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Little Stories of Christmas and the Big Story of God's Love

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Alejandro García-Rivera is highly regarded as a professor of theology who mentored more than three dozen graduate students and directed more Latina and Latino theologians in their doctoral dissertations than any other scholar.¹ He is even more known for his own impressive production of theological works.² One of García-Rivera's most frequently-cited claims is his insistence that what he calls the "little stories" of everyday life reveal the "Big Story" of God's love for humanity, and indeed God's love for all of creation. García-Rivera's initial development of this insight was in his first book, the 1995 work *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture*. That volume examines testimonies from the beatification process of San Martín de Porres, the son of an African mother and Spanish father in colonial Peru whose life, deeds, and holiness are narrated in the fascinating testimony accounts. Employing the semiotic method and insights gleaned from thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Eugene Genovese, and Robert Schreiter, García-Rivera explores the interrelations between the "signs, codes, and messages" of the Martín de Porres testimonies to uncover the "cultural text" of colonial Latin American societies. He contends that the "violent and unequal encounter of cultures" is a core sociohistorical dimension of the colonial cultural text that witnesses for San Martín's beatification sought to subvert through their storytelling.³

Many who admire such scholarly analyses, as well as García-Rivera's mentoring contributions, remain relatively unaware of his publications in popular pastoral and theological journals. A key concept underlying many of these publications is the relation between the little stories and the Big Story that García-Rivera addresses in the *St. Martín de Porres* book, although in that work, and in subsequent treatments of the concept, he does not limit the relationship between the Big and little stories to a single definition. Rather, he employs these terms as a wide-ranging metaphor to reflect on the interconnectivity between the everyday elements of our lives—what Latina and Latino theologians call *lo cotidiano*—and the larger realities so powerfully revealed in ordinary

life, if we but have the eyes to see them. For example, in *St. Martín de Porres*, García-Rivera contrasts the Big Story of the "Old" and the "New World." He avows that in the era of colonial conquest, the European concept of humanity revolved around reason, while in the Americas, testimonies such as those about the life of San Martín revealed deeper truths: the uniqueness of each human person as a creation of God and our innate longing for communion with one another and ultimately with God. Thus, the little stories San Martín's admirers told about him corrected the Big Story of European conquerors and conveyed the biblical Big Story about human creatures and our vocation "to know and love God."⁴

At the same time, in the *St. Martín de Porres* volume, García-Rivera also associates little stories with a people's popular faith expressions. In a subsequent article, tellingly titled "Listen to Catholicism's Little Stories," he further articulates this devotional dimension. He notes that "the little stories of popular devotion have a charm and profundity that somehow reveal the 'Big Story' of the Church. The little stories of the faithful reveal the profound imagination of the Church. And in that imagination, the Big Story of our faith is visualized."⁵ In a word, for García-Rivera the little stories of our lives are windows into the big stories that shape our existence, and the ultimate Big Story is God's boundless love for human creatures and for the beautiful world of God's creation. Though God made each of us as unique creations, our commonality is that each of our lives is a wondrously exquisite microcosm of that ultimate Big Story.

Part of his genius is that García-Rivera was a master of unveiling the Big Story in the little stories of people's lives and faith expressions. He is highly regarded for exhibiting this capacity in his scholarly works. Less known are the considerable number of writings he published in more popular venues—over 40 essays in all—most of them through Claretian Publications in Chicago in their journal, *U.S. Catholic*, and their bilingual series of faith resources such as *El Momento Católico*, *Nuestra Parroquia*, and *De Buena Fe*.⁶ These writings reveal García-Rivera's remarkable ability to ignite the religious imagination of

his fellow believers, pastoral leaders, and theologians. This current essay explores García-Rivera's gift of revealing the Big Story of God's beauty and love through his reflections on little stories, in this case the little stories of Christmas, a topic he treats frequently in his shorter essays and reflections.⁷ García-Rivera develops profound reflections on the Christmas event as it illuminates God's loving presence in various aspects of our lives today, such as exile, family, the just treatment of immigrants, and the beauty of creation.

