The Life of Faith

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I have been asked to say something about my life history, and then to try to weave that history into the more general theme of the life and faith of Latinos and Latinas. I find this exceedingly difficult, for three reasons.

The first is that there is too much to say in so little time. I have struggled with what to include and what not to include, and I am not entirely satisfied with that. I would hope that during the final question and answer period you will feel free to bring up any subject I may have left out that might be of interest to you.

The second, and most important, is that I come from a culture in which speaking about yourself is considered to be in very bad taste. We even have a phrase with which to describe the self-promoting, of whom we say that *no tiene abuela*—he or she has no grandmother, for it is your grandmother who is supposed to brag about you and your achievements. Thus, to talk about my own life journey is not something I find easy to do.

The third is that in many ways my biography, both in terms of faith and of career, is not typical of the Latino experience. That experience is one of hardship and constant struggle. In contrast, my life has been one of opportunity and relatively easy success.

So, as I recount a bit of my journey of faith and of life, I do so with the initial and constant warning that much of it is not typical of most Latinos and Latinas in the United States, and that it should not be taken as such.

Having said that, allow me first of all to recount some of the exceptional early life experiences that eased my journey in ways that are not typical of most Latinos and Latinas. I was born in Havana, Cuba, in a Protestant (Methodist) household. My father was an ordained lay preacher, and my mother was also ordained years later. We were middle–or low-middle class—economically, just an average Cuban family. But our family was not typical.

My father had been a revolutionary leader back in the 1930s, at which time he had embraced Trotsky's style of Marxism. Although eventually he returned to some of his Quaker pacifist roots, his passion for social justice never waned. Thus, I was brought up in a household in which Protestant faith was deeply entwined with social issues and concerns—and that in itself was not typical.

My mother was a professor of Spanish literature and grammar. My father was a novelist and a newspaper editor. An uncle who often lived with us was a copy editor. Thankfully, we had no television until I was in my early teens, and therefore after dinner we used to remain at the table, sometimes for hours, discussing points of grammar or commenting on the value or shortcomings of a book or a poem. On a sideboard behind my father, almost like a Bible on an

altar, were the official dictionary and grammar of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language. To these, and to other books in my parents' library, we had recourse in our friendly debates.

Those of you who are old enough may remember that, long before laser printers and even before offset printing, there was the linotype. This produced lead strips, each with one line of print, that were then used to compose a page, interspersed with wood blocks to which cliches were attached, for photographs and illustrations. Under my bed, as one of my favorite toys, I had two large boxes full of linotype strips and wood cliches, and these I used to construct castles. (I do not know what that much lead may have done to my brain, but that is for others to judge!) At any rate, my wife has aptly described the results of all of this by saying that I have printer's ink for blood. (She also says that I have never had a thought I have not published. And sometimes I am tempted to go further, and say that I have also published quite a few non-thoughts!)

But it is not just any kind of printer's ink that runs in my veins. When the revolution in which my father was involved succeeded, he was allowed to create and head a new section in the Department of Agriculture devoted to divulging the best of technical agricultural knowledge. He would meet with agronomists, scientists, and researchers, and then translate what he learned into language that farmers with very little education could understand and apply. I remember him saying repeatedly that if you cannot explain something in simple language, you probably do not know it too well, and chiding authors who, instead of simplifying matters, needlessly

complicated them. This would be a life-long passion for my parents, for years later, after the Cuban Revolution, they would go into exile in Costa Rica, and there develop a continent-wide program of adult basic education which still continues and has expanded into the US and Africa. At that time, as I began writing for publication, I tried to follow their example, and chided myself when something I wrote was difficult to understand, or when a sentence was overly long. Like my father before, I told myself that if I could not explain something in relatively simple language, I should try to understand it better before writing about it.

