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**Toward a Liberative Catechesis:
Catechesis for Marginalized Communities in the United States**

Francisco H. Castillo
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Los comentarios de los campesinos suelen ser de mayor profundidad que la de muchos teólogos, pero de una sencillez como la del mismo evangelio. No es de extrañarse: El evangelio o “buena nueva” (La buena noticia a los pobres) fue escrita para ellos y por gente como ellos.

Ernesto Cardenal
El Evangelio en Solentiname

Introduction

Religion and culture are indispensable human undertakings that pervade our existence. With the understanding that definitions are not necessarily permanent or immutable, I posit that religion is a pervasive human endeavor that impels the human person to confront questions of ultimacy and grounds our praxis in concrete sociohistorical realities. This affirmation needs to be filtered through another lens, which is culture. In other words, we cannot have religion devoid of culture and vice versa. If religion is one of those enterprises that eludes definition, so too culture is a problematic concept to describe. Culture can be understood as the organically constituted totality of the spirit of peoples, which they enact and embody in their religious transcendence, in their anthropology, literature, science, social principles and structures, political definitions, and law, and in their vision of the future.

This seemingly grandiloquent definition simply points to the sins of omission in our current attitude of pragmatic functionalism with its overemphasized sense of efficiency and profit. It reveals the absence of a deep probing into the operating discourses that make up our

social realities. It may lack the promotion of “thinkers of deep reflection, who can think a new humanism.”¹ In my pedagogical experience, and in my current ministerial practice as a senior editor and multicultural specialist for a religion publishing company, I have seen that we tend to expect the complex questions of our times to have simple answers. However, our attempt to engage and interpret reality should never be simplistic, facile, or shallow. We need both faith *and* reason, and never just faith *or* reason, in our attempt to explicate the intersection of faith and culture, religion and spirituality, or catechesis and culture.

This paper seeks to provide an analysis of current catechetical processes in the Catholic Church of the United States to see whether they offer a clear liberative message that engages those who find themselves on the margins. I argue that the way in which catechesis is carried out is not conducive to authentic liberation. I further posit that catechetical formation may even contribute to perpetuate a sense of captivity for U.S. Latino/as, people of color in general, and other minorities in the church.

A Call for a Properly Inculturated Catechesis

Culture is foundational for the human person and the human community. Since culture is central for human flourishing, any successful catechesis needs to be properly inculturated. Catechesis, according to Pope Paul VI, is a complex process that encompasses many dimensions of human life: “It is impossible to grasp the concept of [catechesis and] evangelization unless one tries to keep in view all its essential elements.”² If the Gospel is to take root and its message is to be authentically transformative, a liberative catechetical process, born out of the concrete sociocultural reality of peoples, must take into account the lived experiences of these persons and

¹ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 20.

² Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 17.

communities and their communal, political, theological, spiritual, and liturgical dimensions.

A properly inculturated message can determine people's relationship to themselves, society, and culture. It affects their sense of self and community all at once. It allows them to discern and appropriate the values and symbols that are present in their society and culture and hence to enact just and ethical interpersonal and international relations. This article presents what I believe to be a sound catechetical and inculturated methodology based on the example of Jesus as presented by the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Next, it proposes a renewed praxis based on the specific needs and experiences of racial and ethnic minorities who comprise the rapidly growing majority of the Catholic Church's adherents in the United States.

An authentic liberative catechesis needs to provide the underpinnings of the prophetic mission that those who catechize or instruct in the faith must carry out. The catechetical enterprise must have its origin in the radical action of Jesus of Nazareth. Inserted in the social and historical reality of his time, Jesus demonstrated that he had made a fundamental option for those who were marginalized and outcast. The testimony offered by Luke presents the catechesis of Jesus and its aim to set the captives free by announcing to them the Good News:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.³

The Business of Catechesis

My responsibilities as a multicultural specialist for a publishing company include the reviewing catechetical textbooks and other materials before their publication. Besides evaluating theological content, I often appraise cultural content as well. The material that we publish has to

³ Lk 4: 18-19, in which Jesus quotes Is 61.

be submitted for the process of conformity review by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee on the Catechism. It is in this process of theological and cultural review that I think we often fail as publishers to provide materials that contribute to a liberative catechesis. Catechetical ministry in the United States seeks to become a professional ministry in the church. This ministry is modeled on a secular education system, which is enacted with conceptual frameworks; it is based on educational theories and intentionally seeks the application of developmental psychology to matters of the faith. This academic model seeks the implementation of age-appropriate learning tools while adopting pedagogical developments which have been assimilated from secular educational models. Religious education in the United States utilizes certification programs, competency standards, learning outcomes, evaluations, mission statements, strategic plans, and best practices in the creation of its curricula.

There are many publishing companies in the U.S. that provide resources, books, and other educational material for faith formation of children, adolescents, and adults. Most companies are privately owned and are usually for profit, with just a few belonging to religious orders that are not-for-profit organizations. Companies such as Our Sunday Visitor, Loyola, Sadlier, and RCL Benziger have a long presence in the United States and compete for the larger shares of the Catholic market. These companies produce, print, and distribute materials used for religious education and catechesis. Most catechetical publishing companies seek to strike a balance between presenting sound doctrinal material and meeting the demands of the market. The process that the mainstream companies implement in their product development arose after the Second Vatican Council. Changes in educational trends and psychology have also been incorporated into catechetical publishing. Concretely, some publishers highlight the importance of sharing the faith in light of human experience. However, the challenge of how this is

communicated in the catechetical material is difficult to resolve. Bishops demand a more theoretical and intellectual articulation of the faith to the detriment of experience. In a recent meeting of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) with catechetical publishers, one bishop stressed the importance of clearly presenting the faith:

Presenting Christology is a fundamental issue in catechesis and in catechetical texts. It is of utmost importance to use appropriate language about the incarnation since this has profound implications for the Church. We must work together when it comes to answering that question, “Who do you say that I am?” Answering this question can radically change the understanding of the Trinity if not presented correctly. It also affects our understanding of the Church. Presenting Jesus as friend and teacher may overshadow understanding him as Savior. Jesus must be presented the way he is presented in the New Testament: one person, two natures, and as it was clarified by the Council of Chalcedon. We must use the proper language when using the words “nature” and “person” to convey what the language was meant to say in 451.⁴

Statements such as the one above make it more challenging for publishers to present the faith in an age-appropriate and culturally sensitive manner. For publishers, developing the scope and sequence of doctrinal material becomes almost impossible. Contextualizing the message in concrete human experience that is filtered through scripture, that is appealing to the readers, and that can be applied in a process of reflection is even more difficult from a pedagogical

⁴ Frank J. Caggiano, “Doctrinal Presentation of Christology in Catechetical Texts,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis Annual Meeting with Catechetical Publishers (Chicago: unpublished notes for presentation, 2016).

standpoint. Navigating these many demands creates many issues in the publishing world that are compounded with other non-doctrinal and cultural components.

