Teaching US Hispanic popular religiosity

Valuable lessons for the spirituality of our times

Eduardo C. Fernández

IN READING LAST YEAR'S TEACHING EVALUATIONS for a course I have taught for a few years now, Hispanic Religious Expressions, an exploration of popular religiosity as manifested in the US Latino population, I was particularly struck by one phrase: 'Thank you for sharing this rich spirituality with me.' Nowhere in the title of this course does the word spirituality appear. I did not make a conscious effort, moreover, to design the class as an exploration of Hispanic spirituality.[1] Influenced by my social science background, I intended chiefly to introduce the students to Latino popular devotions, describing their many forms and some of the anthropological and sociological underpinnings, and then to relate these to theology. But over the years of examining its various themes, I have seen that my classes have known better. In fact, themes relevant to all spiritualities, such as prayer, personal experience, integration, beauty, embodiment and identity, surfaced repeatedly, whether the students were Hispanic or not. In fact, this course has often served as a corrective experience for an approach to faith which is excessively cerebral. By accenting the role of family and community, the centrality of emotion, oral tradition and the human need for symbol, the educative process aims to take the students beyond verbal concepts to a closer embodiment of them. This article describes the goals, methods and outcomes of our time spent exploring popular religiosity, times which yielded valuable lessons for all wishing to pursue a deeper, incarnated spirituality.

Either as Latinas or Latinos themselves, or simply as persons of other ethnic or racial groups who are interested in the spiritual life, these students have convinced me of the centrality of this aspect of human experience. As one Latino who is in the process of rediscovering his cultural roots commented:

> Within the Latino culture, religion and religious expressions go hand in hand with culture. Regardless of particular cultural or ethnic backgrounds, faith and its rich varieties of devotional expressions communicate a reality that is an intrinsic and dynamic element of what it means to be Latino. To be Latino is to express a natural affinity to and for religion and religious expressions.[2]

Thus my students have convinced me that Hispanic popular religiosity has much to teach us today. After introducing the topic and its various manifestations in Latino culture, I describe the course's content and method. The final portion of the article outlines some specific contributions or lessons we have gleaned together from our explorations.

THE FAITH OF THE PEOPLE

What is popular religion?

Robert Schreiter provides one of the best summaries of what goes by the name of 'popular religiosity or religion' or 'popular devotions'.[3] He outlines three perspectives shaped by linguistic as well as ideological differences: first, literally meaning 'of the people', the terms can connote either all of the people in general or one specific class. In Latin America, the Spanish word *popular* is associated with the lower socioeconomic class. In North America, on the other hand, 'popular' refers to the majority, which is middle class. Second: another term used is 'folk religion'. While meaning 'popular' as in the 'simple folk', it also embodies a certain nineteenth-century ideology which exalts the poor as the subjects of history. Seen as the keepers of wisdom against the threat of modernization, the life of peasants is romanticized. Finally, the term 'common religion' suggested by the sociologist Robert Towler, 'emphasizes the fact that the more theological or doctrinal understandings of religion are usually the province of but a small segment of the population, which has been entrusted with the maintenance of religious institutions'.[4] Most people's experience of religion is much broader than that maintained by the institutions.

My own use of the term 'popular' parallels its use in Spanish *popular*, that is, having to do with the poor. C. Gilbert Romero translates *religiosidad popular* (popular religiosity) as 'devotional piety', adding that 'the word *piety* for me conveys the notion of the deep faith of simple people (simple in the sense of the Spanish word *sencillo*, unpretentious)'.[5] It is not my intention here to expand much

further on the use of these terms – 'popular religion', 'religiosity', 'devotional piety', 'folk religion', etc. – but rather to point out their connection with the faith of poor or marginal persons as well as their relation to other aspects of human experience, be they political, economic, anthropological, or other.[6]

