

La predicación y la enseñanza:
Evangelization, Education, and the Hispanic Catholic Future

Address

National Symposium on the Present and Future of
Catholic Hispanic Ministry in the United States

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¡Un saludo cordial muy queridos hermanos y hermanas! It is great to be with you, my friends. I am honored to be invited to share my thoughts with such a distinguished group.

My friend, Hosffman Ospino, has asked me to talk about three issues: first, the major challenges facing Hispanic Catholics; secondly, the paths that we as leaders should take in addressing these challenges; and finally, some thoughts on how we might take initiative at this historic moment in which our people are about to become a “numerical majority” in the United States.

I am happy to try to talk about all these things. But I want to start with some recent news items. As you all know, President Obama has recently nominated two Hispanics to high positions—a Cuban-American Catholic, Dr. Miguel Diaz, to be his Ambassador to the Vatican, and a Puerto Rican who was raised Catholic to serve on the Supreme Court, Judge Sonya Sotomayor.

I do not know either of these nominees, personally. But I find their biographies, as I have read them in the press, to be quite inspiring. And as I thought about what to say to you today, it occurred to me that their stories tell us a lot about our people and their experience over the last few generations in this country.

Dr. Diaz was born in Havana and is the son of a restaurant waiter. He is the first person in his family to attend college and he has gone on to become a respected theologian; he is very active in the Church, and is the father of four children.

Judge Sotomayor has an even more dramatic background. Her father died when she was 9 and she was raised in the Bronx. Her mother worked hard and sacrificed to send both her and her brother to Catholic schools all the way through high school. According to statements from the White House and from people who know her, Judge Sotomayor is no longer a practicing Catholic and indeed does not practice any religion.

Now, let me make myself clear. The reason I mention Professor Diaz and Judge Sotomayor has nothing to do with politics. I'm not interested in making any judgments on their religious faith, or their political views, or their qualifications for the posts for which they have been nominated. I

mention them because I think their paths are instructive as we consider the future of our ministry to our Hispanic people.

Let me explain.

Here we have two leading Hispanics. Each has risen, within one generation—from homes where the parents had very limited educations and very little economic means—to achieve among the highest ranks in his or her respective fields. Each is now in line for a very prominent position in the government of this country. Each is a great “success story” of Hispanic immigration; the one continues to practice the Catholic faith he was brought up in, while the other does not.

In these two nominees we have a snapshot of larger patterns of religious practice and affiliation among our Hispanic population. The Pew Religious Landscape Survey from last year, and the Trinity College American Religious Identification Survey, which came out about a month ago, reach similar conclusions about the faith of our people. About 58 percent of Hispanics identify themselves as Catholic; about one quarter identify themselves as some brand of Protestant Christian; and between 10 and 12 percent describe themselves as having no religion.

These percentages represent a big change from 20 years ago, and even from 10 years ago. The number of Hispanics self-identifying as Catholics has declined from nearly 100 percent in just two decades, while the number who describe themselves as Protestant has nearly doubled, and the number saying they have “no religion” has also doubled.

I’m not a big believer in polls about religious beliefs and practice. But in this case the polls reflect pastoral experience on the ground and provide us with a graphic measure of what I believe to be the biggest challenge facing Hispanic Catholics in the years ahead.

Let me state the challenge bluntly and then explain what I mean. I’ll put it in terms of the question that Jesus Christ once asked: *Pero, cuando el Hijo del hombre venga, ¿encontrará fe sobre la tierra?* “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8)

That’s the challenge, my friends. As Hispanics become more and more successful, more and more assimilated into the American mainstream, will they keep the faith? Which path are they going to follow? Will they stay Catholic or will they drift away—to Protestant denominations, to some variety of vague spirituality, or to no religion at all?

What will their relationship be to the Catholic Church? Will they live by the Church’s teachings and promote and defend these teachings in the public square? Or will their Catholicism simply become a kind of “cultural” background, a personality trait, a part of their upbringing that shapes their perspective on the world but compels no allegiance or devotion to the Church?

These are all open questions as we move into the early 21st century. And the stakes are high, friends. Because historically speaking, Hispanics have always been more than an ethnic group. To be Hispanic has always been to be Catholic.

There are many factors involved in this drift. There is the simple reality of our relentless consumer culture. “Shopping around” is more than a metaphor for Americans, it is a way of life. People shop for churches and religions like they do everything else, and Hispanics in this country are no different. It’s also true that Protestant proselytizers have been successful in playing on the poverty and insecurity of our people—by preaching a seductive “Gospel of wealth.”

Another factor: we cannot underestimate the impact—let’s be frank—of racism, both in American society and unfortunately in the Church. Our ugly, unproductive, and unfinished national debate over immigration has exposed that. If our people feel scapegoated in society and marginalized in Catholic life, it’s only natural that they would look around for someplace that might welcome them and treat them with the dignity they deserve. And unfortunately, some people are going to reject Christianity altogether because they experience Christians treating them in ways that are not very Christian.