Then there was another important factor in my upbringing. Public education in Cuba, as in most of Latin America, was horrendous, and private education was unaffordable for people such as us. But, fortunately, my mother was the principal of one of the best private schools in Havana, so my brother and I got to attend for free. The entire school was bilingual from Kindergarten up, the morning session in English and the afternoon session in Spanish. In third grade we started studying French. This school, combined with the academic atmosphere at home, gave me an uncommon head start, so that from that point on all my studies were easy.

But not all my experiences in that school were easy. My classmates were all well-to-do, either rich Cubans or the children of expatriate American and British entrepreneurs. I would visit their homes and country clubs for their birthday parties, swim in their pools and ride their ponies; but I never invited them to my home. On Mondays, they would talk about their week-end shopping trips to Miami, and all I could say was that we had gone to the farm where my father

grew up, where I enjoyed working side-by-side with day-laborers harvesting corn or tending to animals.

As I now look back to those formative years, I see that those experiences combined with my father's early convictions, letting me see the contrast between the life of unnecessary leisure and wealth of my classmates at school and the life of toil and poverty of my work and playmates in the farm.

Then, there was another experience of those early years that is worth mentioning. This has to do with religion. We were the only Protestants in our neighborhood, and this was not always easy. In those years, long before Vatican II, religious prejudice and ignorance were rampant. I remember when a girl I liked, and who seemed to like me too, upon learning that I was a Protestant crossed herself, and never spoke to me again. Another insisted that we Protestants did not believe in Jesus, and nothing would convince her otherwise. And we Protestants were equally prejudiced against Catholics. As teenagers, one of our favorite pastimes was to find a priest or a nun, and accost them to create a public discussion on the Bible and its teachings, always with the purpose of showing them to be idolatrous heretics.

Oddly enough, as I now look back on those years, they seem to have prepared me for my later commitment to ecumenical endeavors. Since Catholics rejected us, we Protestants felt that, despite our differences among ourselves in matters of doctrine or of polity, we were all one

church. That is, except for some who insisted that they were the only true believers, among which unfortunately were the only Lutherans we ever saw, who belonged to another body not now part of the ELCA. But to us, who felt discriminated against because of our religion, such an attitude made no sense. Later, particularly after Vatican II, and in the midst of the struggles of Latinos and Latinas in this country, it was relatively easy to set aside my earlier anti-Catholic prejudice, and include them too in my ecumenical vision.

My first experiences of seminary, first as a student in Cuba, and later as a teacher in Puerto Rico, reinforced these ecumenical commitments. The seminary in Cuba was a united institution, jointly owned by the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Methodists, but also attended by members of other denominations. Likewise, the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, where I began my teaching career, was jointly owned by five denominations, and attended by many others.

But in between those two seminary experiences, one as a student and one as a teacher, came my first experiences of actual living in the United States. Although I had been in the United States before, it was in 1957, after graduating from seminary, that I came to live in New Haven, CT, to begin my graduate studies in theology.

Those studies were not difficult. I did find that I had a number of gaps to fill, but my early multilingual years, and my later education in classical languages, proved to be an advantage.

What was difficult was the adjustment to a new situation as an ethnic minority. As a Protestant, I was used to being part of a religious minority, but now what made me a minority was my ethnicity. In Cuba, I had the experience of a friend crossing herself and refusing to talk to me because of my religion; in New Haven, I now had the experience of a store clerk following me around and refusing to leave me alone as I shopped, as if he were sure I was about to steal something. And it was not because of my religion!

My church experience in Connecticut was twofold. When the weather permitted, I would attend a Latino church in the barrio—which at that time was not as large as it is now. When it was too cold to wait for the bus, I would attend a Lutheran church near Yale Divinity School to which I could walk. The people in the Latino church reminded me of those with whom I used to work on the farm. They had no idea what I was about at Yale, but they invited me to their homes, their parties, and their funerals. Those in the Lutheran church, I am sorry to say, reminded me of those with whom I used to attend school. They were not unfriendly, but in three years not one of them was interested enough to say "hello," and I never learned any of their names. Just as I had earlier wished that my fellow students could meet my fellow workers, now I wished my fellow worshipers could meet one another. I knew that there was value, faith, and commitment in both, and in a way felt sorry for both, and also for myself for belonging to both and to neither—an in-betweenness that I would soon learn was an important part of the Latino experience in the United States.

