of love.

Let's go a step further. Americans, and especially American Catholics need to see that our diversity is a gift. It's a gift that, in spite of differences, we can be one. Our country today desperately needs to see that unity and diversity can co-exist happily together. There is a snake in our midst, and its there with a poisonous and deadly venom in our society: the horrible anti-immigrant, anti-foreign mentality that seems to be growing in our society. Let's not forget, folks, our own immigrant roots. We were once immigrants, our people were once wanderers, and they ended up in this land called America, this land of the free, this land of the brave. And now, when others want to come--even need to come--we can't close and lock our doors. Yes, immigration may somehow need to be controlled, but we just can't shut our doors completely. On this issue the church of the United States needs to prove to the rest of society that one of the mottos of our country can be a reality. That motto is *E Pluribus Unum*. Look at your money, the motto is there: *E*

*Pluribus Unum*, "out of many, one." You remember the minister who wanted to raise money for the church and said, "We're very ecumenical in this church, we take all denominations."

There's also another challenge, a more concrete and specific challenge. What can individuals do to make this church come alive with all this diversity? This is how I would answer my own question: interaction, conversation, sharing, exchange. Folks, unless we learn to learn from one another's bread-making and bread-eating, and everything that our breads symbolize, we will fail in bringing about the dream of Pentecost.

We are all called to share our stories and to listen to other people sharing as well. I think it's a challenge for us to be asked, "When was the last time I spoke with a person of, let's say, Asian origin? When was the last time I spoke with a recent immigrant? When was the last time I spoke with an African American person when I had the chance?" People in this country, even though we're so diverse, can go through their entire lives without ever having had a conversation with someone of another color. It is possible that people in the same city would never have a decent conversation with someone of a different nationality. It is possible that even in a parish where there are people of different nationalities and different races, families and individuals go to the same Mass week after week, sit in the same pews and meet the same people every time, and never reaching out to anyone they don't know or who might be different. My challenge to you is: What are you going to do about it?

Some parishioners might be heard to say, "Our parish is all white." But maybe our parishes need to come together, one that is all one color coming together with one of another color and, who knows, having some wonderful experiences. You guys in Phoenix do wonderful liturgies. I'm not sure about what happens in all your parishes, but I know you have a reputation of doing wonderful diocesan celebrations. Since you're good at liturgies like that, maybe these should be done between parishes, between one side of town and another. Certainly a more affluent parish could help another financially, but--more importantly--each could help the other by sharing their faith stories, trying to

understand each other and celebrate the differences. Because none is so poor that they can't share. And none is so rich that they can't be enriched by someone else. This is how we, as a church, can learn and grow. We're so often afraid of one another, aren't we? We think that because the other is so different, they don't have anything to give us that would enrich us. Let me tell you a story, a true story. The other day in Las Cruces, after we had a catechetical meeting at the Newman Center at New Mexico State University, I was walking out and I heard this man calling me. He had been in the back of the church praying and crying. He said, "Father" (he didn't know I was a bishop), "I need you." And I went over to him and I nearly fell back because he smelled so bad. It seemed like he had been celebrating New Year's already, and it was 15 days before New Year's. But anyway, he smelled awful, he'd been partying, he'd been out on the streets. I found out he was homeless and a terrible alcoholic. He's been run out of the house by his parents. He'd already wrecked three cars, had been to 12 rehabilitation programs and was out on the street. To make a long story short, I put him up in a motel overnight. The next day, I picked him up and took him to Mass and he was very grateful.

I got a call from him two weeks later. And he said, "Bishop, we're making a lunch for you today at my mother's, can you come?" And I said, "No, I have other plans, but maybe dinner some time." And he said, "When can you come to dinner to my mom's house?" And I said, "Maybe tomorrow night." "O.K., we'll have a dinner for you at my mother's house." Well, I suspected that something wasn't right. I tried calling his mom, the line was busy. So I went to his mother's house, and sure enough, there was nothing prepared. They were eating while watching television. They said, "Oh, we weren't expecting you." They started talking to me about their son and how embarrassed they were and telling me the whole story and what a nuisance he is and what a cross he is for the whole family. When he comes home, he disrupts the whole family life, and he uses the telephone and runs up the bill. The man is a real problem.

While we were talking, the phone rang. It was my friend, the alcoholic. His name is Gary. He said, "Bishop, this is Gary. We're over at my aunt's house, and she made you a cake, and I made you a meal. Can you come over quick?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll be there, I could use some enchiladas right now." So I went over there, and sure enough, he had prepared a meal. This man, this broken man, had prepared enchiladas. And I found out that his aunt was also a broken person, arthritis all over her hands, and she suffers from schizophrenia. Her boyfriend was there, and he's schizophrenic. And this other neighbor was there and I said, "And what's wrong with you?" It seemed like something was wrong with everybody. And she said, "I suffer from anxiety attacks." And there was a man there in a wheelchair who was very skinny, with one arm all shriveled up and the other one all crooked, but he was trying to hold a Bible in his hand. And then another lady walked in, a senior citizen, and I don't know what was wrong with her, I think it was simple old age, and she was just sitting there, smiling in the corner. I walked in and I felt I was part of a Fellini movie or part of a Dostoyevsky novel, with all these broken people. But sure enough, she had baked a cake, this arthritic woman. She held on to me all evening while we sat on the couch eating.

