The Challenge of Transitions

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It is customary, on an occasion such as this, to begin by saying that one is pleased to be here. And it is true that I am pleased. But in this particular case, I am especially pleased for a reason. It is now twenty years ago that I first visited this school. At that time, all that was here was the seminary. So, as I look around today, I see how much has been accomplished, and I catch a glimpse of the many transitions you must have experienced. I believe this gives me a slightly better understanding of this school than I would have had I not been here twenty years ago, before many of those transitions.

So, it is with any human being and any human enterprise. Over half a century ago, Spanish Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset declared that it is impossible to understand anything human without its history. Think about it for a moment. When I was introduced, much was said about my history. It is so whenever we introduce one person to another. When I say, "Meet my friend Dr. Nora Lozano, a Baptist from Mexico," I am saying something about her ancestry, about her being born in Mexico, about her being baptized, and about her studies, and about our having met before and developed a friendship. I am also at least hinting at some of the transitions in her life—transitions of residence, transitions of learning, and so on.

It is important for us to realize this, because if we forget that people have a history, that they have undergone many transitions, we are quite likely to misunderstand and stereotype them.

Suppose that I am driving, and in front of me a car is moving so slowly as to be exasperating. Finally, as I manage to pass it, I see that it is being driven by a wizened old man who can hardly peer over the steering wheel. My immediate reaction is to discount and belittle him. He shouldn't be on the road! He is holding things up!

But imagine that at that point I stop to think, and I try to see that man's joy when, as a teenager, he first learned to drive. I see him driving his first car. I see him going on a date with a young woman who would eventually be his wife. I see him having his first traffic accident, or his many traffic scares. I see his more recent efforts to continue taking care of himself and his errands, even though at his age he could easily lay back and rely on others. I see his pain as things that used to be simple routines have become increasingly difficult. I see him on his way to buy a gallon of milk or to visit a daughter. In other words, I see him as a long series of transitions. At that point I have to think of him differently than when I was simply passing him on the road, exasperated by his slowness and extreme caution.

It is for that reason that, as we today consider the Latino church, I suggest that we begin by considering some of the transitions that the Latino church and its members have experienced and are experiencing.

Along those lines, let us begin by considering the transitions of those who are recently-arrived immigrants—some of them without legal documents. You drive along the street; you see one

of them mowing a lawn, and all you see is either an "illegal alien" who should be sent back home or, at best, a hard-working Mexican who is trying to make a living. But stop to think for a moment, and you will realize that there are probably in that person strengths and qualities that one could easily discount, but that are real and that coincide with many of the qualities and strengths that our society values.

Our society values entrepreneurship, daring, and going after one's dream. We tell the story of this nation by recounting the saga of a group of pilgrims who set out for Virginia and ended up in Massachusetts. In more recent times, we tell stories about young men who began tinkering in a garage and built an empire in computers and computer programming. Movies tell us about a young woman, born to poor miners in West Virginia, working at her singing and insisting on her goal, until she became a star. Our children hear about Abraham Lincoln and his long trek from a log cabin to the White House.

Now think again about that young man mowing the lawn. Imagine him being born and raised in a small village in northern Mexico. Imagine, as is quite likely, that before setting his sights on coming to this country, he had hardly been out of his village. And then imagine that one day, for whatever reason, he decided to come to this country. It was not easy. He had little or no money. First of all, if he has come legally, he had to request papers, to stand in line for hours and days, to be rejected again and again, until finally he was given the necessary documents. If he did not come legally, he had to begin by making his way to the border—quite likely, a trip of several

hundred miles. Then he tried to come across. Most likely he failed more than once. Perhaps he finally came across by risking his life in the desert. One may not like the fact that he is here illegally. But one cannot but admire his courage and entrepreneurship—a courage and entrepreneurship that are equal to those of our most successful CEOs or our most admired sports figures and movie stars. Thus, when you see him going through those transitions, he is much more than a foreigner mowing the lawn; just as when I see that old man behind the wheel through his transitions, he is much more than a slow driver.