I shall return to this matter of in-betweenness. But, since I have begun by listing some of the advantages I had in my career, I must mention one of which I did not become aware of until much later. Strange as it may seem given much of what we hear today, and the present anti-immigrant environment, one of the great advantages I had in my career was not being born in the United States. As I now look back, I realize that the Methodist Church took an interest in my education that it did not take in the education of my Latino contemporaries who were born and raised in the United States. And the same is true of most other denominations. I was able to study at Yale because I had a scholarship from the Methodist Board of Missions. My contemporaries in the United States did not have the same opportunities. At Yale itself, there were no US born Latinos either in the Divinity School or in the Graduate Division of Religion. It would be decades before the first US-born Latino would receive a PhD in religion from Yale. When, in 1961, I came to teach at Candler School of Theology, in Emory University, there were no US Latinos in the seminary, much less in the Graduate Department of Religion. Actually, in the entire US there was no other tenured Latino in a Protestant seminary. Again, it would be years before this picture began to change. To this day, in most denominations, there are few US-born Latino and Latina leaders, and even fewer in the faculties of our seminaries.

Now back to the matter of in-betweenness. This was my first existential point of contact with the Latino experience in the United States. As a Latino, I was a minority in the nation, and for some time a minority of little more than one in the academic community. As a Protestant, I was a minority among Latinos. As an immigrant, I was not quite the same as the native-born, who

often were more discriminated against than I was. And, as a generally welcome immigrant, my situation was not quite the same as the situation of most immigrants.

At that point I had my first contact with a man who would eventually become a close friend, this was Fr. Virgilio Elizondo, then a priest here in San Antonio, and one of the first US-born Roman Catholic Latinos to obtain a doctorate in religion. This he did at the Institute Catholique in Paris. He based his dissertation on the notion of mestizaje, developed earlier in Mexico by José Vasconcelos and others. *Mestizaje*, being a *mestizo* or mixed race, had been part of Mexican reality from the beginning of the colonization, and became a crucial element in Mexican self-identity since the times of the Mexican Revolution. A *mestizo* is both Native American and Spanish, and at the same time neither Native American nor Spanish. To the Native American, he or she is almost Spanish. To the Spanish, he or she is almost Native American. Thus, a *mestizo* is at a loss for identity, and therefore tempted to self-loathing. But the truth is that cultural growth and creativity occur precisely at the point of *mestizaje*, and that the reason why the *mestizo* does not fit into the present order is that *mestizaje* points to the future, to a breakdown of the present divisions and prejudices.

In his dissertation, and later in several of his writings, Elizondo connected this notion of *mestizaje* with the Galilean experience—and experience of being seen as Jews by Gentiles, and as almost Gentiles by the Jews. This was part of his own existential Tex-Mex experience, for when he was a child in Texas he was repeatedly told that he was a Mexican, and when he finally

was able to visit Mexico he found that also in that land he was a foreigner.

Virgilio's writings came to reinforce my growing conviction that as Latinos and Latinas we have to reread all of Scripture and all of theology in a new and different way. In my case, there were two experiences that I have recounted before and that, while somewhat lighthearted and even comical, convinced me that the Bible did not necessarily say what I had been told it says. They both took place approximately at the same time, while I was teaching in Puerto Rico, and before I learned of Virgilio's work.

The first had to do with Peter's denial of Jesus. I must have been eight or nine years old when I heard a sermon on that subject. The preacher asked, "How did they know that Peter was one of the disciples?" And his answer was, "Because when you have been with Jesus it shows in your countenance." I remember that after service I sat on the curb across the street, looking at people coming out of church, and coming to the conclusion that no one had been with Jesus!

Now, years later, I was invited to preach during Holy Week at one of the largest United Methodist churches in the United States. I had preached in English often enough. But several thousand people! Would I be able to make myself understood? Or was my accent so heavy that I would have difficulty communicating?