It was like Emmaus. It was like the Last Supper. I don't know how to describe it. But I never felt like Jesus as much as I felt that night with all those broken people around me--with everybody listening to every word I said. I've had celebrations in cathedrals and in all parts of the country and the world, and I've presided at special ceremonies and administered the sacraments, but I've never felt so much an instrument of Jesus as I felt that night. In that atmosphere--marvelous and beautiful as it was at that moment--I decided to anoint them. We had the most beautiful anointing service. They were so quiet; it was so still; it was pure grace. I said, "Gary," as we walked back to my car, "you can't be bad, you may be a drunk, but you're a good drunk." That just happened a week ago, and I'll never forget the experience as long as I live.

Breaking open God's Word with broken people is what it's all about, folks. And we have to admit that we're broken. But what was beautiful about that evening was how that little community

of six broken people support each other and how they understand each other and how they'll be with each other as much as they can. And they're as giving as they can be with anyone, but especially with one another in their brokenness. It is in our brokenness that we find the Lord and we find the power of the Lord. And only in that brokenness when we receive hope and encouragement to go on no matter what. Jesus opened ears so the Word could be heard. He opened mouths so his Word could be proclaimed. He opens our ears so we can hear, and he often talks to us through others, whether they're derelicts, or homeless, or sick, or broken, for he uses all kinds of ways and all kinds of people to speak to us.

The other day I was over at the Holy Cross Retreat House near Las Cruces, when the wonderful Mercy Sisters were there for a meeting. These were all presidents, and they were smart, those Mercy nuns are smart! At dinnertime I knew conversation at their table would be wonderful and I planned to sit with them. As I carried my dinner tray, I noticed a little group of people at a table in the corner. It happens they're cancer victims that stay at the Retreat House at a reduced rate. Thank God for the Franciscans who haven't lost their charism. I was anxious to sit with these lovely nuns and learn a lot from them because they're so smart--and I am not making fun of them, they really are smart and I wanted to learn from them--and then one of the ladies sitting at the corner table said, "Bishop, sit with us." I didn't want to sit with those cancer victims, I wanted to sit with those nice looking nuns over there. I looked around and said, "O.K., I'll sit with you." and, reluctantly, I sat down. Now, I'm glad I sat down. One of the ladies said, "I'm so glad you came because now I can tell you what happened to me the other day. You know what's wrong with me?" I said, "Yeah, you have cancer." She said, "Yeah, I have the terrible `C', but the other day I was out in the desert sitting in front of my house," because she lives out in the country, "and I was all by myself and the sun was going down, and I was sitting on this big old rock crying and crying, just feeling sorry for myself, that I was going to die, and that I was so sick. And then I heard this voice, `Well, I'm just a rock.'" She looked all around, there was nobody around. She looked behind the rock, and there was

nobody behind the rock. She sat and she heard the voice again, "Well, I'm just a rock." The rock had spoken to her. Now, whether it happened or not I don't think makes any difference. The important thing is that she heard a voice and it penetrated into her heart and what she heard was, "Don't feel so bad, lady, I'm just a rock, you're a human being saved by the Savior, by the Precious Blood of Jesus and you're filled with the Holy Spirit and you were baptized and you're a child of God, and I'm just a rock." And all of a sudden she was uplifted, and she felt better.

Some might say, "Well, God wasn't talking to her because God doesn't talk to us directly". And we might answer, since he doesn't talk to us directly, he uses instruments to talk to us. We are the most likely instruments for him to use, and if we don't talk, God is mute. Like this lady in Mexico told me when I was a missionary down there, "Father, do you know that God is mute?" And I said, "I've never thought of it." And she said, "Have you ever heard him?" And I said, "No." "Has he ever called you on the telephone?" "No, and he better not call me collect because it's a long way." She said, "He is mute unless we speak for him. We must be his voice, we must be his mouth. And if we don't speak in his name, then he remains mute. So you go and loan him your mouth and speak in his name." Well, I've been speaking ever since, allowing the Lord to use my mouth and to use my tongue so that his voice can be heard, so that God will not be mute in the world.