These are problems. But I think the most serious problem we face comes not so much from these factors as from the dominant culture in the United States, which is aggressively, even militantly secularized. This is a subject that unfortunately doesn’t get much attention at all in discussions about the future of Hispanic ministry. But it’s time that we change that.

In fact, I believe that unless we, as Hispanic leaders, develop a strategy for understanding and dealing with the secular culture, our pastoral plans and programs will never achieve the success we would hope for.

The Challenge of Secular Culture

Let me be clear about what I mean by secularized culture. There is a sociological theory that holds that secularization is the inevitable, almost natural outcome of modernization. In other words, religious faith is supposed to fade away and eventually disappear as a society becomes more technologically advanced, more educated and sophisticated. That theory might be a good explanation for how secularization happened in Europe. But here in the United States, secularization has involved a deliberate strategy of “de-Christianization,” carried out by cultural elites over many years.

There is a good scholarly book on this called “The Secular Revolution,” edited by Christian Smith of the University of North Carolina. Smith and his colleagues show how secularization was carried out by powerful interest groups in the areas of law and public policy, education, and the media.

The result is that what I call “practical atheism” has become the de facto state religion in America. The price of participation in our economic, political, and social life is that we essentially have to agree to conduct ourselves as if God does not exist. We can’t talk about religion or faith in the workplace or in the public square. Sure, people still do, but those people are dismissed as zealots or “the Christian right.”

This is all very strange for a country that was founded by Christians—in fact by Hispanic Catholics. Indeed, where I’m from, in San Antonio, the Gospel was being preached in Spanish

and Holy Mass was being celebrated by Hispanics before George Washington was born. Before there was a Congress. Before there was a Wall Street.

But today, religion in the U.S. has been reduced to the area of private devotion and subjective emotion. Religion is something we do on Sundays or in our families, but is not allowed to have any influence on what we do the rest of the week—in our work, in our civic life. This separation of religion from public life has led to lots of other problems in our country. It has contributed to the rise of moral relativism, the presumption that there are no truths in the moral order, only different opinions, and points of view.

And more to my point—secularization has an “alarming effect” on everyone’s practice of religion. We see this in the rise of the number of people who say they practice no religion at all. Never before in the history of our country have so many people lived without any day-to-day awareness of God. They don’t hate God like atheists do. They’ve just forgotten who he is.

These secularizing forces put forth even more pressure on Hispanics and other immigrant groups. Why? Because immigrants already face severe demands to “fit in,” to downplay what is culturally and religiously distinct about them; to prove that they are “real” Americans, too. A generation ago, we can hardly imagine a Hispanic saying he or she had “no religion,” yet that number has doubled in just the past few years.

My friends, I believe we need to think hard about our culture. The first missionaries to this country studied the indigenous cultures in order to evangelize. We need to do the same thing. We need an approach to culture that is broader than concentrating simply on ministering to Hispanics. Definitely, we need to raise up Hispanic Catholics leaders, and we need a pastoral plan to educate Hispanics in the faith and to nourish them with the sacraments. But this must be part of a wider evangelical strategy. We need to commit ourselves again to the work of re-evangelization, to preaching the Gospel again to America.

I want to talk more about these things in a minute.

The Challenge of Poverty—Material and Spiritual

But before I do, I want to mention the second critical challenge that I think we face as Hispanic leaders. I’m going to label this second challenge—“poverty: material and spiritual.”

In general terms, Hispanics in this country are following the classic immigrant model. The second and third generation of Hispanics are much better educated, much more fluent in the dominant language, and are living at a higher economic standard of living than the first generation.

But the troubling fact is that still about one-quarter of all Hispanics, no matter what generation, are living below the poverty line. And that number does not seem to be improving very much from generation to generation. Combine that with high school drop-out rates of about 22 percent, and a dramatic rise in the number of Hispanic children being raised in single-parent homes—

both strong indicators of future poverty—and I worry that we may be ministering to a permanent Hispanic underclass.

We have moral and social problems too. Our people have some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy, abortion, and out-of-wedlock births, of any ethnic group in the country. These are things we don't talk about enough. But we cannot write these issues off as just "conservative issues."

The hard truth is that many of our young people are making bad moral decisions that have enormous and permanent consequences—not only for them, but for our society and for the future of Hispanic culture in America. To my mind, these are serious "justice" issues. If we want justice for our young people, if we want what God wants for them—lives worthy of their great dignity as his sons and daughters—then we need to find ways to teach our young people virtue, self-discipline, and personal responsibility. Any realistic assessment of the future of our ministry must include consideration of these issues. Any meaningful pastoral plan must address this challenge.