Some diocesan religious education directors opine that the elementary, adolescent, and adult catechetical material currently in print is weak. Therefore, some dioceses in the United States have opted to conduct their own faith formation programs and adult faith formation that mostly concentrates on sacramental preparation. The relationship that exists between catechetical publishing companies and dioceses often follows business models and customs more than ecclesial or ministerial practices. In some cases, some bishops mandate which specific publications exclusively will be used in their dioceses. Parish pastors and schools have no choice as to what catechetical material they will use. Since some bishops and diocesan officials feel that big publishing companies impose particular catechetical models, they may opt to either create their own programs through digital means or choose one particular company that meets the diocese's standard of articulation of the faith. These dioceses create their own standards of faith that must be taught in parishes and schools and thus can avoid the process of conformity that the USCCB has set in place for catechetical publishing.

The Conformity Process

The catechetical resources that the publishing companies produce are submitted for Catechism Conformity based upon alignment with certain protocols predetermined by the Subcommittee on the Catechism of the USCCB. According to the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis' message on the USCCB website, the purpose of the Committee, including its Subcommittee on the Catechism and the Conformity Review, is to

assist the bishops . . . in fulfilling their role as evangelizers and chief catechists in their dioceses by addressing all aspects of evangelization and catechesis for adults, youth, and

children. This includes fostering the distribution and implementation of foundational documents related to evangelization and catechesis, the development of guidelines for both, and especially the evaluation of catechetical materials for their conformity to the Catechism of the Catholic Church.⁵

The manuscripts submitted by the publishers are, in my estimation, subjectively read and reviewed by a catechetical expert. The reviewer, who is chosen by the Subcommittee, discerns whether a catechetical manuscript properly aligns with the conformity protocols. The Subcommittee members and staff finalize the individual reviews and provide a written report to the submitting publishers, who now must make editorial corrections or may even have to rewrite the entire manuscript. The bishops claim that the Subcommittee only reviews for doctrinal content and not for methodology: “The Subcommittee's conformity review process focuses primarily on the accuracy and completeness of doctrinal content, not catechetical methodology.”⁶ Yet since the reviewer interprets the texts at their own discretion, sometimes they make recommendations that lie outside their own expertise. The Subcommittee reviewers’ recommendations on catechetical methodology are binding. The document on the Conformity Review states that “the methodology employed can sometimes have a bearing on accuracy and completeness in a particular text.”⁷

⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis, “Conformity Review,” available from <http://www.usccb.org>. See also Evangelization and Catechesis Mandate, <https://www.usccb.org/committees/evangelization-catechesis/evangelization-and-catechesis-mandate> and, on the Conformity Review Process administered by the Subcommittee on the Catechism (of the Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis), <https://www.usccb.org/committees/catechism/conformity-review-process>.

⁶ USCCB, “Conformity Review.”

⁷ USCCB, “Conformity Review.”

The process of conformity was implemented voluntarily by the bishops after the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was published by the Vatican in 1992. No individual bishop is required to follow or adhere to this conformity process or requirements within his local diocese. Certain ordinaries ignore or loosely adhere to the conformity expectations. Yet for the publishers, the process of conformity has come to dictate what and how material is published. Most companies know that if they intend to penetrate the Catholic market, the bishops' declaration of conformity is something they cannot do without. Certain dioceses or parishes will not purchase catechetical material that does not show evidence of adherence to the USCCB's declaration of conformity. This process affects the business aspect of publishing companies. This complex process also shapes how catechetical resources are developed. The conformity process, as it exists now, adds an unusual burden to production timelines.⁸ It also tends to arbitrarily standardize the content of catechetical materials. In addition—and this is most pertinent to my argument here—it may also hinder any effective process of inculturation publishing companies may attempt to make. Most publishers try to shape their doctrinal presentation based on the

⁸ I believe that the new *Directory for Catechesis* promulgated by Pope Francis in June 2020 should have a major effect on the Conformity Review Process in the United States as a benchmark for life-long faith formation. In the current process, “conformity” is about synchronization or homogenization of the faith. This is contrary to the nature of a faith lived *en lo cotidiano*. If this new Directory is to make a significant impact on catechesis in the Catholic Church of the United States, it needs to reject the USCCB's current Conformity Review Process. The current “requirement” of conformity needs to change and include the notion of the gradual unfolding of catechesis, or of the “progressive maturation of the formation process in which the entire community is involved.” Conformity requires completion. However, complete coverage of the Catechism in six to eight years is not a gradual unfolding. Educators are then, by design, forced to do ongoing catechesis with people who, by the standards of the new *Directory*, should still be in initiatory catechesis. (See Rino Fisichella, “Press Conference to present the *Directory for Catechesis* prepared by the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation,” *Bolletino Sala Stampa della Santa Sede*, June 25, 2020, available from <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/06/25/200625c.html>,

markets they are targeting, for example, elementary school-aged children, adults, and other age groups. Sometimes the publishers are asked to correct their presentation of the material according to the USCCB reviewers' interpretations. Even though the corrections are presented as recommendations, the publishers must comply with them as mandates. The USCCB publishes an official list of those texts and series that have been found "in conformity" with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.⁹ The bishops present a report that must be addressed by the publishers' editorial staff. Once the corrections are made, a list of changes must be sent to the bishops for the declaration of conformity to be granted.

An Un-inculturated Catechesis

I recently edited a junior high textbook that is due for publication in the next few months. The book offers a weak presentation of cultural realities central to the development of the faith of adolescents. There is no cultural sensitivity regarding issues of diverse populations, even when there are apparent connections with certain chapters. More alarmingly, the textbook does not prompt its young readers to work for justice. The book presents Jesus being revealed in the Old Testament. Its aim is to present an overview of Scriptures and how these prefigure the Messiah. The book's introduction reads as follows: "Prayerfully reading and studying the Old Testament is important to our Christian living. God's Word in the Old Testament reveals to us that we are God's People who are in a Covenant with him. God's Word also prepares us to receive Jesus as the Messiah."¹⁰ The book presents a spiritual reading of the Old Testament. For me, it is a deficient presentation for two reasons.