In the midst of such doubts, I began studying the texts on which I was to preach. One of them, quite naturally, was the betrayal of Peter. I was reading in the Gospel of Matthew the story that I practically knew by heart, when a few words struck that I had never noticed. The woman said to Peter, “you are one of them; your accent betrays you.” She knew that Peter was one of the disciples of Jesus, not because his face shone, but because he spoke with an accent!

Following up on that insight, I came to see that much of the passion narrative is an account of the reaction of Judeans to a bunch of Galileans who have come to Jerusalem claiming that they have an insight into the works of the Almighty God of Israel that “proper” Jews from Judea do not have. Significantly, this came to me roughly at the same time that Virgilio Elizondo was working on his Galilean theme; and I later learned that a Puerto Rican Baptist friend who had grown up in New York, Orlando Costas, was moving along the same lines.

The second “aha moment” came at roughly the same time. It was the days of Vatican II, when it became fashionable for all to jump on the bandwagon of ecumenism, and to make a show of it. Following the trends of the time, we had an ecumenical celebration in Puerto Rico, at the large Methodist church next to the Seminary where I was teaching. All the great dignitaries of the church were there: the Catholic Archbishop, the Methodist and Episcopal Bishops, the President of the Lutheran Synod, several Pentecostal pastors. All were dressed in full regalia according to their ecclesiastical traditions: robes, staffs of office, academic regalia for some of us, and black three-piece suits for Pentecostal pastors. As Dean of the Seminary, I too was there, in full

academic regalia, and my task was the reading of Scripture. As was to be expected, the reading was from I Corinthians 12: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ...” All went well, until I got to verse 23: “and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor.” I could not help but look at ourselves. In this Pauline anatomy, what parts of the body were we, now dressed with greater honor?

As soon as I was able, I went to the library, and soon found that most of what Paul says in this passage was commonplace in classical literature. After all, it makes sense to speak of a society as a body with various members, each of them with a particular function, and all working together for the good of the body. What Paul says here that I could not find anywhere else in classical Greco-Roman literature was precisely these words on which I had never heard a sermon, these words so often glossed over in the reading of the passage: “those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members we treat with greater respect.”

When one looks at it this way, it is clear that in this passage Paul is not just talking about a body in which everyone has a place. He is continuing his argument in the previous chapter against a supposed celebration of communion in which the rich eat rich foods, and the poor are poorly fed. In spite of what the world might think about who is honorable and who is not, says Paul, “God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member.”

All of this was boiling in my mind when I finally came to live permanently in the United States in 1969. Now I was a professor at a respected academic institution, and my denominational affiliation was with a respected and respectable church. With those credentials, I was able to move in the supposedly more respectable circles of society. But it was clear that there were not many like me in those circles.

It was at that point that I began making wider contacts with Latinos and Latinas in various parts of the country, and in different denominations. Through those contacts, I learned that there was much in my own experience that resonated with theirs. As we sat together we shared experiences of marginalization for both ethnic and religious reasons. I met Mexican-Americans whose ancestors had been in the land even before it became part of the United States and yet were repeatedly treated as newcomers and invited to "go home." I met New-Yorricans whose entire lives had taken place in New York and whose Spanish was very limited, but who in spite of all this were not treated as New Yorkers by the rest of society. I met pastors—Methodist as well as Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Roman Catholic—who had been denied opportunities for advanced studies on the grounds that what they knew sufficed for work with their people. In Texas, California, Illinois, and New York, each in its own way, in-betweenness seemed to be a common link. I met women caught in the further in-betweenness of love for their culture and having that culture treat them as inferior and even abuse them. I also met thousands upon thousands of believers who felt they did not have the respect of major denominations because they were too enthusiastic, or because their worship was too lively, or because many of them

were not highly educated. And in all of this I was constantly reminded of Paul's words, "God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member."

