

Hispanic Summer Program 20th Anniversary Celebration

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I have been asked to speak on the *future and the impact* of the HSP on theological education. Whoever decided on that subject was wise beyond measure. If I had been asked to speak about the *history* of the HSP, I would treat you with tales about the time when our budget was \$45,000 for 76 students, and when the office of HSP was a table at the end of the hallway in our house. And you will be reminded of your grandparents, how they had to walk five miles to school, through snow and sleet! Asking me to talk about the HSP in general would be a dangerous invitation to open the floodgates of enthusiasm. It would be like asking me to speak about Catherine . . . or about the theology of St. Irenaeus!

But no. I am invited to speak about the eventual impact of the HSP. How will the HSP impact the wider field of theological and ministerial education in years to come? I shall try to limit my remarks to this point, with the hope that you will understand that behind each remark stand experiences and hopes that could fill pages.

Along those lines, the first point I would like to make is that the HSP is *already* impacting theological education throughout the land. HSP has contributed significantly to the increase in the number of Latinas and Latinos teaching in the field of religion in seminaries and universities. I have not kept up with the statistics, but three years after the beginning of the Hispanic Theological Initiative (HTI) fully one half of all Latinos and Latinas pursuing academic doctorates

in the field of religion were alumni and alumnae of the HSP. This is understandable, for at that point the HSP was the first, and often the only, opportunity that Hispanics had to study under, or even to see, a Latino or Latina professor of theology or religion. The HSP was also one of the first and most fruitful venues where the HTI came in contact with prospective doctoral students, and began recruiting and coaching them for their future academic careers. These professors in the early years of the HSP became role models for the new generation that is now coming to occupy teaching and leadership positions in theological education. They in turn are becoming role models for an ever increasing number of Latino and Latina doctoral students. Some of them are now members of the Board of the HSP!

Although this is a significant process of multiplication, one must point out that there is still much to be done. Even after these years of joint work by the HSP, the HTI, and other agencies, the number of Hispanics in theological faculties is less than one sixth of what would be a fair representation of the Latino population in the country. Thus, one of the most important functions of the HSP both at present and in years to go will be to continue insisting on the need for more Hispanic faculty presence in seminaries, schools of theology, and departments of religion. This will obviously have to be coupled with greater cognizance on the part of such institutions

Meanwhile, the HSP has been impacting theological faculties in another way. The Board of the HSP has wisely decided to continue the program “Through Hispanic Eyes” even after the original

funding from the Wabash Institute expired. This program is helping non-Latino faculty gain a deeper understanding of Latino issues, Latino contributions to the field of religious studies, and the experience of the Latino church. In this too, the HSP has been at the forefront, for as years go by it becomes increasingly clear that all fields of theological and religious studies are being impacted by the work of Latina and Latino scholars, and even more so by the living realities of the Hispanic church. In future years, it will be practically impossible in this country to be a respected scholar in any field of religion without being cognizant of Latino contributions, issues, bibliography, and experience. When the history of religious and theological education in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century is written, the contribution of the HSP in this regard will not be ignored.

Then there is the contribution of the HSP to students themselves. Obviously, the most important work of the HSP is in its impact on those who participate in it. But since that is not the subject on which I have been asked to speak I shall not dwell on it, except to indicate that the impact of the HSP on its own students also carries into the institutions they represent. This is true at least in two ways: First, in that these students often return to their institutions with a heightened sense of their own identity, and thus begin demanding that their theological education be more relevant to the issues of the Latino church, and that curricula, bibliographies, methodologies, field education, etc. take this into account. Second, the HSP has been having an impact, and will continue having an impact, on theological education simply on the basis of the retention rate of students. Seminaries and departments of religion in universities have a hard

time recruiting Latino and Latina students. This is due to a number of reasons that cannot be discussed at this time. But an important factor is the low retention rate of Hispanic students. Quite likely, for every student who completes an academic program and is engaged in some form of ministry, several others decide to enter the same program; and for every student who fails to complete a program several others decide not to enter. During the years when I was directly involved in the HSP I repeatedly heard what I am certain many of you still hear: A student would come at the end of the program and say, "I was ready to quit my studies. Now I am ready to go on for another year." No one will ever be able to quantify what this has meant and will mean for theological education and for religious leadership in years to come. But it will certainly make a difference!

Then one should consider the impact of the HSP in matters that go far beyond Latino issues. Half a century ago, when I began my wanderings in theological education, the word throughout the world was that seminaries and schools of theology standing alone in a city or area would not long survive; that the late twentieth century would result in conditions such that only large schools of theology connected with universities, or those joined in clusters in which they would share resources, would be able to survive. That prediction proved not to be true. Indeed, today we find that geographic proximity to a point of residence is an important factor in the selection of a school, and that institutions standing alone within a fifty or a hundred mile radius have little difficulty recruiting students. But we have learned that there is another sense in which consortia are becoming increasingly necessary. The growing diversity in the population of the United

States, as well as the variety of forms of ministry that are required, makes it practically impossible for the existing institutions to respond to the diverse needs of theological education. While there are a few institutions that have a significant Korean-American program, there is also an increasing number of Korean students in all parts of the nation, and educational institutions find it difficult to provide a theological education that fully takes into account the Korean-American reality. The same is true, in various degrees, of Japanese-Americans, Filipinos, native Americans, and now an ever increasing variety of East Europeans and people from Southeast Asia. In all these cases, and in many others, two options are open: one can have a single institution specializing in a particular population, or one can develop consortia such as the HSP. For a number of reasons, Latino and Latina leaders in theological education some time ago decided that for us the second was a better and more viable option. Now others are coming to similar conclusions, and it is quite likely that in years to come we will see a number of programs developing that will be very similar to the HSP in vision and in structural organization.

