

3-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Sullivan, D. J. (2005). Mestizo Worship, A Pastoral Approach to Liturgical Ministry, by Virgilio P. Elizondo & Timothy M. Matovina. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 8 (3). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0803102013>

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MESTIZO WORSHIP, A PASTORAL APPROACH TO LITURGICAL MINISTRY

VIRGILIO P. ELIZONDO & TIMOTHY M. MATOVINA
THE LITURGICAL PRESS, 1998
\$15.95, 106 pages

Reviewed by David J. Sullivan

Mestizo Worship is an important reflection for the Catholic school administrator. With changing demographics due to a mass influx of Hispanic immigrants and an increasingly higher percentage of American births of Hispanic descent, schools must prepare themselves for a new and often Spanish-speaking ethnic majority in their communities. In the American Catholic Church of the 21st century, where studies reflect rapidly increasing numbers of believers to be a Hispanic majority, the school leader is compelled to develop understanding both as a professional and as an agent of spiritual development among the school's community. Here the reader is empowered with an appreciation for the rich expressions of popular religiosity that have been and continue to be so important to Hispanic Americans.

Among the most renowned contributing scholars and practitioners of Hispanic theology, Elizondo and Matovina offer a three-part thematic approach in *Mestizo Worship* that explores the significance and history of popular devotions in Hispanic communities in the southwestern United States and, more particularly, in San Antonio, Texas. Defining and describing various forms of popular religiosity, Elizondo shows how devotions are integral to the catechetical and cultural formation of the Hispanic experience. Matovina reinforces this by providing concrete explanations of similar devotions in liturgy, worship, and Hispanic celebrations of the sacraments. This book provides concrete and descriptive examples of such devotions, describes their cultural context in light of the people's history of conquest and reconquest, and nurtures discovery of the sacred through Hispanic expressions of faith. Through Hispanic devotions to Our Lady of Guadalupe, for example, Elizondo and Matovina posit that a new people emerge from the downtrodden and defeated history of the Mexican people:

The new people of the land would now be the mestizo people – la raza – and

the new Christianity would be neither the cultural expression of Iberian Catholicism nor the mere continuation of the pre-Cortés religions of indigenous America, but a new cultural expression of Christianity in the Americas. (p. 45)

They press even further, arguing that the very essence of what it means to be a *mestizo*, a person of mixed European and indigenous descent, lends itself to a "treasured means of encountering God in worship" (p. v).

Written primarily for what the authors describe as pastoral agents, this book provides a concise series of essays that present some profound theological insights for leaders who engage in ministry to Hispanic communities. The book serves as a foundation for broad understanding of Hispanic rituals and as a catalyst for continued scholarship in the field. The book uses the terms Hispanic and Mexican interchangeably to describe the experiences and cultural norms of those of Spanish-speaking heritage primarily from Mexico and the American Southwest. In spite of personal objections to the word Hispanic, this reviewer will continue to use the terms interchangeably for the sake of consistency.

Mestizo Worship offers insight into Hispanic popular religiosity. It explores the spiritual beliefs, ritual practices, and the cultural and historical context of Hispanic worship and religious traditions as integrally important to people's understanding of God. It empowers leaders who are entrusted with pastoral responsibilities to explore the validity and unique gift of spirituality that Hispanic popular devotions are to the Church and to its people. Elizondo puts it best when he writes,

the greatest contribution that pastoral agents can make to the Hispanic communities is to have a fundamental change of attitude in relation to us. Do not see or fear us as an insurmountable problem, but rejoice and appreciate us in our world lowliness as God's life-bearing gift, not only for the enrichment but even for the salvation of our church and world. (p. 74)

Never before in this country has the gift of Hispanic spirituality been as readily accessible as it is today. Communities who are growing in numbers of Hispanic faithful should empower their leaders and school administrators to create and experience opportunities to worship as Hispanics have done for centuries.

Elizondo succinctly describes the profound meaning and context of Hispanic forms of worship like *las posadas*, *la Pastorela*, the ritual significance of Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, devotions to *Diosito*, *Jesús*, *María y los santos*, Christ the King, and the Eucharist. Defining them as popular expressions of faith, Elizondo claims that they are critical to our understanding of self and the sacred:

By popular expressions of faith I do not refer to the private or individual devotions of a few people but to the ensemble of beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, devotions, and prayers which are commonly practiced by the people at large....Those expressions of faith which are celebrated voluntarily by the majority of the people, transmitted from generation to generation by the people themselves and which go on with the church, without it or even in spite of it, express the deepest identity of the people. They are the ultimate foundation of the people's innermost being and the common expression of the collective soul of the people. (p. 25)

For the Mexican-American, Elizondo suggests that these rituals offer us powerful symbols of the struggle, suffering, and death that unite us with the paschal mystery, which gives us all meaning for hope and survival in spite of our personal and collective experiences of rejection and pain.