In his earliest sustained reflection on the Nativity, García-Rivera examines the flight to Egypt through the lens of his experiences as a Cuban exile and as a pastoral leader in the United States. He compares his first experience in exile to that of the Holy Family on their flight to Egypt, visualized in a Hummel figurine in which he sees "not Mary sitting on a donkey but my mother sitting on a bare, wooden floor holding tightly not the baby Jesus, but my baby sister . . . such was the image that met my eyes when I first opened them in the land of Egypt."⁸ Years later, his earlier association of the flight to Egypt with the loss of home and possessions took an unexpected twist in an encounter with a five-year-old girl in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The girl knocked on García-Rivera's door one night, announced it was her birthday, and asked her neighbors to bake a cake for her. When García-Rivera and his wife took the cake over later that evening, he was surprised that the girl's bedridden mother did not show more joy or gratitude. He surmised that the mother may have been worried that she would lose her child if authorities got word that she could not take care of her, even to the point of not being able to provide a simple celebration for her daughter's birthday. Later it dawned on García-Rivera that he had not understood the flight to Egypt deeply enough. Like this struggling mother in Allentown, "the silent but anguished Mary in the Hummel was not grieving the loss of her home and possessions, in fact, she was carrying the only possession she cared about—her baby son, Jesus." This realization led to deeper reflections on the economic, social, and cultural realities that today threaten "the traditional domestic space, the nuclear family." The struggle of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to sustain a family amidst societal strife is not just a model for refugees and exiles, but for all who seek to hold fast to family life amidst the contemporary forces that assail it. And the flight to Egypt is not primarily about the loss of home and belongings; it is an urgent call to take stock

of what truly matters in life, especially the Big Story of God's love that beckons us to seek, above all else, to love God and love God's family.

A subsequent essay focused more specifically on immigrants and their struggle for human rights and human dignity. García-Rivera wrote this article in the wake of California's Proposition 187, a controversial ballot initiative to deny government services to the undocumented that voters approved but a federal court later declared unconstitutional. He asserts that "through Proposition 187, the state of California believes it can make a surgical incision into the mass of humanity living within its borders and eliminate [the] 'undesirable' from 'desirable' families."⁹ Indeed, García-Rivera avows this Proposition is symptomatic of a broad misconception in contemporary society—that we can categorize which families are undesirable, in common parlance usually designated with labels like "dysfunctional, dependent, and abusive," or in this case "illegal." Seen in this light, García-Rivera claims Proposition 187 is "an unprecedented attack on the family." Linking the Holy Family's "illegal" flight to Egypt to escape the brutality of King Herod with the strong familial motives of many contemporary undocumented immigrants, he asks rhetorically: "Is it illegal or a holy duty to cross foreign borders to keep the family, God's First Blessing, together?" He urges his readers to see in today's migratory peoples the image and likeness of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, "whose first act as a family was to illegally immigrate to Egypt in order to keep the hope of all families alive." The Big Story of God's original blessing extends from the Genesis accounts of Creation and the first human family to the life of the Holy Family and down to the current struggles for family in our world. The little stories of anti-immigrant attitudes and laws like Proposition 187 must be seen within the wider context of this Big Story and exposed for the sinful contradiction to God's ways that they are. Likewise, the little stories of immigrant mothers and fathers sacrificing themselves for their families proclaim the Big Story of God's plan for family disclosed since the very origins of human life.

García-Rivera's most far-reaching reflection on the Big Story revealed through the traditions of Christmas is encapsulated in his bold contention that "the mysterious presence of the Nativity scene is the presence of the entire universe in our living room."¹⁰ He recognizes that one important influence of the home manger is that the figures presented become part of our family. But this intimacy

does not negate the more transcendent dimension of the Nativity scenes we enshrine. Rather, “the Nativity scene is, in a sense, a miniature cosmos or universe. Every creature, visible (humans, animals, earth, sky, and stars) and invisible (angels), revolve like a galaxy round the Christ child.” Even the hay in the manger has a cosmic significance, as it images how Earth’s vegetation gives witness to Christ. It is not only sustenance for donkeys and camels; it also reminds us of our spiritual food of the Eucharist. Moreover, the Magi following the star represent diverse regions of the world, an intercultural mosaic of peoples united in the worship of God becoming one of us. The convergence at the manger of shepherds and kings, the poor and the rich, adds yet another element of this unity across the barriers that often divide. Thus, “the Nativity reaches out beyond our living rooms, beyond our immediate family, and encompasses every creature under God’s gaze ... Because of Jesus’ birth, we have become members of a wider family, a family that can number among its members even the stars.”

In such passages, we glimpse the depth of García-Rivera’s theology and the profound wellspring of faith from which that theology flows. Who else sees in a simple Nativity scene such an all-embracing vision of redeemed humanity and redeemed creation? Like Augustine, Francis, Teresa of Ávila, and a host of other great contemplators of God, García-Rivera helps us open our blinded eyes to see the divine mysteries abundantly revealed in every moment of everyday life. He enables us to glimpse the Big Story of God in seemingly ordinary realities like the Nativity scene. Ultimately, he invites us to look with him for the myriad of ways that God’s Big Story is inscribed in the little stories of our daily lives.