A methodological shift to human experience

The current interest in popular religion on the part of theologians and pastoral theorists is the product of a move towards an inductive (and therefore less deductive) method of doing theology and ministry. A contextual reading of Scripture which takes into account time, place and literary genre (as opposed to a literal reading which lacks historical consciousness) has produced a rediscovery of metaphorical thinking. A theology supported by a solid spirituality pursues not so much 'clear and distinct' ideas about the divinity, as ways of surrendering to the mystery which is God. After all, as Schreiter reminds us, religion is ultimately about a way of life, not simply a view of life.[7] Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan taught us to pay close attention, not only to Scripture and tradition, but also to the 'the life and mind, the context and interests, of the persons doing theology'.[8] In paying more attention to who is doing the theologizing, modern theological methods have enlisted the services of the social sciences, particularly sociology and anthropology. What is resulting is a rich ecclesial mosaic whose composite beauty reveals a universal Church rooted in both the particular and the most catholic, or universal. Today, possibly more than ever, the faith experience of the poor cannot be ignored. For reasons of mass conversions in some areas such as Africa, a history of Iberian Catholicism in others, coupled with the decline of mainline religion in the northern hemisphere, the Church's members are most likely to be found in the southern. At a time when the adjective 'post-Christian' is being used to describe the culture in developed countries, the faith experience of the poor who are found both among them, as well as overwhelmingly in developing countries, cannot be ignored. These are among the reasons why we fellow Christians must pay attention to their form of spirituality or *religiosidad popular*.[9] Such Hispanic theologians as Orlando Espín, Jeanette Rodríguez, Roberto Goizueta, Alejandro García-Rivera, and Edwin David Aponte, moreover, are convinced that this faith of the people provides an important *locus theologicus*, or context for doing theology.[10]

In the various Hispanic communities living in the United States, this popular religiosity, found in various forms among Catholics and

Protestants, often takes the form of devotional practices which centre upon the crucified Christ, as well as Mary and the saints. Particular manifestations include home altars, the use of holy water and other sacramentals, street processions, the rosary, novenas, seasonal devotions such as *Posadas* during the Christmas season, and pilgrimages to sacred sites.[11]

Having described some aspects of popular religion and its relation to current theological method, I now turn to details of the class itself, especially in terms of methodology.[12]

CLASS TIME: HISPANIC RELIGIOUS EXPRESSIONS

Attentiveness to experience

This type of class must do more than talk about the experiential. Those of us who have been nourished by these types of popular religious expressions since our youth know that we were learning a great deal through our experience, even if we were not aware of it. Only later did I realize the power of embodied prayer. Memories of walking with my grandfather in a candlelight procession on Good Friday as we took the Lord to his grave,[13] or of gathering at our parish church on 12 December at 6 a.m., amidst the smell of roses, to serenade Our Lady of Guadalupe, or of singing hymns and praying the rosary in Spanish as we walked up Mount Cristo Rey on the US–Mexican border in the hot desert sun, or of seeing Matachines (Indian dancers) weave in and out like butterflies as we processed in a poor neighbourhood with the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – all are connected with walking, singing, dancing, seeing, hearing, smelling, and the wonderful tasting of meals after! Because these customs have endured for centuries, they represent a tried pedagogy, one which acknowledges that 'experience is the best teacher'.

If theology, as some have said, is the second moment, and experience is the first, then this course had, within the confines of academia, to start with experience, even if it is not directly our own. A novel or biography often starts the course readings. What better way of inviting my students to see this world through the eyes of another! Two autobiographical works which have sparked interest with classes are *Rain of gold* and *A place in El Paso: a Mexican American childhood*.[14] Convinced that one story leads to another, we listened to each other as students talked about the times they found themselves between places, cultures and growth stages. Often details from a particular time and place would trigger important memories in the lives of the readers who

most often found themselves far away from those faith experiences of early childhood. There is the case of the young Latina, for example, who was struck by the gnarled hands of a miner in *Rain of gold.* According to her grandmother, her grandfather, a man she had never met, suffered the same, having worked long hours in the mines in Mexico. This detail helped lend validity to more of her grandmother's stories, helping the student to appreciate how much the elderly woman had experienced.