Popular devotions, therefore, are critical to a person's understanding of the sacred, particularly when they can be reflected through the ethnic practices and norms of a community that knows and understands what it means to be ostracized, marginalized, and shunned. In perhaps one of the most-articulate explanations for the importance of such traditions to the Hispanic community, Elizondo writes

Never was the distance between the "official" church and the church of the people more evident to me than on Good Friday in Mexico City where there might be as few as a hundred people in a barrio church for the official services and as many as sixty thousand outside the building, taking part in a living Way of the Cross. To "academic" theologians and liturgists this may seem a folkloric, nostalgic, emotional, childish expression of religion; they would not call it real liturgy. But for a people for whom sudden arrest, speedy trial, trumped-up charges, circumstantial evidence, quick verdict, and immediate sentencing are a way of life – as it is true for the millions of poor and oppressed throughout Latin America and in the United States – this ritual reenactment of the way of Jesus is the supreme liturgy. It is the celebration of their creed. It is not academic theorization; it is life. (p. 16)

Thus, Hispanic popular religiosity has a profoundly theological effect on one's understanding of self and God because it mirrors Christ's experience with rejection and suffering. Through song, procession, and palpable symbols like ashes and the cross, such devotions encourage the believer to participate and experience God's grace physically. These expressions of faith allow the Hispanic believer to extract meaning from that which is so sacred, it is perhaps even beyond explanation. Such traditions speak to the heart of life for the foreigner, the poor, the rejected, the mestizo. Such traditions offer a special source of faith from which Hispanics, collectively and individual-

ly, derive theological and cultural meaning, validating both their life experiences and their understanding of mystery and holiness.

Beyond the central premises of Hispanic theological scholarship mentioned above, Elizondo and Matovina go on to describe the historical, cultural and spiritual importance of one of the most popular Hispanic devotions: Our Lady of Guadalupe. This expression of faith is especially pertinent in light of what they describe as the double conquest of the Mexican-American. The first conquest is identified as the Spanish conquest of the indigenous peoples beginning with the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519, where attempts were made "to destroy their world view, rituals, and symbols – the very means by which a group sustains meaning in its existence" (Elizondo, p. 35). The second conquest is that of the southwestern United States which began with the war between Texas and Mexico in 1836, and culminated in the Mexican-American War ending in 1848, which Elizondo argues was

as catastrophic as the first; from California to Texas, Mexican residents suddenly became aliens in their own land, foreigners who never left home. Their entire way of life was despised and the conquerors instituted efforts to suppress everything Mexican: their customs, their language, and even their Mexican Catholicism. (p. 36)

Nonetheless, such defining events enable the rejected to experience solidarity with Christ's suffering, as well as a uniquely personal understanding for God's great love for us. Elizondo and Matovina demonstrate how the miracle of Guadalupe shapes a new cultural and spiritual perception for the Hispanic self, giving new meaning and hope to a repressed and defeated mestizo. Quoting Elizondo, Matovina argues that without Guadalupe, there "would be no Mexican or Mexican-American people today" (p. 62). Further, he argues that in celebrating the feast of this American patroness, Hispanics have

placed their plight within a wider context of meaning. By processing with their patroness past the sites of recent violence, for example, they recalled the community's suffering while denying that their celestial mother would forego responding to their misery. (p. 62)

These expressions of faith through and for the Mother of God, who appears as a mestiza herself, empowers a people plagued by tragedy to be a people united in the paschal mystery and to be modern-day bearers of salvation for all.

Hispanic devotions are a tremendously rich fountain of theological understanding and worship for the faithful. Catholic school administrators, parish pastors, youth group ministers, and other pastoral agents are performing a great disservice to their communities when they make little or no

attempt to interact with and engage Hispanic believers in Hispanic traditions of faith. Those

who still confuse unity with uniformity feel that by speaking Spanish and insisting on our traditions of faith – on the *sensus fidelium* of our particular church – we are being divisive....The greatest difficulty of this type of problem-oriented mentality is...[that] it blinds people from seeing the unique and privileged gift of God that the poor, the marginated [sic], and the foreigner are to the church and society. (p. 73)

Hispanic popular religiosity has much to offer us.

Mestizo Worship is a well-written and affordable collection of writings by internationally renowned scholars who offer the contemporary leader a valuable instrument for understanding Hispanic devotions and their significance to the culture and spirituality of the universal Church. Reading it will enrich our "ministerial call to know and foster the Church's liturgical tradition, celebrate and enhance our people's faith expressions, and, above all, love the community of faith that we serve and accompany in worship" (p. 106).

David J. Sullivan is assistant principal at Madonna del Sasso School in Salinas, California.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN CONTENTION: COMPETING METAPHORS AND LEADERSHIP IMPLICATIONS

JOHN SULLIVAN
VERITAS PUBLICATIONS, 2000
€12.68, 240 pages

Reviewed by Kathleen Asmar

John Sullivan addresses the conflicts that emerge in Catholic education today. The sources of these conflicts surface from both internal and exter-