Since I have just mentioned structural organization, allow me a word in this regard. The evolution of the HSP itself could serve as a paradigm for other similar programs. It began with a relatively small grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts—actually, a small portion of a much larger grant to The Fund for Theological Education. Then, as that grant expired, the HSP had enough of a track record and sufficient prestige to call together a number of institutions into a consortium. At that time, it lacked the infrastructure or the resources to manage a large overhead, and thus contracted with AETH—the Association for Hispanic Theological Education—to serve as its

manager. Under that arrangement, it both increased the number of participating institutions and built up an endowment, so that it could reach its present structural organization, fully managing and supporting the various elements in its program. This history of twenty years could well serve as a model for others seeking to develop similar consortia.

The HSP is also a sign of the new directions that the movement toward Christian unity is taking. The modern ecumenical movement was born in what was called “the mission field.” Although several theologians made important contributions to it, and church leaders joined it, the modern ecumenical movement was not the result of theological research nor of the decision on the part of high-ranking church leaders. It was rather the result of the experience of countless Christians brought together by a common mission—of Christians seeking to build the church in India and in China, of Christians trying to witness in the labor movement, in civil rights struggles, in peacemaking and rebuilding after the ravages of war, in feeding the hungry and liberating the oppressed. But then, as was to be expected, this grassroots movement became a process of dialogue and negotiation among church leaders. In some cases, it even degenerated into pageantry-like shows of unity and concord. This was the ecumenical movement that caught the eye of the media to the point that the movement itself came to be identified with conversations and plans of collaboration from the top down.

Now that sort of ecumenical movement is in crisis, and some declare that its time is past. But the original movement, the one born out of the challenges and the hopes of mission, continues

strong. In countless places all over the world, Christians are coming together to feed the hungry, even though they may disagree as to how the Lord feeds us at the communion table. They do not begin their trek towards unity by discussing how Christ is present in communion. They begin by feeding Christ in the hungry, and out of this begin discovering dimensions of Holy Communion on which they can agree.

In a way, this is what has happened and continues happening in the HSP. We are all aware of the degree to which our Latino barrios and communities are divided by religious prejudice. In the first session of the HSP, a Protestant student declared that he was surprised, because he had thought this was a Christian program, but there were Catholics present! In the second session, a Roman Catholic student came to complain that we had given him a Protestant as a roommate, and his conscience would not allow him to accept that! At every session since then, we have had a variety of participants: Pentecostals, Roman Catholics, Independents, and mainline Protestants. Such people do not often come together. But here at the HSP they do come together around a sense of shared concerns and mission in a common setting. Thus, in the HSP, as in many other venues and programs throughout the world, a new form of ecumenism is being born—a form of ecumenism that, as in the beginning, is not primarily the result of ecclesiocentric concerns, but is rather the result of an urgent sense of mission.

It is also my hope that, as this urgent sense of mission pushes us, the HSP will not forget that right now, and probably for decades to come, the vast majority of Latina and Latino pastoral and

ministerial leaders do not have the opportunity or the privilege of formal theological educations in ATS-accredited seminaries or university departments of religion. The vast majority of Latinas and Latinos engaged in pastoral ministry do not have degrees from such institutions, and most have not ever had a connection with them. Not all—nor even most—theological education takes place in seminaries, schools of theology and university departments of religion. Throughout the nation there are hundreds of programs training leadership for our churches—Bible institutes, institutes for pastoral ministry, programs through the internet, and many more. It is these programs that are serving a growing number of those who feel called to serve within the various leadership ministries in the church. This has long been true of Protestant, Pentecostal, and Independent pastors. But it is also increasingly true within the Roman Catholic Church, which finds itself evermore relying on lay pastoral ministries. While many of us gathered here are seeking greater Latino and Latina presence in ATS-accredited institutions and in university departments of religion, we must not forget that we are also a privileged minority within the Hispanic community, and that we must find ways to make theological education at all levels more accessible to all of our present and prospective pastoral leaders, and ever more relevant to the issues of our day. What the role of the HSP will be in this endeavor, I do not know; but I trust that it will be a question constantly asked. How we respond to that question will be an important factor on the degree and the manner in which the HSP will have a truly revolutionary impact on theological education at large.

Where will the future lead the HSP? Where will the HSP lead theological education in the

future? The truth is, all of the points I have outlined are little more than informed guesses and hopeful dreams. The future is not ours to see. Yet of one thing we can be certain: just as in these past twenty years God has surprised all of us by doing much more than any of us could have hoped for, so will the same God continue surprising us by doing much more than our wildest dreams. I hope and pray that, even as the HSP becomes a more solid institution, it will still be open to the many unexpected calls and gifts from this surprising God of ours!

