



Samuel Escobar

Peruvian pastor, theologian, and missiologist, Escobar is president emeritus of the FTL and current president of the American Society of Missiology. He currently resides and works in Spain with his wife.

IMMIGRATION:

Avenue and Challenge to Mission*

To be an immigrant identifiable by skin color or the way of speaking the language of the land has become a matter of personal concern for me in recent months. Immigration is placed at the top of the European Union's political agenda these days, especially for Spain, which is a gateway into Europe for Latin Americans and Africans. Debates in the media raise fears, added now to the obsession for security in the aftermath of September 11. Like a nasty dormant ghost, immigration has become a nightmare, and extremists of the right are cashing in on it in order to achieve political power in France, Austria, and even the Netherlands. Two of the countries that have historically sent the most immigrants to other parts of the world, Italy and Spain, are now talking about tough new legislation to stop the flood of newcomers reaching their coasts.

*This article appeared in a slightly modified form in the journal *Missiology* (January 2003).

A few stories will illustrate well the challenges that immigration poses to Christian mission in Spain these days. My wife and I boarded a bus in southern Spain to go from the Andalusian city of Almería to Roquetas, a small coastal town half an hour away. A large crowd was waiting for the bus, among them some Africans, Ecuadorians, and Romanians, most of them workers in the large agro-industrial plants that are the economic heart of this region. The bus comes a bit late, and the female driver shouts at the passengers that she does not have time to sell tickets but that passengers must buy the tickets at the company ticket booth in the station. Most of us have done so, including a couple of young Africans who sit in the first row, across from the driver's seat. A Romanian passenger did not understand the instructions and gets in the bus with his five euro bill. The driver repeats the instructions, and people waiting in the long line try to explain the situation to the young Romanian. The driver continues to talk loudly about the heat and how hard it is to drive at this time of the day and that passengers must learn to be considerate. The two Africans tell her "Come on, don't talk so much and let's go." She gives them an angry look and tells them, "Mind your own business; I'm not talking to you." The young Africans laugh and start chatting in their own language. The Romanian passenger has gone to the end of the line, and when his turn comes again he pays the driver and she gives him



*“Nobody laughs at me,
not even God laughs at me!”*

the ticket and the change, plus a short lecture about the way to travel. As she starts driving and pulls out of the station, she keeps up her loud diatribe about some people’s lack of consideration and how hard her job is. We have gone two or three blocks when one of the Africans says again, “You are talking too much, just drive.” And then he and his friend start talking in their own language and laughing again. The driver stops the bus, gets out of her seat, and shouts at the Africans: “You two get off the bus. Nobody laughs at me, not even God laughs at me!” The young Africans protest, but other Africans tell them in English they ought to get off the bus. The driver says that she will not continue the trip unless they get off and that she will call the police. Finally the two Africans get off shouting their protest. For the rest of the trip we hear the driver talking with one of the passengers in the back about immigrants who come and take over their jobs and do not even respect the local people. The driver insists that she is not a racist but punctuates her conversation with the phrase “Not even God laughs at me!”

As my wife Lilly and I talk about what is going on, I try to understand the theological meaning of the statement “Not even God laughs at me!” but Lilly reminds me of the ambiguities of the situation. In Valencia, where we live, she works with a team of volunteers, serving poor immigrants in “Misión Urbana,” an inter-denominational service project of the Protestant churches of Spain. Some of the people that come looking for food or clothing tend to make excessive demands and put to the test the patience and the good will of the serving teams. Some of them are experts in how to get the best

from as many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) as possible. The accumulation of little daily incidents like these fuels the population’s general attitudes.

My second story comes from the center of Spain. During the night of May 4, 2002, in the town of Arganda just outside Madrid, a group of skinheads burned down a Romanian evangelical church and painted its walls with swastikas and racist phrases. A few days later another group of young people entered a Baptist church in Vallecas, a popular district of Madrid, during a midweek service and interrupted it. They were after a young Ecuadorian man whom they accused of having molested a young Spanish woman in the subway. Members of the church and the pastor argued with the angry young men, protecting the Ecuadorian who claimed he was innocent. After a heated discussion the attackers left. The pastor of this church is Joaquín Yebra, a colleague of mine at the Baptist Seminary. He says that these young attackers were not skinheads. They were just hooligans who had been drinking too much. But he also explains that twice a week the church provides food and medicine to approximately six hundred poor people, most of them immigrants from Morocco and Latin America. Some neighbors have protested because of the long lines that last for up to three hours, but most of the neighbors are understanding and sympathetic to what the church is doing.