Lest we think this is purely hypothetical, allow me to tell you of an experience we had a few years ago. We were sitting at a table on New Year's Eve. Among our guests was a couple from San Salvador. They spoke no English. She was illiterate. He had the equivalent of a third-grade education. They had left their village when several of their relatives were killed by death squads. The United States had not granted them asylum, and therefore they were on their way to Canada, which had done so. Just to make conversation, I asked them, "Where were you a year ago today? Do you remember?" He smiled and said, "We certainly do. We were wading through mud and water up to our waists, crossing the border between Guatemala and Mexico." After that, they had traveled the entire length of Mexico, much of it on foot, hiding from both the authorities and people who would try to take advantage of them. They arrived at our border, crossed the river on inner tubes, and made their way during the night to a church where they had been told there might be help. Somehow, they got there in the dark of night, without knowing a word of English and without daring to ask anybody. Then followed a drawn-out

process of requesting asylum, being denied, the fear of being deported back to El Salvador, and finally the welcome news that Canada would take them in. They were getting ready to leave by bus, traveling to Canada, there to face the hardships of winter, joblessness, and loneliness.

One might debate whether their call for asylum was justified, and whether what they were doing was legal or not, but one could not look on them condescendingly, as if they were just poor, helpless people unable to function in our environment and lacking in initiative. This is probably the first great transition that Latino immigrants face as they arrive in this country. Back in their hometowns, while certainly not wealthy, they probably stood out for their courage and initiative. Here, they find themselves the object of prejudice or, at best, of pity and condescension.

Then, there is another major transition—one that deeply affects the life of Latino churches. Most Latino immigrants come from areas where they had the support of an extended family. In Latino culture—particularly Latino rural culture—the "family" is not just the parents and their children. The "familia" certainly includes those people, but it includes also aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces, cousins in various degrees, in-laws, and even in many cases relatives by baptism—for Godparents are also considered part of the family. This extended family provided much support, and one's sense of identity is closely tied to it. A child growing up in such a family has more than one adult to look to as a male or as a female role model. A man who is

part of such a family does not feel that he and his wife are alone in the process of bringing up their family. They can count on uncles, aunts, and others to share the responsibility.

Now they find themselves in an entirely different situation. Many are parents who have left their children behind. Some have come alone. A few have managed to come as a nuclear family—the parents and their children. But in all such cases, they no longer have their extended family around them, providing support, making them feel that they have a place in the universe.

If we then look at that transition, and how it affects the life of the Latino church, it is clear that most Latino churches are filling the gap left by the absence of the extended family. Quite often, Hispanics find in the church community a substitute for the extended family they left behind. This is one reason why many Latino churches meet almost every night of the week. In those meetings there is a bit of the flavor of those evenings back home, when a dozen or more relatives would gather to tell stories, to share their joys and problems, and to support each other. Granted, given the working conditions in their new land, many Latinos barely have time to attend church. But just knowing that the church is there, that I have family there, is a source of strength and confidence.

This is also why one seldom hears people in a Latino church say things such as "we have twenty families in our church." There is a very clear sense that the church is the family of God and that therefore we are not many families, but one.

This transition also helps explain the very rapid growth of Protestantism both among the immigrant communities in the United States and in the large urban centers that have resulted from mass migrations within a number of cities in Latin America. In Chile, out of a total population of 15.2 million, 9.5 million are Protestant. In Brazil, out of a total of 170 million, 105 million are Protestant. In México, where growth has been much slower, there are over four million, out of a total population of 40 million—thus accounting for roughly 8% of the total population. However, what is important in these figures is not just the sheer growth but also the fact that for a long time this growth has been mostly urban, and only recently has begun to move into the more remote rural areas. The original growth in Chile was in Santiago and Valparaiso, and in Brazil in São Paulo, at one time the fastest growing city in the world. More recently, as the population has exploded in Mexico City, so has Protestantism, and some claim that more than half of all Protestants in Mexico are in the capital. During the second half of the twentieth century, for a number of reasons, mass migrations began in Latin America from the rural areas to the cities. In those cities, people often felt lost without the support of their extended families. This, to such a point that a study in the mid-seventies found that more than half of all Brazilians moving to São Paulo returned home within two weeks of their arrival.