Exile, the just treatment of immigrants, family, the beauty of creation: García-Rivera uncovers the interconnections between the beautiful light of the Incarnation, the Christmas tradition, and life concerns such as these today. At the heart of his theology is the fundamental conviction that there is only one story of the cosmos. The task of the theologian is to relentlessly contemplate the interconnectedness of this Big Story and the little stories that make up our lives, and then to animate others to join in collective wonder at the beautiful unity that overshadows the suffering of our world. García-Rivera is well aware of the seductive power and horrific ugliness of sin. He speaks of it forthrightly in the pain of exiles, in Herod’s senseless slaughter of the innocents in an

attempt to kill Jesus, in the effects of xenophobia on today’s immigrants, in the vilification of those deemed inferior in Jesus’ day, in the colonial era of San Martín de Porres in Peru, and in our own times in the lives of Latina/os and many others. Nonetheless, like the marginal people García-Rivera knew and served as a pastoral leader and as a disciple of Jesus, he refuses to accept that injustice and calamity have the final word in this life. He insistently calls us all forward to see in supposedly mundane realities the glory of God revealed.

Ultimately, García-Rivera seeks to unveil the interconnectedness of all things, the overlapping of stories that all point to one great story of the universe, a Big Story that is contained in so many little stories, like living organisms are inscribed in the smallest particles of their DNA. Whether the topic is Christmas or one of the many other subjects he examines, García-Rivera dedicated himself to growing in faith and to unveiling for us the divine mysteries revealed in the stories of our lives. And I am sure today he reminds us that the best expression of gratitude for such a gift is to imitate him in offering to others what he has so generously passed on to us.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Scholars who worked under García-Rivera’s mentorship for their doctoral dissertation include Anita de Luna, MCDP, Michelle González, Nancy Pineda-Madrid, Cecilia González-Andrieu, and Joseph De León. Three of them went on to publish books based on their dissertations, while a fourth authored her first book on another topic and is now returning to prepare publications from her dissertation. Anita de Luna, MCDP, *Faith Formation and Popular Religion: Lessons from the Tejano Experience* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002); Michelle A. González, *Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003); Cecilia González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012); Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011); Pineda-Madrid, “Interpreting Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mediating the Christian Mystery of Redemption” (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 2005); Joseph De León, “The Passion Drama at San Fernando: Mediating the Relationship between von Balthasar’s Theo-Drama and Nahua

- Ritual Using Royce's Notion of Interpretant" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 2008).
- 2 A bibliography of García-Rivera's major works is included in this issue of *Diálogo*.
- 3 Alejandro García-Rivera, *St. Martín de Porres: The "Little Stories" and the Semiotics of Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 30-39, chapter 4 "The Violent and Unequal Encounter of Cultures." Cited quotations are on pp. 31, 39.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 5, 97-105, quotation at 99.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 20-21; Alejandro García-Rivera, "Listen to Catholicism's Little Stories," *De Buena Fe/In Good Faith* (Chicago: Claretian Publications, n.d.).
- 6 My sincere thanks to Carmen Aguinaco of Claretian Publications, who provided me with many of García-Rivera's short essays from these various publications, for which she has served as editor. Some of these short essays from *U.S. Catholic* and other venues are listed in the Latino/a Bibliography of Theology and Religious Studies sponsored by the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS), at <<http://www.latinobibliography.org>>.
- 7 Besides the publications cited below, see, e.g. Alejandro García-Rivera, "Toward the Third Millennium: True Christmas," *Nuestra Parroquia* (November, 1999): 11; García-Rivera, "Epiphany: A

- Great Light for Kings and Shepherds," *El Momento Católico* (Chicago: Claretian Publications, 2005); García-Rivera, "Holy Innocents," *Reflexión Especial/Special Reflection* (Chicago: Claretian Publications, n.d.). See also reflections on the distinct Christmas trees that Puerto Rican and Euro-American congregants placed in their separate worship spaces at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Allentown, Pennsylvania in García-Rivera, *The Community of the Beautiful: A Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), esp. 2-4. An insightful further analysis of this "Tale of Two Christmas Trees" is in the recent book of a former doctoral student of García-Rivera. See González-Andrieu, *Bridge to Wonder*, 123-28.
- 8 All quotations in this paragraph are from Alejandro García-Rivera, "My Flight to Egypt," *U.S. Catholic* (August, 1994): 37-39.
- 9 All quotations in this paragraph are from Alejandro García-Rivera, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph Were Illegal Immigrants," *U.S. Catholic* (April, 1995): 32-34.
- 10 Quotations in this paragraph are from Alejandro García-Rivera, "El Nacimiento: Reflection on the Nativity Scene," *Nuestra Parroquia* (November, 1998): 7. See also García-Rivera, "Everyone Makes the Scene," *U.S. Catholic* (December, 1998): 50.



Father Arthur Poulin, *Morning Prayer*, acrylic on canvas, 24" x 48", 2008