Other opportunities to experience Hispanic religious expressions were videos shown in class, with time after to allow students to talk about what they found most striking and why: music from the period, place or culture being discussed that day, a translation being provided when the words of songs were not in English; slides, prints of artworks and artefacts which are often connected to these manifestations – such as the time we discussed *el Día de los Muertos* (the feast of All Souls) and how our deceased are still with us; and even a tasty morsel as we enjoyed folk art. These were all ways of getting them to see, touch, hear and taste the spirituality we were reverently entering into. Guest speakers, whom we not only listened to but also engaged in conversation, provided much experiential food for thought. In addition, all students were required to be present at some type of popular devotion and afterwards to write about it. These encounters have often been among the most valuable of the various learning exercises, even when the student attending did not speak Spanish.

Prayer began each session. For poor Hispanic communities, what we are studying is not 'popular religiosity' but ways which allow them to enter the world of the sacred. If we are ever to treat their spiritual quest with respect, not to mention our own, it was indispensable that we begin each class with some form of recollection of how God moves through diverse experiences.

A time to reflect theologically

History served as a context for helping us to understand these popular faith expressions manifested in various Latino communities. Even though most of my students grew up in the United States, many commented that they were not aware of much of the history the class covered. Few, for example, were aware that Hispanics are the descendants of the first European group which came to the vast territory now known as the United States, or for that matter, that Mexico City could already boast of having a university and printing

press in 1540, more than two hundred years before the United States' Declaration of Independence from Britain.

Once we had a basic historical overview, we began to examine theological questions which surfaced. Since many of my students were preparing for ministry, their questions were often pastoral. I felt it important, however, to move beyond 'how to' answers to understanding the 'why' behind these expressions. This search for understanding the reasons behind these devotions requires much patient listening. What often resulted was a self-questioning on the part of the student as to how these theological realities were manifested in their own lives. Questions about students' use of symbol, ritual and storytelling inevitably surfaced. At times, since some of these popular religious customs occurred around important moments in life, such as birth, adolescence, marriage and death, they started to ask themselves how their particular non-Latino cultures celebrate these rites of passage.

Above all, students were encouraged to listen carefully to their communities. A particular non-Hispanic woman preparing for ministry wrote in her evaluation that one of the key things she learned in the course was 'the complexity of faith and the need to dialogue with each group in order to be an effective minister who empowers others on their faith journey – how you learn from those with whom you are ministering'. Another student in the same class sought the same goal through the ideal of what has become known as inculturation, defined by some as 'preaching the gospel in a way people can understand'.

> The purpose of inculturation therefore is not inculturation itself, but helping people live lives more connected to Christ and to develop that connection in the worship of the Church. It is important therefore to listen to the experience of the Hispanic people, rather than impose or assume the shape of a liturgy that does not take this into consideration.

LESSONS FROM THE STUDY OF POPULAR RELIGION

The many faces of beauty and truth

The ancient Aztecs, the rulers of Meso-America who were conquered by the Spanish in the sixteenth century, believed that truth was to be found in *flor y canto* (flowers and song). Cross-cultural spirituality and learning today is demonstrating that the road to truth is often through the aesthetic. As computer technology takes prominence, experts describe such environments as the World Wide Web as

consisting more of circular learning (where the community and the environment play a greater role) than of linear (which is more verbal and analytical). In a context where graphics, music and interactive capabilities are seen as teaching tools, the written word is no longer seen as the primary way of acquiring knowledge. Popular religion, with its recourse to these things, captured that reality a long time ago.

Religion: a matter of the heart

As a corrective to a faith which has been excessively intellectualized, popular faith expressions and devotions appeal to the heart. Reflecting on his exposure to this aspect of Latino culture, a student wrote:

> When one considers the affective and intellectual content of the people's faith, the affective has not lessened in import, as it seems to have in other parts of the Church. This affective part is expressed in many different ways, many of them artistic. From painting and sculpture to song and dance, the faith of the people is expressed in deep and profound ways. From the early pictographs of the catechisms to the Santos of New Mexico, we see the affective content of the faith expressed.

Stories are particularly evocative. At first I hesitated to fill my lectures with so many narratives. A written comment on a course evaluation convinced me that I was right in listening to my heart and following its lead.

> The emphasis on storytelling and anecdote is completely appropriate to the subject matter. I think that popular religion is best understood as an experience and in so far as the class can emphasize experiential learning, it is strong and valuable.