In that situation, Protestant churches—particularly Pentecostal churches—found a significant opportunity and challenge. People, who felt uprooted from their extended families and who were determined to remain in the city, found a substitute extended family in their church community and thus became Protestants. (And, in passing, allow me to note that this was precisely the sort of context in which the early church grew. The early church was mostly urban, at a time when throughout the Roman Empire people were migrating from the countryside into urban settings.)

Back to the twentieth century. The transition itself from a nominal Catholicism—but one that was firmly entrenched in family and cultural tradition—to a more active and committed Protestantism was facilitated by the very process of migration away from the extended family. Back at the place of origin, the extended family not only provided support and identity but also served as a framework to undergird the tradition of being Roman Catholic. Back there, many people were not actively Catholic, but they felt they were Catholic because their family was Catholic, and their identity was very closely connected with being part of that family. Now in the city, things were different. That undergirding was no longer there—or at least, was not constantly present. People had to make a new life for themselves. It was not just a matter of finding work and surviving economically. It was also a matter of finding one's bearings while feeling adrift in a sea of strangers.

In such a situation, it was relatively easy for people who had been raised as nominal Catholics, and whose extended families considered themselves Catholic, to consider other options.

Quite often, Protestantism made its way into this opening. People began attending a church because they were lonely, because they had no community. Quite soon, they found that the church had become their new community and, in many ways, their functioning extended family.

Thus, the church as the family of God becomes much more than a pretty phrase in Scripture and becomes the very reality of the church as people experience it. This is, in brief, one of the main reasons for the growth of Protestantism in Latin America during the last half century. This is also one of the reasons why many Latino churches experience a limit in growth. At first, when the numbers are sufficiently small that there can be frequent and close contact among members, these churches grow at a surprising rate. But then they reach two or three hundred members, and their growth slows down, or there is even a slight decline in membership. In other words, once the church grows to the point that it is difficult to have the close contacts of an extended family, people prefer to go to another church family. Those congregations that have managed to become megachurches have done so by organizing themselves into smaller groups that function as extended families for their members, meeting regularly, sharing joys, concerns and perplexities, etc.

Something similar is happening now in the United States with Latino immigration. Until the late nineteenth century, there was significant emigration from the United States to Latin America. Thousands from the United States came to settle in the lands that we now call the Southwest and at that time were northern Mexico. Soon after the Civil War, large contingents of

African Americans moved to Haiti, drawn by the notion of a black republic—and their descendants still live in Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Even into the twentieth century, some groups continued migrating from the United States and Canada to Latin America. This was the case, for instance, of the Mennonite settlers in Paraguay, who went to that country seeking the freedom to live their own religion in ways that were not possible nor allowed in the United States—particularly to affirm their traditional pacifist stance.

Then, after the Mexican-American War, came a period in which most people did not pay much attention to the border. They traveled back and forth across that line to visit family, to graze cattle, and for several other reasons.

It was early in the twentieth century, particularly as a result of the Mexican Revolution, that this situation changed. Fleeing the uncertainties and the devastation of the revolutionary process, many Mexicans crossed the border in order to settle permanently in the United States. On its part, the United States was increasingly concerned, not so much over peaceful migration into its territories—which were still underpopulated—as over the danger that the chaos of the Mexican

Revolution might spill into the American Southwest. This was particularly true after Francisco (Pancho) Villa crossed the border into New Mexico in 1916. At that point American President Woodrow Wilson sent a military expedition to capture Villa, which it was not able to accomplish. This marked the beginning of the militarization of the border. Since that time, emigration from Mexico into the United States continued at a variable pace. When the economic disparity between the two nations decreased, so did migration. When Mexico fell into times of great economic distress, immigration into the United States increased.

Those events point to the two main reasons for emigration from Latin America to the United States—and later to Canada and elsewhere. One reason was the economic disparity between Latin America and its neighboring lands. The other was the desire to flee political chaos, violence, and insecurity. It was not always easy to distinguish between the two, for quite often economic distress and inequities led to political instability, and the latter also led to economic downturns.