The Only Path for Leadership: Jesus Christ

Ok. So far I have answered Hosffman's first question—the challenges I see facing our Hispanic people. Broadly speaking I've identified those challenges as the aggressive secular culture in the U.S., and the realities of material and spiritual poverty among our people.

Now for Hosffman's second question—what paths we should pursue in addressing these challenges.

My answer to this question is short—two words: Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ has to be our way, our truth, and our life—for each of us personally and for our ministry as a whole. There can be no other path, no other paradigm or model for Hispanic ministry.

The only "reason" that Hispanic ministry exists in the first place is to fulfill the calling of Christ, the mission that he gave to his Church—to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations, to baptize and make disciples, and to spread his teachings.

Hispanic ministry should mean only one thing—bringing Hispanic people to the encounter with Jesus Christ in his Church. Too often, I'm afraid, we lose sight of that. We get caught up in thinking about our plans, our programs; who has control; what's going on in the bureaucracy. Our intentions are always good. We want to find the best means to help our people. My worry is that we concentrate so much on the "means" that we end up mistaking the means for the end.

All our pastoral plans and programs presume that we are trying to serve Christ and his Gospel. But my brothers and sisters we can no longer simply *presume* Christ. We must make sure we are *proclaiming* him.

The proclamation of Jesus Christ must be the criteria against which we measure everything we do in Hispanic ministry. Are we making new disciples? Are we strengthening the faith of those who have already been made disciples? Is the knowledge and love of Christ spreading through our work?

The mission that Christ gave to his Church can be summed up in two words: preaching and teaching. *La predicación y la enseñanza*. Proclaiming the good news of salvation and teaching men and women to live according to all that Christ commanded. This is a good way for us to think about and organize our pastoral response to the challenges I have identified. Preaching and teaching. *La predicación y la enseñanza*.

La predicación y la enseñanza

First, we need to preach the Gospel. “The new evangelization” has become a buzzword or catchphrase in the Church. This is good. It must now become a way of life, a way of discipleship, the basic mandate for our every ministry.

In our Hispanic ministries, we must understand that we are preaching the Good News to the poor. This is the reality, my friends. Many of our people are poor now and they are going to be poor for many years. They face discrimination and exploitation because of their poverty and their race. Millions of them are forced to live in the shadows because our lawmakers are not yet brave enough to fix our broken immigration system.

We need to preach the Good News of Christ to them. But we also need to show them that good news in action. I am more and more convinced that we must address the issues of Hispanic poverty with an intense practical emphasis on education—education in general and education in the faith.

Every expert on poverty tells us that education is the one key to getting out of it. That means, in the first place, we need to get those Hispanic drop-out rates down. It means we need to find new ways to keep our kids chaste and in school, and to instill in them the value of education. We need to push for real improvements in public education, and in public support for private education, especially in our poorest school districts. And we need to assemble all the resources of our own network of Catholic schools to meet this challenge.

Educating our people in the faith should also be an urgent priority. We need to find ways to teach the faith so that our people really “get it”—not just the intellectual content of the faith, but the true, life-changing power of the encounter with Jesus Christ.

We need to show them that our Catholic faith is a beautiful and complete way of life, one that brings joy and peace, and one that offers real answers to the problems of daily life. We need to teach the faith so that people not only want to live it, but are inspired to defend it and pass it on to others—in their homes, in their communities, in the places where they work.

My brothers and sisters, it is essential that our people know their own story, *our* story—the great story of Hispanic Catholicism in the Americas.

Do our people know that the Gospel was being preached in Spanish and the Holy Mass was being celebrated by Hispanics in our country in the 1560s—more than 200 years before the Declaration of Independence? Do they know the names and the lives of the great priests and lay missionaries, the saints and martyrs who brought the faith to this land?

Do they know about the more immediate *'memoria historica'* of Hispanic Ministry? The *Encuentros*, including *'Encuentro 2000'*, the only official national celebration of the Jubilee Year. What about the Documents of the USCCB regarding Hispanic ministry?

How will our people come to know these things unless we are the ones who tell them? As leaders, we have to learn this great story ourselves, and promote creative ways of sharing that story with our people. We need to encourage devotion to our local saints— especially our Hispanic and Latin American saints and blessed. Our people need to know that these holy men and women shared their faith, and their struggles against sin, injustice, and oppression.

They also need to know about the men and women who have dedicated their lives in recent years to the service of the Church in Hispanic Ministry.

We also need to concentrate on raising up new leaders. We still do not have enough successful Hispanics taking on leadership roles in the Church or in our communities. There are a lot of reasons for this. Professional Hispanic men and women are still struggling hard to establish themselves in their fields. They still face a lot of racism and institutional barriers to success; it takes a lot of their energy and a lot of their time. There isn't a lot of either left-over to "give back" to the community, to the Church.