⁹ See <https://www.usccb.org/resources/current-conformity-list>.

¹⁰ *Be My Disciples Old Testament: Christ Revealed in the Old Testament* (Cincinnati: RCL Benziger, unpublished), ix.

The first reason is a lack of engaging issues of diversity. In the chapter about the Exodus, the book fails to mention the historical identification of the African American community with this biblical story. Kelly Brown Douglas, in *The Black Christ*, discusses how significant the Exodus event has been in the struggle for civil rights. Then—and earlier in African American religion and culture—the Exodus from Egypt signaled God’s liberating action in history. Brown adds that Martin Luther King Jr. believed that “God identified with Black people as God had identified with the Israelites.”¹¹ In the chapter that covers the Babylonian Captivity and Exile, the textbook completely ignores issues of exile or migration. One of the most problematic issues I encountered was a section in another chapter introducing Saint Maria Goretti.¹² Her story is used there to illustrate the concept of forgiveness. She is presented as a virtuous person who was able to forgive the man who sexually attacked and stabbed her. I brought up my objections to the publisher, explaining that this section could be rewritten to address issues of sexual aggression, bullying, or at least improper relationships among pre-adolescents. The publisher’s response was that since this textbook was going before the bishops for review, it could not take on any controversial issues.

A Covenant of Justice

The second reason I found the book wanting was this: if the central idea of this catechetical text for junior high school students is to present the Covenant as the key to

¹¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994), 40.

¹² Maria Goretti, a daughter in a poor family in Italy born in 1890, was approached at the age of eleven by a twenty-year-old neighbor who had previously made sexual advances to her which she had turned down. He approached her again with sexual advances and threatened to rape her and stab her with an awl if she did not submit to him. She refused, crying out that this action would be a mortal sin that would cause the rapist to go to hell and that she would rather die than submit, and the neighbor, Alessandro, stabbed her fourteen times. She died from her injuries a day later, expressing her forgiveness for Alessandro.

understanding God's relationship with the people, then a central aspect of that relationship is being ignored. Each chapter attempts to illustrate the different covenants that God has made in the history of salvation, yet the practice of justice as a response to the Covenant is absent. Many biblical scholars describe the faith of the people of Israel as covenantal, as a relationship that is based on the ethical claims of God's righteousness and the people's pledge of loyalty.¹³ If young people are to understand that their faith and their spirituality need to be lived concretely in real sociohistorical situations, catechetical texts should allude to what Ada María Isasi-Díaz succinctly declared: "To struggle for justice is to pray."¹⁴ In other words, faith and action go hand in hand. The catechesis that this textbook presents speaks of a one-sided, top-down covenant between God and humanity. This does not convey what the human response to that covenant has been.

Publishing companies sin by omission by not considering the reader, the catechized, the young, U.S. Latino/as, African Americans, women, or other minoritized peoples. Publishers intend to present a neutral catechism at best, or at worst a White, Eurocentric message that fails to engage. We pretend to engage a learner who is abstract and non-existent. It is sad to note that these catechetical programs conspire to perpetuate a colonialist presentation in the formation of the faith of young people. The problem is that the communal and social dimension of the people of Israel, and therefore of the Christian people, is often eviscerated. Certain key texts, such as those that deal with love and with welcoming the stranger, for example, Exodus 22:20, Leviticus 19:33, Deuteronomy 24:17, and Deuteronomy 27: 19, were ignored in the book I just described.

¹³ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 412.

¹⁴ Arturo Pérez, Consuelo Covarrubias et al., eds., *Así es: Stories of Hispanic Spirituality* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1994), 16.

In my experience, this tends to be the case at the level of catechetical material and hence in religious education classrooms. These texts, if presented and studied, could prove beneficial in presenting an authentic liberating catechesis.

There seems to be some hesitation on the part of the publishers and the USCCB's Subcommittee on the Catechism to present a clear and strong treatment of the church's social Gospel. The biblical narratives of Exodus and Exile, the papal encyclicals, and the biographies of saints that are presented need to be framed within the current sociocultural context. It is imperative that catechetical textbooks and instructional material include important and extensive sections on the contextual response that today's young people give to biblical and magisterial teaching.

Attention to Culture

What seems to be missing in catechetical publishing is a good grasp of the importance of exploring the diverse cultures that make up the church in the United States. For this task, more intentional methodologies need to be applied. A method such as the one proposed by Robert J. Schreiter may prove relevant for this task. Another concern for publishers should be to establish the relationship that exists between catechesis and culture. What Schreiter proposes is to define what he calls the local theology. This would allow catechetical authors and publishers to investigate the reality of the audience that they are engaging. This simple yet necessary process facilitates the demarcation of a contextual or local theology, which helps the readers discern how the Gospel and the church's teachings interact and become incarnate in culture. In other words, as Schreiter eloquently declares, culture is the concrete context in which interaction takes place.¹⁵ Paying attention to the reader is an important aspect of educational writing. Experienced

¹⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 21.

educators are interested in the interaction between the text and the reader. Such interaction can help explain the different levels of meaning in the instructional texts. This is important when writing for diverse populations because, as we know, readers bring to the text their own experiences and preconceptions.

I believe that critically looking at culture and analyzing the different voices that arise from culture afford an ideal starting point for the process of constructing a local liberative catechesis. In concrete human circumstances, the task of finding meaning through religious experiences is often compounded by people's sociocultural, economic, and political contexts. This is the case for minorities such as African Americans, other people of color, and Latino/as living in the United States. Religious institutions and religious instruction may afford those who find themselves on the margins the necessary environment for human flourishing. According to Thomas H. Groome, religious instruction needs to become an education

that is intentionally religious [and] is clearly a transcendent activity. In attempting to “bring things together again” (a meaning suggested by the Latin root of *religious*) in the context of ultimacy, [religious instruction] attempts to nurture to awareness and lived expression the human capacity for the transcendent . . . it encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that faithfully reflect what they perceive as ultimate in life.¹⁶

Although Groome is referring to the whole scope and sequence of catechetical instruction in the faith for believers of all ages, religious education appears to be more effective during the formative years of childhood and adolescence. Luis M. Benavides believes that authentic human

¹⁶ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 13.

growth and development is facilitated through religious instruction at an early age: “El niño necesita respeto y ayuda para su crecimiento humano y espiritual; también está necesitado de la catequesis,” he writes.¹⁷ Adolescence is typically marked by a common search for meaning and identity, yet most often young people feel alone and alienated in this pursuit. This is the point where catechesis can serve as a guide to direct people in their pursuit of meaning. John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* notes:

Adolescence . . . is also the age of deeper questioning, of anguished or even frustrating searching, of a certain mistrust of others and dangerous introspection, and the age sometimes of the first experiences of setbacks and of disappointments. Catechesis cannot ignore these changeable aspects of this delicate period of life. A catechesis capable of leading the adolescent to reexamine his or her life and to engage in dialogue, a catechesis that does not ignore the adolescent’s great questions - self-giving, belief, love and the means of expressing it . . . such a catechesis can be decisive.¹⁸

A Decisive Catechesis

In some catechetical circles, especially in the publishing world, the image of Jesus preaching in the synagogue is used to convey the idea of Jesus as a Master Teacher. Some images used in the cover of some catechetical textbooks portray Jesus reading from the scroll, as narrated by Luke, Chapter Four. The thought behind this is that just as Jesus brings the good news, catechists and teachers must also use scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church to

¹⁷ All translations are mine, unless otherwise specified. This translates as: “The child needs full respect and help for his or her human and spiritual growth; he or she is also in need of catechesis.” Luis M. Benavides, *La Catequesis con niños pequeños: Cómo hablar de Dios a los niños* (Buenos Aires: Editorial San Benito, 2010), 50.

¹⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979), 38.

bring the catechizing to an intimate communion and knowledge of Christ. In the current model of conducting catechesis and religious education in the United States, too much emphasis is placed on an academic and pedagogical model of secular education. Such a model has limitations. The main issue lies in the understanding of what it means to “know.” The Hebrew understanding of the word “know,” according to William O’Malley, connotes a knowing with the whole self, but

[In the United States to] ‘know’ shifts definitively into a Greek understanding, meaning to grasp as the result of logical research, as in ‘science tells us’ or ‘2 + 2 = 4.’ (Or more to the point, ‘the Church says.’) That seemingly slight semantic shift makes all the difference between persuasion (conversion) and indoctrination (brainwashing). This model . . . does not aim at knowing God, but at knowing about God. . . . The exclusively cognitive smother the affective.¹⁹

In my experience in catechesis, there is too much emphasis on performance and expectations. Too many parents, catechists, directors of religious education, and even bishops, place too much stress on an educational program rather than on a catechetical process. Furthermore, epistemologically, the secular educational model places emphasis on the “hard sciences” and creates a deficient way of “knowing.”

There seems to be an empirical epistemology underlying catechetical expectations. It is that of an education that relies too much on a conversion based on evidence rather than on the Christian witness of the lives of educators, parents, and church leaders. This misplaced emphasis goes contrary to what the Catholic Church has underscored in recent times to be effective

¹⁹ William J. O’Malley, SJ, “Faulty Guidance: A New Framework for High School Catechesis Fails to Persuade,” *America*, September 14, 2009, 12.

learning. The Vatican Congregation for the Clergy stresses the role of the Christian community in the task of catechesis in its 1997 document *General Directory for Catechesis*: “These are the profound reasons for which the Christian community is in herself [*sic*] living catechesis. Thus she [*sic*] proclaims, celebrates, works, and remains always a vital, indispensable and primary *locus* of catechesis.”²⁰ The whole community is important in catechesis, which goes beyond the classroom to a catechesis derived from the liturgy as well. A properly inculturated catechetical process thus allows the learners to model their lives on the idea of communion of persons.

Leonardo Boff, in *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, offers a thorough theological explanation of the reality of church and society in relation to the concept of the Triune God. Boff claims that only in re-envisioning society and church through a Trinitarian lens can we contextualize the process of catechesis and evangelization. Boff challenges the conception of church that seems to prevail in most religious institutions. He believes that this prevailing view of the church as an institution has been detrimental to the work of the church:

As an institution in history, the Church has developed within the Western framework, which is strongly marked by the concentration of power in a few hands. It has been inculturated into settings where monarchical power, the principle of authority and property prevailed over other values more oriented toward community and society.²¹

The new society Boff calls for is one that is founded on a Trinitarian understanding, in other words, one built on the relational aspect of human and divine life. This is truly a whole-

²⁰ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (1997), 141, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html.

²¹ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000), xii.

community catechetical model based on the communion of persons that is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This, I believe, can and must be epitomized not only in catechetical settings, but also in the ritualization of the faith. Keith F. Peckler, S.J., in his essay “The Liturgical Assembly at the Threshold of the Millennium: A North American Perspective,” agrees with Boff’s critique of church and society:

In the conciliar liturgy, the assembly has again become the primary symbol of the liturgy: the subject rather than the object of liturgical action, providing the proper context for all liturgical ministry. Presiders and musicians, readers, servers, and ministers of hospitality, deacons and eucharistic ministers, are first and foremost members of the assembly and their servant-role only makes sense in relationship to the assembly.²²

Liturgically, through the mystery that is the church, the gathered assembly represents the best understanding of the community of believers in reciprocal interaction with the community of persons that is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. According to Boff, the mystery of the church finds expression through the historical event that is the incarnation, and therefore, the gathered community can also bring about the same image of Trinitarian relationship.²³ This is accomplished when the whole community understands that collaboration and communion have to take place between ordained and lay people, between presider and gathered assembly, and between divine and human persons. The community serves as this privileged encounter when we do not allow unity to become uniformity. Boff believes that for ecclesial institutions to go from

²² Keith F. Pecklers, S.J., “The Liturgical Assembly at the Threshold of the Millennium: A North American Perspective,” *Liturgy for the New Millennium: A Commentary on the Revised Sacramentary*, ed. in Mark R. Francis and Keith F. Pecklers (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000), 54.

²³ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 65.

church-societies to church communities, “We must be converted to the Trinity to recover diversity and communion, which create the dynamic unity that is ever open to new enrichment.”²⁴

From Ritual to Action

Pope Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* points to the centrality of the liturgical celebration in the catechetical process. For catechesis to lead to authentic liberation, the communal and celebratory aspect of the human drama cannot be neglected. If both catechized and catechists pay attention to culture, they are fully aware of how this drama plays itself out. Through a properly inculturated catechesis, those who are catechized can explore the sacrament and the life of faith and see how these bring meaning to the life of their communities. Children, adolescents, and adults can thus become conversant in the diverse ways in which the Christian community is called to live out the faith in ethical service to others.