In the United States, politicians and others emphasized one or the other of the two explanations according to their own agendas. For instance, during the 1980s, when proxy wars were fought in Central America between the United States and the Communist bloc, the North American government admitted those fleeing from the leftist regime of Nicaragua as people seeking political asylum, while it dubbed those from right-leaning Guatemala and El Salvador "economic refugees"—and therefore not meriting asylum.

At any rate, during the second half of the twentieth century, there was a constant flow of immigrants into the United States from Latin America. At first, they came from Mexico, then also from Cuba, particularly after the revolution of 1959; and then from Central America. By 2005, the Bureau of the Census of the United States counted those of Latin American descent in the United States as 37.5 million—one out of eight inhabitants. This did not include approximately four million in Puerto Rico, and an unknown number of undocumented immigrants who would normally avoid being counted by the census. Thus, there were estimates that the total Latino or Hispanic population under the jurisdiction of the United States was close to fifty million. Even on the basis of the official figures of the Bureau of the Census, this would make the United States the fourth largest Spanish-speaking nation in the Western Hemisphere—after Mexico, Argentina, and perhaps Colombia.

For our purposes here, it is important that we see the parallelism between this international migration and the internal migrations of which I was speaking earlier. Those whom we see from this side of the border as immigrants, from the other side are emigrants. They are leaving behind their land, much of their traditions, and certainly their extended families, to come to the United States. For this reason, many immigrants insist that their plan is to remain here only temporarily, and that as soon as they have reached certain goals they will return home. They firmly believe this, for to admit that they have been permanently severed from their roots would be too painful; but we know—and deep inside they know also—that their cherished

return is quite unlikely. Some have suggested that the stress is such that many who enter the country without documents do not take the necessary precautions and subconsciously allow themselves to be caught by the Immigration Service and deported. But, like many of the early Brazilians moving to São Paulo, many of them return, now better prepared for the shock.

This places them in a situation similar to the conditions of internal migrants in Latin America moving to the cities. Their system of support—particularly their extended family—is no longer present. They find themselves in a new environment, where they have to learn much about how to live and even how to survive. When looking for jobs, for transportation, for translations, and a host of other necessities, they find themselves much more alone than they have ever been in their lives.

Among those who find ways to survive not only economically but emotionally, many do so because they have found communities that come to take the place of the extended families they have left behind. In most cases, these communities are churches.

As is the case with people in Latin America migrating to the cities, many of these recent immigrants into the United States, finding themselves suddenly lacking the extended family that had previously determined their identity and even their religious allegiance, are open to listening to the message of churches that are ready to receive them with open arms. Through their process of conversion, they not only gain a new faith but also a new extended family. As in

Latin America, this offers a partial explanation for the rapid growth of Protestantism among Latin American immigrants to the United States. And also as in Latin America, the result is a large number of relatively small churches and very few megachurches. Although there have been no comprehensive nation-wide studies, estimates are that, a few years after immigration, at least one of every four Latin American immigrants has joined a Protestant church. The phenomenon is nothing short of a mass conversion. In the mid-eighties, a study in Los Angeles County determined that there were in the county alone well over a thousand Protestant Hispanic churches. Today people who live in Los Angeles, and who work with those churches, tell me that their number has more than doubled and perhaps even tripled.

Thus, the transitions integral to the very process of immigration results both in crisis and in new faith for many immigrants.

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Then there are other transitions. I am referring to those that take place as immigrants settle in the community, have children, and begin raising them. The transition in the home is quite apparent in the matter of language. While the couple most likely spoke Spanish among themselves, and their children did learn Spanish when they were young, once they began attending school and mingling with the rest of society, their primary language tends to be English. They do not forget all their Spanish, and there is evidence that many fourth, fifth, and

even sixth generation Latinos in the US still speak Spanish with relative fluency. But English does become their dominant language. Siblings speak English among themselves. They watch television in English, and they do their homework in English. This would be a normal development under any circumstances, but it is often reinforced by the general attitude among many in the surrounding society that Spanish is a second-class language.

Needless to say, this often creates conflicts within the home. The older generation feels that its offspring is, to use a phrase commonly heard in Latino communities, "losing its culture."