Created in the image of God

As we discovered that many of these popular devotional practices are connected with cultural self-affirmation and identity, we often found that there are many reasons for needing to make these connections. Marginal people have often been told that their religious expressions are simplistic and syncretic (as if all religious expressions did not owe their origins to a combination of various religious beliefs which must be sorted out eventually). Often the religious practices of oppressed people have been dismissed as magical or superstitious. For those of us

who have internalized these self-denigrating images, among the liberating aspects of studying these devotions is that they remind us that we come from a community of ancient believers and that God is very much alive and well in our faith communities – and, in fact in these very practices!

After viewing a video based on the popular devotions of the people at San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, a Protestant pastor remarked, 'When I see the faith of these simple people, I am reminded of the Appalachian community of faith which was home to me. Unfortunately, the seminary later taught me to see their powerful faith as being simplistic since they were uneducated country people.'[15]

Another element I have seen surface in the discussion of popular religion, especially among Hispanics, is the sense, albeit somewhat exaggerated, that everything was wrong before Vatican II and that everything is right now that it has taken place. What happens if one is from a more traditional culture which is much slower to change? Could the result be the perception that somehow one's religiosity is not authentic but very much in need of reform? Asked what was one of the key things he got out of the class, a Mexican Dominican friar remarked, 'I was able to relive the customs of my ancestors, thus imbibing their values. This historical point of reference is helpful in building up the Latino community today.' Finally, the same student writes: '[The course allowed me] to understand the complexity of my culture.'[16]

The question of the dignity of the human person in community comes through another student's comment about how the key insight gained in the course was 'a detailed overview of how popular religious expression is *not* just about "your grandmother's rosary". It's about a communal expression of what lies close to the heart of a people'.

A final area where some of my students often felt insecure about identity had to do with being in between cultures. As in the case of a Hispanic who has grown up in a very assimilated environment and may no longer speak Spanish, popular religiosity, given its ability to be inclusive, is more sensitive to the mixture of cultures. Virgilio Elizondo's latest book on Our Lady of Guadalupe, for example, demonstrates how she embodies the mixture or *mestizaje* of both European and Amerindian characteristics.[17] One of the students, much given to artistic talents, created an image in which he brought symbolic elements of both Our Lady of Guadalupe (the patroness of the Americas) and the Immaculate Conception (the patroness of the United States). Finally, one of the aspects of this history of *mestizaje* which became obvious as the weeks unfolded was that all cultures are a blend

of others. There is no such thing as a 'pure culture' and therefore, in the reign of God, there is room for all, 'Jew or gentile, slave or free, woman or man'.

Women as guardians of the tradition

My students were quick to perceive the central role of women in Hispanic popular religion. Not only have they set the religious tone in the home but they are also typically a parish community's primary catechists. In places where *comunidades de base* (Christian base communities) are strong, women play a key role in sustaining them. In fact, Robert A. Orsi, author of the work which pioneered recent interest in popular devotions in mainline Catholicism, *Madonna of 115th Street: faith and community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950*,[18] maintains that one of the reasons why popular devotions have been trivialized is that they are associated with women. 'Catholic historiography has not been good to women,' he says in the cover story for the *National Catholic Reporter*.[19] 'You can look at the major histories of American Catholics. The references to nuns are minimal. And yet nuns basically built the American church.' As one of my students noted, in the Hispanic community, '[women serve] as family religious experts, as advice-givers, in addition to and yet distinct from the official priest as pastor'.

A final caveat

In the current enthusiasm around the revival of popular devotions, we must not forget the presence of its shadow side. Segundo Galilea, who insists that popular religion be understood as a type of spirituality, offers some good pastoral approaches to help determine the extent to which popular religion embodies evangelical values. Schreiter draws from these in concluding his chapter on the topic.[20] Omitting mention here of the danger that popular religiosity might deviate from true Christian values is not meant to dismiss the real possibility of this, but rather to accent the benefits of such religiosity especially in the context of what my students and I discovered in the classroom.