Then I thought, "Well God doesn't have hands either, and he has a lot of things to do, and if we don't loan him our hands, his job won't get done." And he also has no feet, so he says "Loan me your feet, I want to go where you go," like a little boy or a little girl wants to go to the mall with you. God wants to go wherever you go, so he says, "Loan me your feet. And I don't have a face in the world, could you loan me your face because I have a beautiful smile for the world. Could you be my face?" And so we become the instruments of God. We are his voice, his hands, his feet, his face to others.

To break open God's Word is to break open its power. To break open God's Word is to speak and also to hear. To break open, there are two verbs in that expression, one explicit, one

implicit. To break means to break down the barriers that impede spiritual growth and understanding. To open means to be open at the heart because it is at the heart where God works and God operates, and where the most important things happen: faith, mercy, forgiveness, love.

Getting back to bread, we know the world is hungry for meaning. People are insecure in their own search for the meaning of life. "Am I searching for the right thing? I'm climbing this ladder to the top, but my God, is it the right ladder? Is it leaning against the right wall?" People are wondering, are they going after the right thing? So many are unconvinced about God as their origin. It seems that we're suffering from a major crisis of hope in our world.

Dear friends, we can do one of two things. We can continue to complain about church, about society, about immigrants, about crowdedness, about smog, about the environment, about the environmentalists. We can whine, and whine, and whine, "What are we teaching the next generation? What are we teaching the children?" We're teaching them very well how to whine. They're learning how to whine. They're learning how to focus on the negative. Do you know that you give power to what you focus on? You can focus too much and too often on the negative. You can focus too often and too much on the negative in our society and you can focus too much and too often on the negative in our church.

A famous writer just died recently who was a historian of the church. Once he had to give a talk on whether he loved the church. He tried to call his friend, Hans Kung, to ask whether he loved the Church. He wasn't there, but his secretary gave him the information telling of a talk that Hans Kung had given. Hans Kung got in trouble with Rome, I think you know that, but he can still say Mass and still preach, because he wasn't excommunicated, he was just not allowed to teach in Catholic universities or as a Catholic theologian, but he's still a priest. When he was asked, did he love the church? He replied, "Yes, I do love my mother the Church. A mother doesn't have to be perfect for us to love her." I thought that was a profound statement--a positive rather than a negative response.

Can we somehow build up a passion for the next generation because they really need us? If we want to be God's instrument for them, how can we do it? Well, partly by feeding them the positive, positive, positive; by telling them not only what's bad but what's good about the Church, what's good about Jesus, what's good about faith, what's good about believing, what's good about sacraments, what's good about belonging to the community called church, the community called parish. That's what we can teach them. We can teach them about how to hope, as we learned.

I don't know about you, but I learned about faith and about God from my family. My family were farmworkers, they were very poor. We didn't pray a lot. We prayed once a year in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We gathered for a novena at my Tía Petra's house. Tía Petra was a real go-getter. She was a tiny woman, she could have fit standing up in a Volkswagen. She had beautiful *trenzas*, and all week long, she was washing clothes outside, and she was making food for her large family, making tortillas with her hands, and busy, busy, busy. Then, all of a sudden, once a year she would become the prayer leader, the deaconess of the family. She would take off her apron and bring out this yellow-paged book which was falling apart, and this old rosary put together with thread, and she would lead us in the rosary, and nobody prayed like Tía Petra. She paid no attention to the speed limit. She prayed 70 miles an hour. I don't know why she prayed so fast, we weren't going anywhere, we didn't have a car. There was no television, so nothing was coming on. But there we were, and I was only four years old when I had my first God experience, and I was sitting there amazed, looking at my family kneeling before this image of Our Lady of Guadalupe. I had never really noticed her before that night, and then here was my family, praying very devoutly, and I was amazed and in awe--for a good three minutes, and then I started playing marbles under the sofa.

But something happened on the way back to my grandmother's house where we lived. We were walking back, and it was one of these beautiful December nights in Texas, a norther had just come through and cleaned the clouds and there was no moon, so you could see all the stars in

heaven. My grandfather was holding my hand as we walked back home, and all of a sudden, for some unknown reason, he picked me up in his arms and sat me on his shoulders. And I felt good. I felt support, I felt something solid. I felt something beautiful. I felt family, I felt love, and it had something to do with that woman, around whom we had been praying at my aunt's house. And I looked at the stars, and said, "I don't know who you are, but thank you for making those stars." Because I really felt at that moment in my little tiny heart that those stars were mine. "Thank you God." You know, as I reflect, I say that was the beginning of my faith. That was my Abraham experience, that was my burning bush, that was my Isle of Patmos, that was my Emmaus." My little heart was open, and it has remained open ever since. And because of family devotion, family prayer, family love, family solidarity, it was just the right moment.

Let us be, my dear friends, impassioned and somehow create experiences for children of the next generation so that they will be fed, and desire to be fed, for the rest of their lives with the bread of life. God bless you.