While language becomes a symbol of this transition, the transition itself goes far beyond the matter of language and includes other aspects of the culture—courting and dating practices, attitudes towards parents and the rest of the older generation, tastes in music, art, and fashion, and so on. Given that situation, the generational conflicts that exist in any society as a new generation begins to mature become entangled with cultural issues, and it is difficult to determine whether the young are rebelling only against the authority of parents and other adults or also against attempts to have a culture imposed on them which is no longer functional in their new environment.

These conflicts are particularly noticeable in churches. Hispanics, particularly immigrant Hispanics, have little or no say in many aspects of their life. At work, most of them are in low-paying jobs where their opinions do not count for much. In politics, they are generally

ignored or even demonized. It is only at church that their opinions are heard; it is only at church that they have a measure of power. Thus, when those in the older generation seek ways to express their concern that their culture is being lost by the younger generation, it is at church that they are most likely to voice such views. And it is at church—sometimes even more than at home—that they can turn those views and concerns into policy. As a result, for many immigrants the church becomes a place where the old culture is preserved. This is true, not only in the matter of language but also of food, music, ways of relating, holidays and celebrations, rites of passage, and many others. Quite often such churches become guardians of cultural traditions that are being lost, not only among the immigrant community, but also in their lands of origin. Thus, I have visited Cuban churches in South Florida that seem intent on preserving patterns and traditions that no longer exist in Cuba. And the same is true of many immigrant churches representing various countries of origin.

Significantly, in these churches one often hears the complaint that they are losing their youth, that as soon as children are able to make their own decisions, they leave the church—they either leave church altogether or they move to a different church. Such comments ignore the fact that they were being lost long before that time, by a church that insisted on their acting, thinking, and speaking as if they were still in the old country.

On the other hand, churches that follow the opposite policy also falter. In such churches, one often hears the comment that "since our children now speak English," our Sunday School is in

English. There is much to be said for that. After all, we want children to be able to understand what they are being taught and to relate it to their daily lives. This they can do much more easily in English, which is the language of most of that daily life. But then, Sunday School is not only for "our children." Most of the communities where these churches stand are still largely immigrant communities. New children—and particularly youth and young adults—are constantly coming into the neighborhood, and they do not speak English. Do we mean to say that our church is not for them? Do we mean to say that those of us who immigrated earlier have now created this church that has no room for those who are more recent immigrants?

Thus, the challenge of transition from the first immigrant generation to succeeding generations is not only one of the most urgent for the Latino church; it is also one of the most difficult.

This becomes particularly apparent in the context of worship. As we all know, the matter of worship and its forms is one of the most divisive in North American Protestantism at large. Some argue for traditional forms of worship, singing the old, cherished hymns with the old familiar tunes. Others argue for what they call "contemporary worship," meaning music that is more similar to present-day popular music, often called "praise music," as well as other elements of present-day culture.

The same tensions exist in the Latino church but compounded and complicated by cultural and inter-generational conflicts. On the one hand, those who favor so-called traditional worship

argue that this is the way they were taught and that the old hymns are the only ones to be used in worship. These are usually the same people who wish to preserve their culture and who believe that the church should pursue the same aim. Yet, ironically enough, and as further proof that culture and its transformation is a very complex matter, most of the very hymns these preservers of Hispanic culture wish to sing are mostly translations from English, and occasionally from French or German, set to tunes of European or North American origin! On the other hand, in Latino churches the so-called contemporary worship takes two different directions. Some simply wish to bring into their churches the modern "praise songs" that have become so prevalent in much Anglo-America Protestant worship, arguing that this is the music of today and is therefore the music we should employ in worship. Others wish to include music following some of the traditional Latin-American patterns, arguing that this is who they are and that the church ought to express its worship in the patterns of their own culture. Once again, ironically, many of these are young people who resist their elders' efforts to push the traditional culture down their throats and who are however bringing that traditional culture into worship in ways some of their elders disapprove.

In brief, the cultural transitions that the Latino church faces lead to three different positions in terms of worship and culture: First, there are the traditionalists, then the promoters of contemporary North-American culture, and thirdly there are those who promote a form of contemporary worship, although following Latino cultural patterns.