So we need to find ways to help them and encourage them to put their time, talents and treasure in the service of our people. We have to find a better way to market our organizations and to facilitate the participation of successful Hispanics in our ministries and activities.

But what we really must do is promoting the sense of discipleship among all our peoples. We need to remind them that all Catholics are called to be missionaries, to be leaders in proclaiming their faith, in preaching the Gospel with their lives.

That goes for us, too, my friends. Most of us here today are "professional Catholics." I say that with deep respect and gratitude for your service to Christ and his Church. But you have to remember that your work for the Church—in chanceries and parishes, in classrooms, in all your various ministries—does not exhaust your responsibilities as disciples. Your discipleship must extend into every area of your life.

We are all called to become better examples of the Gospel we're called to proclaim. If you lead, my friends, others will follow. I promise you that.

¡Somos Católicos!

My time is almost up. Let me turn to Hosffman's last question – how do we seize the initiative at this moment in history?

First, I think we need to consider what's really at stake. I hear a lot of talk these days about so-called “cultural Catholicism” as it relates to Hispanics. It's a category that's supposed to describe people who have been raised Catholic. They're supposed to have a unique dedication to working for social justice that stays with them even though they're no longer practicing their faith. “Cultural Catholicism” is supposed to be a good thing, a sign that Christian values have penetrated deep into a person's personality and outlook on life.

But I am reminded of some tough words that our Lord once spoke: *¿De qué le servirá al hombre ganar el mundo entero, si pierde su vida?* “For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mark 8:36)

What good will it do our people to be a majority of Americans if we forfeit our Catholic faith in the process, if we lose our soul?

Jesus Christ did not come to suffer and die so that he could make “cultural Catholics.”

The Gospel is not an attitude or a philosophy of life. It is a relationship with the living God, a relationship that Christ himself intended to be profoundly *ecclesial*; that is, it is a relationship that we have through him, with him, and in him—in *his Church*.

We need to reject every short-cut, every attempt to reduce the Gospel to its lowest common denominator. Catholic principles can make society a better place to live, but only the fullness of the Gospel can bring men and women to eternal life.

To seize the moment, we need to embrace our identity as Catholics. *¡Somos Católicos!* That means embracing the fullness of our heritage as Hispanic Catholics.

Carlos Fuentes, our great Mexican writer, has said, “You cannot have a living future if you have a dead past.” He's right. The way forward in the future is to always be drawing from our past—not only from the words of Scripture, but from the great communion of saints.

In that spirit, I want to leave you this afternoon with reflections from two figures from our Hispanic Catholic heritage.

The first is Bartolomé de Las Casas, the great Dominican evangelist and champion of human rights. We all know his story. In fact, I was rereading his defense of the dignity of the Indians recently, and I was thinking that every word could be applied to our debates today about abortion.

What makes him so relevant for us is that he had some very simple yet powerful ideas about the evangelization of culture. From his classic, “The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith,” I offer you two points:

First, Fray Bartolomé says that Christ and the apostles evangelized by (a) winning people's minds with reasoned arguments; and (b) by attracting their hearts with gentle invitations and compelling motives.

That's a good way for us to think about our ministries, too. We need an approach to evangelizing our culture that is both intellectually rigorous and that is rooted in deep love for our brothers and sisters and a desire that they come to know Christ.

Second, Fray Bartolomé reminds us of something I just mentioned—that our mission is profoundly *ecclesial*. He says we have a “triple duty—The first, to preach the faith. The second, nourishing believers with the sacraments. The third, teaching believers nourished by the sacraments to keep the commandments of God and to live a good life.”

Again—a very clear and simple path for us to follow. We evangelize, we educate, we bring men and women into the life of the Church, we feed them the Bread of Life, and we help them to live by all the teachings of Christ.

Finally, I want to propose that we reflect on the missionary work of Blessed Miguel Pro, the great Jesuit martyr of the Mexican persecution in the 1920s.

I think we all know his story, too. What we need is his conviction that Christ alone can save us. At a time when practicing the faith was a capital crime, this conviction led him to risk his life every day to bring people to Christ in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of Penance.

We need his creativity, courage, and daring, to find new ways to bring our brothers and sisters to Christ.

My friends, in the future we must preach with the confidence of those who know the hope of the resurrection. If the God who raised Jesus from the dead is with us, what could we possibly have to fear?

Thank you for your attention this afternoon. I'm grateful for the chance to join you in this important discussion.

Let me leave you with Blessed Miguel's last words: *¡Viva Cristo Rey!* (“Long live Christ the King!”)

And I pray that Our Lady of Guadalupe, the mother of us all, watch over us and guide us in our service of her Son, especially these coming days as we discuss the present and future of Catholic Hispanic Ministry in the United States.

Thank you.