Those receiving instruction are then able to appreciate the role of God’s revelation in the world. An investigation of the society in which they are immersed, a systematic study of the foundations of the Christian faith, and the study of the sacraments and prayer life of the church, in addition to the lived experience of worship, offer the catechized a concrete setting for the meeting of culture and tradition. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* offers an analysis of society and culture and emphasizes the place of the proclamation of the Word of God. It presents a continual process of conversion and inculturation:

For the Christian community is never closed upon itself. The intimate life of [the] community—the life of listening to the Word and the apostles’ teachings, charity, lived in a fraternal way, the sharing of bread, this intimate life only acquires its full meaning

²⁴ Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, 67.

when it becomes a witness, when it evokes admiration and conversion, and when it becomes the preaching and proclamation of the Good News. Thus it is the whole Church that receives the mission to evangelize, and the work of each individual member is important for the whole. The Church is an evangelizer, but she [*sic*] begins by being evangelized herself [*sic*]. She [*sic*] is the community of believers, the community of hope lived and communicated.²⁵

An inculturated catechesis is one that follows a process of formation that leads to conversion.

This model should contain religious instruction, community service, the development of a life of prayer, and the celebration of the liturgy. These practices may serve as a lens through which catechetical instruction can be offered. An inculturated catechesis that leads to liberation must take into account the entire person. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* makes the case for a liberative praxis that is born from divine-human interaction. It affirms that evangelization “cannot be contained in the simple and restricted dimension of economics, politics, social or cultural life; it must envisage the whole man [*sic*], in all his [*sic*] aspects.”²⁶ Consequently, a catechetical model such as the one currently in place in the United States and which the publishing companies promote cannot limit itself to stressing only practical outcomes, such as sacramental preparation.

U.S. Latino/a Christology and Anthropology

After the Second Vatican Council and amid the changes contemporary society is undergoing, there is a need for religious innovation and variation. Allan Figueroa Deck, S.J., understands the church’s need to formulate a more effective method for faith development and spirituality. About the way in which new immigrant groups are influencing and shaping the

²⁵ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 9.

²⁶ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20.

church in this country, Figueroa Deck writes: “These new communities, which are quickly transforming the face of the Catholic Church in the United States, demand imagination and creative thinking on the part of those who are trying to provide them with opportunities for spiritual development.”²⁷ The new understanding of catechesis that I am proposing here is one that takes into consideration the characteristics of U.S. Latino/a spirituality, combines and applies them to the issues at the crux of our cultural reality, and produces an effective means of mediating the Word of God. This approach is not directed only to U.S. Latino/as since U.S. Latino/a spirituality by nature has as one of its pillars a profound sense of personal relationships and hospitality.²⁸ This is also what Mark E. Wedig, O.P. and Jorge L. Presmanes, O.P., stress in their article “Reflections on ‘Communities of Salt and Light’: Preaching the Social Mission of the Church in the Hispanic/Latino Parish.” These authors believe that ministers in U.S. Latino/a communities need to keep in mind that

advocacy for social justice and social mission in Hispanic/Latino communities remains not as abstract principles to be lived out, but as concrete relationships with others who have been exiled by political and economic estrangement. Fundamental to social mission is the tremendous desire to help those who are in need, likened to the way God has accompanied them in their exile.²⁹

²⁷ Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, “Christian Spirituality: A New Model,” *America*, January 3-10, 2005, 9.

²⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Hispanic Ministry: Three Major Documents* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1995), 88.

²⁹ Jorge L. Presmanes, OP and Mark E. Wedig, OP, “Reflections on ‘Communities of Salt and Light’: Preaching the Social Mission of the Church in the Hispanic/Latino Parish,” in *Preaching the Teaching*, ed. Kenneth G. Davis and Leopoldo Pérez (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2005), 64.

U.S. Latino/a Christians respond with action because they understand that faith and action are intimately linked. The experiences of immigration and exile facilitate a particular reading of scripture and serve as fertile ground for the seed of God's Word to be planted in their lives.

A well-formulated catechesis is one that sees the practice of daily prayer and meditation as the privileged place for the intersection of people's daily struggles and the interpretation of scriptures. This can be seen as a means of bridging text and culture. This vision is one that does not understand prayer as a text to be delivered during the performance of a ritual. Prayer is the art of eliciting the deepest sentiments that lie at the core of the human person. It means to draw from the well of one's own essence and to tap into one's spirituality.

The United States' bishops state that preaching (and hence catechesis) must start with the gathered assembly and not with the preacher or with the homily itself.³⁰ This echoes Jorge L. Presmanes and Kenneth G. Davis's assertion,

To begin with the assembly is to enter into the complexities of the life, dreams and hopes of a people, [means] to delve into the concreteness of their culture and to theologize from this unique and privileged source of revelation . . . a theology from below that is grounded in the cultural context of the people who comprise the . . . assembly.³¹

What I am emphasizing here is the importance of the community in the catechetical process. The whole-community catechesis approach is one that takes into consideration the reality of the community, symbols, rituals, and ethical agency. As Schreiter states in *Constructing Local Theologies*, "The experience of the cultural rootedness of theology rebounds again on a local

³⁰ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Fulfilled in your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1982), 3-4.

³¹ Kenneth G. Davis and Jorge L. Presmanes, OP, eds., *Preaching and Culture in Latino Congregations* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2000), 6-7.

community when it engages the church tradition, entering into that dialogue to test, affirm, and challenge its own understanding of the gospel.”³² The USCCB echoes this sentiment in its text,

Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity:

The encounter with the living Jesus Christ is the “path to conversion, communion and solidarity.” . . . This personal encounter with the risen Lord, so abundantly recounted in the Gospels, Epistles and Acts of the Apostles, leads to a daily vision of the Lord present and active in the world, especially in the poor, in the stranger, and in the migrant and refugee.³³

Ecclesiological and Sociocultural Implications

The demands of the Gospel must be lived in a specific culture and society, in a particular time. According to *Gaudium et Spes*, “the term ‘culture’ means the specific way in which human beings belonging to a given people cultivate their relationship with nature, with each other, and with God, in order to arrive at ‘an authentic and full humanity.’”³⁴ For this to be accomplished, culture and the message of the Gospel must be in continual dialogue through a well-developed catechesis. As the bishops again proclaim in *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish*, the gospel message that arises out of such dialogue “takes on new urgency in light of the increasing clarity and strength of Catholic social teaching and the signs of declining respect for human life and human dignity in society. We [must] preach a gospel of justice and peace in a rapidly changing world and troubled nation. Our faith is tested by the

³² Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 75.

³³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2002), 177.

³⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 8.

violence, injustice, and moral confusion that surround us.”³⁵ In my estimation, the scope and sequence of catechetical curricula, the textbook and programs, as well as symbols, rituals, and everything else that is involved in this endeavor, ought to eloquently describe the ethical dimensions of divine revelation. Catechesis in its entirety must provide ample basis for the articulation of a theologically sound social ministry in the community.

A liberative catechetical process needs to emerge from scriptural texts, liturgical action, and powerful symbols and rituals that involve the whole community so that they may inspire ethical agency. For catechesis to be liberative, it must point to what Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts. According to him, the purpose of liberation is to create a new humanity by encountering God in history:

The stress on communion and fellowship as the ultimate meaning of human life; the insistence on a love which is manifested in concrete actions, with “doing” being favored over simple “knowing”, and the revelation of the human mediation necessary to reach the Lord. The human person is destined to total communion with God and to the fullest fellowship with all other persons. . . . To be saved is to reach the fullness of love; it is to enter into the circle of charity which unites the three Persons of the Trinity; it is to love as God loves. . . . But this charity exists only in concrete actions (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, etc.); it occurs of necessity in the fabric of relationships among persons . . . To know God is to do justice.³⁶

³⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Communities of Salt and Light: Reflections on the Social Mission of the Parish* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 1994), 45.

³⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*, 15th anniv. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 113.

Bishops, pastors, catechists, teachers, and other ministers must attempt to communicate to the those being catechized not only that God's self-communication happens in the most unexpected places, but that this revelation demands a loving response in order that we might enter into fellowship with God and one another. The challenge is to inculturate this message and offer a rereading of scriptures and a reframing of catechetical models that fit the demands of culture.

Latino/a Sources for Evangelization and Catechesis

Factors that can create a liberative catechesis in addition to the ones mentioned above can help bring about a more constructive way of catechizing. A catechetical process that attends to the demands of culture, one that is attentive to the needs of the learners, must engage the entire community. If sacred scripture and tradition form the foundation of catechesis, then those who teach must filter these through the lenses used by the diverse communities who make up the church in the United States. The African American community has an abiding love and respect for scriptures. Cyprian Davis, OSB, writes, "The words of the Bible involve us today. Christ is on His cross down the street. The Samaritan woman is at Jacob's well on the corner. Moses goes down to Pharaoh at the state capital."³⁷ Such understanding of scriptures is important for catechesis because it opens up an entry point to how this particular group in society relates to and reads the Bible. This is what Justo González terms contextuality, which "provides new and valuable insights into the meaning of Scripture, of the gospel, and of doctrines in general."³⁸ An effective catechesis, then, is one that brings together human experience and places it in conversation with tradition, the doctrine of the church, and sacred scripture, all in the context of

³⁷ Cyprian Davis, OSB, "Understanding the African American Community," in *A Vincentian Guide to Diversity/Multicultural Issues* (St. Louis: Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, 2012), 37.

³⁸ Justo L. González, "Contextual Theologies," in *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 38.

diverse cultural realities. Hosffman Ospino, in his book *Evangelización y catequesis en el ministerio hispano*, advances the centrality of human experience as an indispensable source for catechesis: “La catequesis como actividad evangelizadora de la Iglesia, por consiguiente, comienza poniendo atención a las distintas dimensiones de la vida de los creyentes que participan en ella, facilita el encuentro con el mensaje de Dios por medio de Jesucristo y su Iglesia.”³⁹ This emphasis on human experience not only facilitates a better understanding of catechesis and the place it has on the life of diverse populations, but also allows proper grounding for the many other sources of catechesis. Human experience, in other words, is the place where a liberative catechesis can evolve through other rich cultural expressions that catechists need to explore.

Popular Catholicism and Devotions

Popular piety has traditionally been a privileged way for people to express their faith, trust, and devotion to God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. People pray and celebrate these devotions through songs, fiestas, processions, pilgrimages, novenas, and other practices. These celebrations are popular because they are lived communally, domestically, and publicly. For those who celebrate popular devotions, the spiritual life is not limited exclusively to the liturgy. These practices foster incessant prayer and a variety of practices of prayer. Popular devotions do not substitute for the church’s liturgical life, but they extend the life of the church to everyday human experiences. Popular Catholic devotions can be understood as liturgical celebrations of life that are ends in themselves. Domestic and family life serves as the principal locus of popular

³⁹ “Catechesis as an evangelizing activity of the Church, therefore begins by paying attention to the different dimensions of the life of believers who participate in it, facilitates the encounter with God’s message through Jesus Christ and his Church.” Hosffman Ospino, *Evangelización y catequesis en el ministerio hispano: Guía para la formación en la fe* (Liguori: Libros Liguori, 2013), 54.

devotions, which include participation in public, sacramental, and interpersonal relationships with family, neighbors, and God, Jesus, and the saints. Popular religion is a rich source for catechesis.

Orlando Espín understands popular religion as epistemology. In his book *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism*, Espín proposes that we approach popular devotions as an epistemological network, “a *communication relationship* among interconnected nodes that have the capability of transferring data from one to another.”⁴⁰ Espín is another scholar who highlights the importance of human experience in the faith of believers. In constructing a U.S. Latino/a epistemology, Espín believes that “it is the social and historical *experiencia* of the Latino communities that serves as the shaping matrix for the construction of these [epistemological] nodes.”⁴¹ Sixto García believes that popular devotions can also serve as hermeneutics born out of the praxis, reflection, and intuitions of a people:

The popular religious celebrations, reflection, belief, and praxis of the community, insofar as they reflect the community’s understanding of their relation with God, constitute popular hermeneutics. Through their liturgy, their prayer, their thematic or nonthematic articulations of God, Jesus, Mary, and the church, the community expresses their understanding, their grasp—ultimately, their exegesis—of their faith experience.⁴²

⁴⁰ Orlando O. Espín, *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 163.

⁴¹ Espín, *The Faith of the People*, 164.

⁴² Sixto J. García, “A Hispanic Approach to Trinitarian Theology: The Dynamics of Celebration, Reflection and Praxis,” in *We Are a People!*, ed. Roberto Goizueta (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), 114.

Ospino, Espín, and García all speak of the centrality of human experience and its importance for the catechetical, epistemological, or hermeneutical aspect of living the faith. The U.S. Latino/a community understands its lived experiences as a source for concretely encountering the sacred and thus living ethically and at the service of others.

A Renewed Catechesis

The sources for catechesis highlighted above, which mirror a process of conversion and catechetical formation, can be further enriched by understanding the diverse contexts in which minorities live and enact their agency. In other words, community life, with its celebrations, its epistemological networks, and its popular hermeneutics, is also a foundational source for catechesis. Those in charge of catechesis could foster in their programs a more concrete way of living out this reality by forming those who are being catechized in small communities.