In all of this, I was repeatedly and profoundly impressed by the power of faith within the Latino community. People crossing the Rio Grande remembering their ancestors in the faith who crossed the Jordan without getting their feet wet—or their backs! People crossing the desert as their ancestors in the faith had done long before, trusting in God for their survival. People breaking the law as the Israelite midwives of old had done when they saved the life of Moses. People having nothing and yet sharing it with those in even greater need. People gathering to worship God in their living rooms, in abandoned warehouses, and in sumptuous church buildings where they were barely tolerated. And in all of this, people passing the faith from generation to generation, from grandmothers to grandchildren.

And then I have met other people, non-Hispanic people of abiding Christian commitment with a profound understanding of what true love and true catholicity mean. People seeking ways that their churches can serve and empower the Latino community. People seeking to make their denominations and their local congregations more inclusive. People struggling with the difficulties of cross-cultural communication. People painfully discovering how difficult and costly it is for a mainline denomination to find a place for those who are not mainline in society. People discovering that their own denominations have so organized church life as to make it virtually impossible to respond to the challenges posed by the Latino presence in their midst.

People seeking to change those structures. People going to the barrio and to its churches to discover what it is all about. This I have found in just about every major denomination, and among many smaller ones, where there are many who, like Moses of old, having had the option of being counted as sons of the daughter of Pharaoh, cast their lot with the despised children of Israel.

(I must add that in my experience the ELCA has been quite exceptional in this regard, having repeatedly responded to just about every appeal I have brought to its attention, and empowering Latino leadership within its midst. I do not presume to know exactly why this is, but I have at least two points to suggest, which may be points of departure as the ELCA discusses its Latino ministries. The first is that, in contrast to the United Methodist Church to which I belong, and even more so to the Presbyterian Church, USA, to which my wife belongs, the ELCA knows itself to be an ethnic church. In a way, the Methodists and Presbyterians are also ethnic churches, but find it easier to ignore their own ethnic roots and reality, and therefore find it more difficult to counteract them. The second is that the ELCA still retains its own memories of immigration, marginalization and, certainly at the time of the Second World War, prejudice leading to oppression. While the German and Scandinavian experience must not be used in a reductionist fashion to understand all immigration and all marginalization, it does provide an excellent starting point for such understanding.)

And, as I look at the entire picture of North American Christianity, I also note that it is precisely those denominations that have stayed focused on mission—and in this case on Latino mission and empowerment—that have been less divided by the many conflicting issues that beset the church today. Thus, I come to you today to speak, not on behalf of Latinos and Latinas, but on behalf of the gospel as we have experienced it, and as we invite you to experience it. Perhaps some elements in that experience may prove valuable, not just for the Latino church, but for the entire church catholic as we march into the uncertain years of the twenty-first century. It is in this spirit that I'll now offer a few observations on Latino faith and spirituality.

When I compare the Latino churches that I know with others of the dominant culture, the first thing that strikes me is that for many in the Latino community their membership in the church is a crucial element in their identity. This may be partly due to our experience of being a minority. A few years ago, a friend of mine, Dr. David Maldonado, who teaches at SMU, wrote an autobiographical book under the title of *Crossing Guadalupe Street* that I highly recommend. In that book, Maldonado tells of growing up in Seguin, Texas, practically across from the Catholic Church of *Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe*. On Sunday mornings, the entire family would dress up and head for church. But they knew that *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* was not for them, so they walked past it to the First Methodist Church. But that too was not for them, so they continued walking until they came to the Iglesia Metodista La Santísima Trinidad. This was their church. There they belonged.

Other Latinos and Latinas give similar witness. Immigrants speak of their church as the place where they have found a sense of identity and of belonging in an alien and alienating society. Refugees testify to the role their church has played in their settling into their new communities.