Again, at the very core of all these debates there is the issue of the role of culture in the church and of the church in culture. It is probably at this point that Latino churches face their greatest challenge and opportunity. We have to begin conceiving culture in much more dynamic terms than is usually the case. Culture is not a fixed reality; it is not something one can simply pass unchanged from generation to generation. Cultures are living realities. And, as all living realities, they evolve; they emerge; they develop; they die. To put it very succinctly, a culture is the way and the instruments by which a human group relates within itself and with its surroundings. Thus, culture includes language, gestures, conventions, rites, symbols, shared worldviews, by which members of the group communicate among themselves, share values, discuss how to respond to varying circumstances, etc. And it also includes the tools and social structures the groups develop in response to the challenges and opportunities of their environment.

When we study the culture of the Incas, for instance, we look at their language, their social organization, their agricultural practices, their religion, and so on. But then came the Spanish invasion, and many elements in that culture were shattered, others were modified, and some continued almost unchanged. A new culture emerged that included many elements of the old—people in the Andes still speak Quechua—but that also responded to the new in a variety of ways—conversion to Catholicism, for instance. In a sense, one could say that Incan culture was lost, that it died; but one can also say that a new culture emerged out of the

changed circumstances, and that this culture, while new, is the heir to both the Incan and the Spanish culture.

All this is to say that cultures are dynamic realities. They change. A culture that does not change is a dead culture, for the surroundings are constantly changing. For the same reason, a culture that has to be preserved is no longer worth preserving—furthermore, it cannot be preserved. When people begin to feel that their culture has to be preserved, it probably means that circumstances have changed to such a point that the traditional culture no longer serves as a response to those circumstances. And in that case, all efforts to preserve the culture, no matter how vigorous they may be, are doomed to failure.

What this means is that when people in Latino churches bemoan the fact that the younger generations are "losing their culture," we need to help them think in different terms. The younger generations are not losing their culture; they are creating a new one. The transitions connected with immigration have placed them in an environment different from that of their ancestors, and if their culture is to survive in this new environment, it must be a dynamic quality, subject to constant change—and to change so radically that many will simply think that the culture is lost.

To those who complain that Latino youth is losing its culture, the Latino church should respond that they are actually creating a culture. A new Latino culture is being born in the United States, right under our eyes, and we seldom even notice it. The environment has changed, and the

younger generations are seeking to respond to that environment using both the tools they have inherited from their ancestors.

And the changes in the environment do not have to do only with the encounter between Latino culture and the dominant culture of the United States. Certainly, that is important. But the changing environment also has to do with encountering other ways of being Latino or Latina. A Mexican in Chicago is more likely to have repeated contact with a Puerto Rican than he is to have such contact in Mexico itself. A Dominican in New York is more likely to have repeated contact with Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and Mexicans than she is to have such contact in the Dominican Republic. In Southern California people of various Central American backgrounds constantly mingle with Mexicans and with people from the Caribbean. In all of these mixes, the descendants of those who were in these lands before they were annexed by the United States are also an important ingredient. Out of such encounters, a new way of being Latino is being born in the United States. In this, the fourth largest Spanish-speaking country in the Americas, a new Latino culture is being formed. It is not Mexican; it is not Tex-Mex; it is not Puerto Rican; it is not Cuban; it is not Anglo-American; and yet it is all of those, and much more.

Perhaps the greatest challenge before Latino churches as they deal with the transitions in which they find themselves is to reassess and reinterpret what cultures are, how they work, and how they relate to the Gospel. It is not an easy challenge. It is one that the church has had to face throughout its history, as it has crossed one cultural boundary after another. As one reviews

that history, it is clear that the success of the Christian missionary enterprise has been closely tied to this challenge.

So, the challenge before the Latino church in these times of transition, and particularly in these times of cultural transition, is once again to move into the new reality that is being born right here in our midst, to move into it in order to make the Gospel be heard in that new reality.

The challenge is great. But it is not impossible. It is not impossible because the church believes in a God who not only sends us into the unknown, but is already there, beckoning us to go meet God there. As in the Exodus of old, we are all a pilgrim people. That is what being Christians is all about. Again, as in the Exodus of old, our Lord goes ahead of us marking the way day and night—if by day, in the cloud, and if by night, in the pillar of fire.