Traditionally, small base communities, in Latin America and other parts of the world, have served to provide spaces for solidarity, communal reflection on doctrine, and prayer. Small Christian base communities are also instrumental means of living the Gospel in concrete sociohistorical circumstances. This is how *Evangelii Nuntiandi* describes them:

In some regions they appear and develop, almost without exception, within the Church, having solidarity with her [*sic*] life, being nourished by her [*sic*] teaching and united with her [*sic*] pastors. In these cases, they spring from the need to live the Church's life more intensely, or from the desire and quest for a more human dimension such as larger ecclesial communities can only offer with difficulty, especially in the big modern cities which lend themselves both to life in the mass and to anonymity. . . . [They can provide an] extension on the spiritual and religious level—worship, deepening of faith, fraternal charity, prayer . . . Or again their aim may be to bring together, for the purpose of

listening to and meditating on the Word, for the sacraments and the bond of the agape, groups of people who are linked by age, culture, civil state or social situation: married couples, young people, professional people, etc.; people who already happen to be united in the struggle for justice, brotherly aid to the poor, [and] human advancement.⁴³

This renewed approach to the catechetical process, which highlights human experience, epistemology, hermeneutics, and ethical service to the community is one that is born out of a concrete encounter with the Christian message mediated by culture.

As I have previously argued, catechetical praxis should be understood to flow from theological reflection, ritualization of the faith, and ethical action. Small base communities need to be seen as a reflection of the early church that puts us in touch anew with our Catholic tradition. The documents of the 1968 Second Latin America Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, identify the impact that these small ecclesial base communities have in the life of the church:

La vivencia de la comunión, a la que ha sido llamado, debe encontrarla el cristiano en su comunidad de base, es decir, una comunidad local o ambiental, que corresponda a la realidad de un grupo homogéneo, y que tenga una dimensión tal que permita el trato personal fraterno entre sus miembros. Por consiguiente, el esfuerzo pastoral de la Iglesia debe estar orientado a la transformación de esas comunidades en familia de Dios.⁴⁴

⁴³ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 58.

⁴⁴ “The Christian ought to find the living of the communion, to which he has been called in his ‘base community,’ that is to say, in a community, local or environmental, which corresponds to the reality of a homogeneous group and whose size allows for personal fraternal contact among its members. Consequently, the church’s pastoral efforts must be oriented towards the transformation of these communities into a family of God.” Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano (CELAM), “Documentos de Medellín,” available from http://www.mercaba.org/PARROQUIAS/comunidad_eclesial_de_base.htm.

For there to be an authentic liberative catechesis based on the life and preaching of Jesus, the Master teacher, a return to the communal, and basic character that the small communities provide must be fostered in educational and catechetical efforts of the church in the United States.

No Text without Context

Citing Orlando Espín and Allan Figueroa Deck, practical theologians Jorge Presmanes and Alicia Marill offer a clear explanation of culture as context. They write that “culture is not only the epistemological key that opens the door to the understanding of a particular human group or society, but also, in the context of the Church’s evangelizing mission, the gateway through which the Good News of the Gospel can be effectively communicated.”⁴⁵ It is evident that for the message to be grasped and to be liberative, it must be inculturated. The *General Directory for Catechesis* understands it thus. The directory seeks to orient those charged with catechesis to the task of properly grounding and guiding the message that needs to be communicated. Culture serves as the context for this message. Jesus himself is the message that needs to be communicated:

The Word of God became man, a concrete man, in space and time and rooted in a specific culture: “Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the men among whom he lived.” This is the original “inculturation” of the word of God and is the model of all evangelization by the Church.⁴⁶

From this perspective, it is easier to develop an inculturated catechesis based on a renewed reading of the Lucan Jesus, who bases his teaching at the synagogue on the 61st chapter of Isaiah.

⁴⁵ Jorge Presmanes and Alicia Marill, “Hispanic Ministry and Theology,” in *Hispanic Ministry in the 21st Century: Present and Future*, ed. Hosffman Ospino (Miami: Convivium, 2010), 85.

⁴⁶ *General Directory for Catechesis*, 109.

Evanglizing Through an Inculturated Catechesis

We can infer from the *General Directory for Catechesis* that the liberative message is Jesus Christ himself and, that echoing Schreiter, inculturation is the word used to describe the proper relationship between faith and culture.⁴⁷ A renewed catechetical theological process, then, looks at culture and message. It must intentionally filter culture through faith, while at the same time, preach and teach faith in the concrete reality of time and space. The image that catechetical textbooks like to use to illustrate the teaching ministry of Jesus in the synagogue can elucidate an inculturated reading of the mission of Jesus as presented by Luke. The evangelist clearly presents the ministry of Jesus as something that is inculturated in the time and space of his own reality and that of first-century Jews. Moreover, the Lucan Jesus is someone who can incorporate tradition and customs into his ministerial practice. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is present at the synagogue and in the Temple. Luke's readers are aware that Jesus and his family follow Jewish tradition and law. We can deduce that Jesus was someone who incorporated Jewish scripture and ritual into his preaching, echoing the ethical dimension of a covenantal faith. Brevard S. Childs points to the importance of Luke's own understanding of history and Jewish scripture. For Childs, "Luke is interested first in establishing the nature of the messianic hope . . . from the side of the Old Testament."⁴⁸ Maintaining fidelity to tradition and custom is important for catechesis. Jesus was clearly a person of tradition who was raised in the faith of his community and family. In the synagogue, when he presents the liberating message that he comes

⁴⁷ Robert Schreiter, "Faith and Cultures: Challenges to a World Church," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 747.

⁴⁸ Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 279.

to preach and explain, he effortlessly connects it to the messianic hopes and expectations of the people.

Liberation Born from an Inculturated Catechesis

In more practical terms, Jesus knows which version of the passage from Isaiah he wants to highlight or omit. According to Raymond E. Brown, Jesus “omits those elements which would spiritualize the text or narrow its focus on “true” Israel.... He [also] adds... the true fast Yahweh desires and which refers to releasing those who are burdened by indebtedness.”⁴⁹ If human experience is fundamental for understanding and assimilating the message, then it is important that we as ministers pay attention to the social and physical location of those we serve.

Continuing with the idea that Jesus inculturates his message so that it can effectively be grasped by his hearers, the setting in which this message is being delivered needs to be considered.