This is not just a sociological and psychological fact. It also has theological significance, for it is calling the entire church to a rediscovery of what the New Testament means when it speaks of the church as "the household—or the family—of God." For many in the dominant culture, their congregation is a conglomerate of families. For many in the Latino church, the church is a family. This is due to many factors, but one of them is the tradition of the extended family, which still is strong in many Latino communities. If you ask me in English how many were in my family when I was growing up, I would say "four," my parents, my brother and I. But if you ask me in Spanish, I would tend to say "¿Quién sabe?"—who knows? As I was growing up, my family were certainly those four, and my aunt and uncle who lived two blocks away, and their four daughters, and my other aunt and uncle and their son, and my other uncle who was not married, and the widowed aunt and her daughter that came to live with us, and the second and third cousins who lived near the farm where my father grew up, and I have no idea how many others. Family was not a closed reality, with clear edges. And, although it was not so in my own tradition, in many Latino traditions family includes also those related by baptism, godfathers and godmothers, *compadres* and *comadres*.

Throughout most of history, most societies have understood family in that sense, and not in the narrow sense of the nuclear family that became common as the result of the industrial revolution and the ensuing constant mobility of the population. In that traditional family, as in mine, everyone was responsible for everyone else. My father did not have to carry the burden of being my sole male role model, nor my mother that of being my only female role model. For those needs that my parents could not meet, there were my aunts and uncles, as well as many others.

This means that the present crisis in the family that so many decry, with ample reason, is not a recent phenomenon, the result of the sexual revolution of the twentieth century, but began much earlier, with the industrial revolution, and therefore cannot be solved by merely placing more obligations and a greater burden of guilt on parents.

It is at this point that the church comes into play in many Latino communities. People used to the tradition of the extended family, and now reduced to living within the narrower context of a nuclear family, or even alone, find in the church the extended family that they have lost, or that is fading away. In many Latino churches, all are responsible for all. If a child misbehaves, all adults are expected to act as their parents. If a child wants help, he or she can turn to any responsible adult in the church.

I am convinced that in this regard the Latino church has an enormous contribution to make to the entire church and even to society at large, helping all to find new ways of relating in view of the demise of the extended family and the instability of the nuclear family.

In theological terms, this means that we must recover the far-reaching meaning of baptism. If in many Latino traditions relations by baptism are part of the family, this points to a dimension of baptism that we have often forgotten: baptism as one's incorporation into the family of God. Much more could be said about the matter, but the constraints of time force me to speak almost in shorthand.

In a similar vein, still in shorthand, it is important for the church at large to understand the ecumenical undercurrents of much Latino piety. Most Latino Christians know little or nothing of the official ecumenism of interdenominational gatherings and councils of churches. But they know and practice a sort of grassroots ecumenism that often goes beyond the official positions of their own denominations. I have experienced this personally in countless ways. For instance, for several years I directed the Hispanic Summer Program, which every year gathers about a hundred seminary students for an experience in theological education, research, and dialogue. During those years, in a student body in which roughly one-third was Roman Catholic, one-third mainline Protestant, and one-third Pentecostal and Independent, not once did we have a major problem due to theological differences. (And, since this is a Lutheran gathering, allow me to say that my Latino friends in the major Lutheran denominations in this country often give me the

impression of being much closer among themselves than their own denominations are among themselves.)

Still in shorthand, I must add that the examples just given regarding ecclesiology and our understanding of baptism are just some among the many points of theology and biblical interpretation on which Latinas and Latinos have significant contributions to make to the church at large. This includes the entire body of Christian theology, from the doctrine of God to eschatology. In every one of these issues, we in the Latino community struggle with the tension between what we have been taught and what we now discover—or what we experience in worship and mission. For many of us, our God is not the immutable, somewhat removed God of so much Christian theology, both classical and modern, but the active God of Scripture, who intervenes in the life of the people, who not only demands justice, but also does justice, who raises the lowly, and whose greatest gift is promise and hope. Significantly, in much Latino piety, charismatic as well as not, the Holy Spirit plays a crucial role, for it is the action of the Spirit that proves the presence and action of God among us, not just in creation nor even in the incarnation twenty centuries ago, but even today. In a number of other theological points, the Latino faith community struggles in an often unspoken debate between what it has been taught and what it finds in its own reading of Scripture—and the Latino community would very much welcome the participation of the entire church in this debate. A case in point is how one speaks of humanity vis-a-vis divinity. Perhaps with a bit of exaggeration, but not too much, one can say that in much of the theology we were taught, one of the ways in which the Godhead is exalted