Eduardo C. Fernández SJ is assistant professor of Pastoral Theology and Ministry at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Author, retreat director and national lecturer, he is currently writing a book with James Empereur SJ on Hispanics and the recovery of cosmic sacramentality.

NOTES

1 I use the terms 'Hispanic' and 'Latino/a' interchangeably to describe Latin Americans, or those of that descent, who reside permanently in the United States. For a discussion on the history and use of these terms, see my book, *La Cosecha: harvesting contemporary United States Hispanic theology (1972-1998)* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 2000), pp xviii-xix.
2 As these quotes come from anonymous students' evaluations and course synthesis work, I have chosen to preserve the anonymity of the authors. I have been privileged with a great diversity of students, as I have taught the course at a state university in El Paso, Texas, the international border place of my birth, and at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, an ecumenical gathering of nine theological schools preparing students for ministry or further academic work in theology.
3 Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (Maryknoll, New York, 1985), pp 122-143.
4 Schreiter's summary of Towler, p 124.
5 C. Gilbert Romero, *Hispanic devotional piety: tracing the biblical roots* (Maryknoll, New York, 1991), p 17.
6 Orlando Espín, the most published writer in the field of Latino popular religion, does not favour calling it 'religiosity', a word condescending to some, as if it only exists as a derivative of formal religion. 'Popular religion has all too frequently been considered an embarrassment to Catholicism. It has been derided as the superstitious result of religious ignorance, a product of syncretism, a vestige of the rural past, and an ideologically manipulated tool in the hands of those who would abuse simple folk. These accusations (and many others) do point to real issues and do express serious concerns. But when popular religion is only or mainly viewed through the prism of these accusations the result can only be prejudiced and distorted.' See his collection, *The faith of the people: theological reflections on popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, New York, 1997), p 63.
7 Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, p 126.
8 The phrase, which appears in *La Cosecha*, p 97, is that of Thomas H. Groome and Robert P. Imbelli.
9 I am reminded of the words spoken by a person from a developing country. 'You people in the first world, noting the amount of suffering and death in the world, ask yourselves, "how can there be a God?" We in the third world, however, say, "We are sure that there *is* a God because we see so much suffering and death in the world and yet we are still alive. They have not destroyed us."'
10 See *La Cosecha*, especially Chapter 2, which introduces the writings of all but the last of these theologians. Edwin David Aponte sees the popular Spanish hymn as a manifestation of Protestant popular religion. See his work, '*Coritos* as active symbol in Latino Protestant popular religion', *Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology* vol 2, no 3 (February 1995), p 57-66. For other examples of Hispanic Protestant manifestations, especially as they relate to spirituality, see Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, 'Hispanic Protestant spirituality' in *Teología en conjunto: a collaborative Hispanic Protestant theology*, ed José Davíd Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero (Louisville, Kentucky, 1997).
11 For a captivating coverage of the growing interest in popular devotions outside of a Hispanic context, see Patrick L. Malloy, 'The re-emergence of popular religion among non-Hispanic Catholics', *Worship* vol 72, no 1 (1998), pp 2-25.
12 The classroom pedagogy included lectures, readings, discussions, multimedia, and field visits.
13 This custom found in some Hispanic communities, known as *el santo entierro* ('the holy burial') consists of a procession with an image of the crucified Christ laid to rest. The figure of the Blessed Mother is also prominent at these events, at times followed by *el pésame* ('our condolences'), a sermon or rosary to accompany her in her grief.
14 Victor Villaseñor (Houston, Texas, 1991) and Gloria López-Stafford (Albuquerque, 1996).
15 I am paraphrasing his remark, recalling that he used the word 'hillbillies'. The thirty-minute film is entitled *Soul of the city* and is distributed by the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas.

16 His actual quotation in Spanish reads: 'revivir las costumbres de nuestros antepasados'; elsewhere he mentions: 'valores de los antepasados . . . la historia ayuda a construir los días presentes en la comunidad Latina . . . entendí la complejidad de mi cultura.'
17 See Virgilio Elizondo, *Guadalupe: mother of the new creation* (Maryknoll, New York, 1997).
18 New Haven, 1985.
19 4 February 2000.
20 Schreiter, pp 141-143.