Robert Pazmiño speaks of Galilee, the region where Jesus lived and where most of his ministry took place. This was a place full of religious and ethnic diversity, a place where people were bilingual and, in a sense, bicultural. Pazmiño writes: “It was in this very context of Galilee that God chose to be incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet it is the very nature of this multicultural context which is often ignored in considering Christian religious education today.”⁵⁰ As we read the Lucan narrative, we are aware that the people of Nazareth reject both the message and the messenger. We can argue that the people in this region were so oppressed and imprisoned that they could not heed the liberating message that the Messiah was bringing

⁴⁹ Robert J. Karris, “The Gospel According to Luke,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 690.

⁵⁰ Robert W. Pazmiño, “Double Dutch,” in *Voces: Voices from the Hispanic Church*, ed. Justo L. González (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 139.

them. Jesus attempts to ground and contextualize his liberative message in the reality of his time. In the same manner, an effective liberative catechesis must be contextualized because the socio-historical, economic, and political realities of people give rise to specific questions that the Christian message must answer in meaningful ways. Here lies the true liberation that this renewed catechetical process seeks.

New Ecclesial Model

Our new sociocultural and religious situation presents specific demands for catechists and pastoral agents as well as for catechetical publishers. The challenge lies in reappraising the novelty of reframing faith concepts through new means of communication. This means re-envisioning catechesis as well as the catechetical process. In other words, a new paradigm is needed for this process. U.S. Latino/a theology, and other theologies that come from the margins, are poised to better present the liberative message of the faith to the emerging faith of the Catholic Church in the United States. Virgilio Elizondo, in his seminal book *Galilean Journey*, offers such a paradigm shift in re-envisioning the faith. Michael E. Lee offers great insights into Elizondo's hermeneutical lens of *mestizaje*. This concept, one that has been used for quite some time in U.S. Latino/a theology, although not unproblematic, may offer a valid interpretative key to understand the mission of Jesus of Nazareth in the formulation of a liberative catechesis. Lee writes: "Following David Tracy's understanding of theology as the mutually critical correlation between an interpretation of a faith and an interpretation of a contemporary situation, I would characterize *Galilean Journey* . . . as a foundational correlational text of Latino/a systematic theology with important christological implications."⁵¹ Even though this concept of *mestizaje*,

⁵¹ Michael E. Lee, "The Galilean Jesus as Faithful Dissenter: Latino/a Christology and the Dynamics of Exclusion," in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community*, ed. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallanes (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 18.

which is so central to understand U.S. Latino/a theology, may be foreign to the understanding of race in the White, Eurocentric United States, it is important for the construction of a liberative catechesis.

Reading the Gospel from this perspective is a culturally conditioned endeavor that must be used to shed light on the cultural situatedness of those on the margins.⁵² This goes beyond seeing the concept of *mestizaje* in a spiritual dimension, but more importantly, to being conversant with the implications this concept has for catechetics and theological inquiry. It provides us a key to understand that Jesus of Nazareth was a *mestizo*, and that as such, he lived in two cultures, two sociocultural and linguistic realities. This afforded him two interpretive horizons or perspectives for his own life and ministry.

Conclusion: A Theology of Culture

The work of theology is not monolithic: it draws from different sources to create a viable framework for understanding the reality of God and human life. In U.S. Latino/a human experience, especially in popular devotions, with their particular epistemology and hermeneutics, beauty is considered to be revelatory. Theology, in other words, can disclose the aesthetic and ethical character of human action. Marill and Presmanes write:

Ministry as inculturation is thus the process through which the universality of the Gospel message is preached by the Church and the faithful respond in the concreteness of time and in the particularity of culture. As a result, the key to inculturation lies in the Church's capacity to discover a unity of faith diversely expressed through symbolic structure and social practices of a specific culture.⁵³

⁵² Lee, "The Galilean Jesus as Faithful Dissenter," 20.

⁵³ Presmanes and Marill, "Hispanic Ministry and Theology," 86-87.

This means that people's actions are mediated by symbols. Their action and participation in life, *en lo cotidiano*, reveal God. In this divine-human exchange and interaction, as expressed and celebrated in popular devotions, in the liturgical celebration of life, a liberative praxis is disclosed. This U.S. Latino/a anthropology and ecclesiology based in human experience and celebrations have a direct relation to understanding the concept of a *mestizaje* of faith, culture, race, language, and human life.

Doctrine, liturgy, and the sacraments are thus understood differently. Furthermore, narratives, symbols, and rituals disclose for U.S. Latino/as permanent possibilities of meaning and truth. For example, the human person is understood as relational. This means that religious education and catechesis must capitalize on what it means for U.S. Latino/as to be in relationship with others. A liberative catechetical process must move the heart because popular devotions and the other prominent sources of catechesis, and their narratives, symbols, and rituals, manifest God's love in concrete situations, especially in persons considered least significant. Pope John Paul II declared in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*:

Before His own townspeople, in Nazareth, Christ refers to the words of the prophet Isaiah . . . These phrases, according to Luke, are His first messianic declaration. They are followed by the actions and words known through the Gospel . . . It is very significant that the people in question are especially the poor, those without means of subsistence, those deprived of their freedom.⁵⁴

Catechists and those who teach and publish need to be cognizant that for the U.S. Latino/a community, truth is not a concept or thing to be taught. Rather, it is a human event in which

⁵⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, 3.

ethical relationships with God and others are lived, experienced, and celebrated. As Pope Francis states:

Christians express their faith through popular piety. . . . It is truly “a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly.” Nor is it devoid of content; rather it discovers and expresses that content more by way of symbols than by discursive reasoning . . . a legitimate way of living the faith, a way of feeling part of the Church and a manner of being missionaries.⁵⁵

A catechesis influenced by secular models, such as the one in place in the United States, cannot be a catechesis that calls to conversion, to a transformation of heart, mind, and soul. The catechized need to be “impregnated” with the Word of God.⁵⁶ A liberative catechesis requires intimacy; hence it cannot flow from a merely pragmatic or practical worldview.

A renewed catechesis that leads to liberation, whether in print or electronically disseminated, a catechesis that is celebrated and lived by the entire community, to echo *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, moves beyond conventional notions of teaching to an authentic witness of life. It must give hope in something not seen or imagined.⁵⁷ A properly inculturated catechesis helps to conceive and understand the unimaginable. The best catechesis is one that, just like popular devotions, stimulates the imagination and the heart, not only the mind.

⁵⁵ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 125.

⁵⁶ *Catechesi Traedende*, 20.

⁵⁷ *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 21.