is by emphasizing human worthlessness. “I am nothing but a worthless worm,” seems to be an expression of good Christian piety. But others among us are saying that Latinos and Latinas have been demeaned enough by society at large that we do not need our religion to do the same. No! We praise God for making the many marvels in the world, and among such marvels we include ourselves. Likewise, while traditionally we have been taught—following Augustine—that pride is at the root of all sin, many of us are discovering that a humility that demeans the image of God in us is also sin.

These are just some examples of the avenues of thought that Latinas and Latinos are currently exploring in the field of theology. Similar explorations are taking place in biblical studies, where we are learning to “read the Bible in Spanish”—which does not mean simply reading it in our language, but reading it through our own eyes and from our own issues and perspectives. If I had time, I could say much more about that, but this is too wide a subject to even broach here. Suffice it to say that in tomorrow’s Bible study I hope to give you a glimpse of that, and that in this regard too the ELCA deserves credit for investing resources in the series *Conozca su Biblia*, published by Augsburg/Fortress.

And, had we more time, I could also point to ways in which it is not just on the fields of theology, Bible, and church history that the Latino experience is being brought to bear, but also on pastoral care and counseling, religious education, ethics, worship, and many others.

In all of this we seek not to be sectarian, but truly catholic. We do not intend to undercut the authority of Scripture, nor of the tradition that has brought us to this point, but to contribute to our common understanding of both Scripture and tradition. Nor do we propose our experience and our views as normative for the rest of the church, but rather offer them as a gift that we hope may enrich the life of the whole.

I know of no better image to explain this than that of a landscape. As we look at a landscape, there is a reality that is given; we cannot simply change it to our whim. The landscape is there, and is not subject to my flights of fantasy. I cannot say that I see a polar bear on a tropical island, nor a palm tree in Antarctica. But, on the other hand, if someone claims to see the entire landscape as it is, without a particular perspective, that person is either God or a self-deceiving fool. Our perspective changes what we see in the landscape. It is not the same to look at the landscape from this hill than from yon mountain. If you are interested in textures, you do not see the same thing as if you are interested in forms, or in colors, or in lights. The landscape comes to you in the garb of your own perspective. Yet others looking at the same landscape from a different perspective see other things. There is nothing that makes some perspectives valid and others not, as long as they are faithful to the landscape itself. Furthermore, the variety of perspectives itself, rather than questioning the value and reality of the landscape, enriches our understanding of it. To claim that mine is the only valid perspective is both to claim for myself an authority that only the landscape has and to deprive myself of the richness that a variety of perspectives brings to my view of the landscape itself.

Something similar is happening in the fields of theology and biblical interpretation. Their landscape has been beautifully and carefully explored from the particular mountain of a North-Atlantic, white, male, middle-class tradition. That is good, and is not to be discarded thoughtlessly. But then there are those of us—Latinos and other minorities, women, Christians in the Southern Hemisphere—who happen not to stand on that mountain. And we invite the church at large—particularly those who stand on the North-Atlantic, white, mountain—to come to the valleys where we stand, and from those valleys to look at the same landscape. You may well be overawed. You may well discover in the very landscape your ancestors bequeathed to you an unexpected beauty, and an overpowering grandeur, and a surprising relevance, and an inescapable challenge.

Come with us. Come to the valley. And let us jointly worship and celebrate the God both of our common landscape and of our different perspectives, the God who even today invites us to a foretaste of that final day when a great multitude that no one can count, from every people, and tribe, and nation, and language will join with angels and archangels and all the company in heaven in the everlasting song: “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty, heaven and earth are full of your glory. Glory be to you, oh Lord most high!”

Amen.