It can be extremely difficult to pronounce an unpopular prophetic word to a society in panic about the waves of foreigners who have come to stay.

As I reflect on this story I am reminded of an experience that historian Justo González mentions in his book *Mañana*. When he came from Cuba to the United States, he experienced a painful transition. In Cuba he had known the condition of being part of a religious minority and some of the disadvantages related to that status. But he was unprepared for the traumatic experience of becoming part of an ethnic minority in the United States in the early 1960s. The stories of the Romanian church and the Baptist church attacked in Spain bring together the two elements. The Romanian evangelicals in Spain are at the same time a religious and an ethnic minority, and the Baptist church is part of a religious minority that serves the social needs of ethnic minorities.

In Spain the Catholic church, as well as the tiny minority of Protestant churches, has had to face the challenge of a massive wave of immigration in recent years. Official figures show that there are 220,000 Moroccans; 83,000 Ecuadorians; 40,000 Colombians; 35,000 Chinese; 28,000 Peruvians; 13,000 Pakistani and a similar number of Filipinos. This massive presence has become a missionary challenge that forces churches to go to the roots of their faith for insight on how to respond to the new situation. The challenge is threefold.

The first is *the challenge to Christian compassion and sensitivity*. The church is challenged to provide funds and volunteers for an organized response to a massive flow of human beings, especially to those that face hunger, homelessness, and marginalization. There is also the challenge to cooperate with a great number of secular NGOs patterned after the Christian model of volunteer

involvement but usually very suspicious about the motivations of Christian churches as they enter the field of social assistance. This challenge involves the double task of discipleship and education. On the one hand, Christians need to develop attitudes that come from the core of their faith and not from popular prejudices. These attitudes then need to develop into actions of service.

The second challenge is *the need for churches to take a prophetic stance against the unjust ways in which society treats immigrants*. Perhaps the biggest challenge is the prophetic task of being a mouthpiece for the poor and downtrodden. It can be extremely difficult to pronounce an unpopular prophetic word to a society in panic about the waves of foreigners who have come to stay. Exercising a prophetic role, the church returns not only to the sources of her own faith but also to an ethical treasure that is part of the Western and European heritage. Protesting true injustice is very unpopular in today's society since the general erosion of Christian values has nearly obliterated the Christian substratum that once made Christian behavior more acceptable. As a further complication, the apparently militant advance of paganism breeds an attitude in which there is no room for solidarity or compassion in the face of human need and suffering.

The third challenge is the fact that *migration is an avenue for the evangelistic dimension of mission*. Immigrants are people in transition, people on the move who experience homelessness and the loss of roots in a new way and on a massive scale. Such people in transition are open to becoming believers, ready to assume faith in a personal way. Throughout the history of missions

The same coin contains a painful side of homelessness and uprootedness and yet an exciting side of new freedom.

Christianity has flourished in the context of migration precisely because of the double condition of the immigrant experience. The same coin contains a painful side of homelessness and uprootedness and yet an exciting side of new freedom. As a follow up reality, the presence of these new believers in old communities brings pastoral challenges. The church is forced to become truly missionary and to welcome the presence of “the other” in its midst. In the rest of this article I will examine the threefold missionary challenge presented by the reality of immigration as we establish ourselves in the twenty-first century. I base my reflections on my own experiences and observations and, therefore, focus on the Hispanic world.

The Hispanic Experience

Europe feels invaded by immigrants today, but Europeans themselves have frequently been immigrants. Between 1814 and 1939, sixty million Europeans crossed the Ural Mountains, the Mediterranean Sea, and especially the Atlantic Ocean in search of a new life they could not find in their own countries. During the same period only an estimated three million Asians and Africans migrated to Europe or the Americas.¹ The case of Spain is typical. Between 1492 and 1988, six and a half million Spaniards migrated to the Americas. The largest portion of this figure corresponds to the period between 1825, when the Spanish domination of Latin America ended, and 1988. During that period 5,710,000 went to the

Americas while only 2,915,000 returned to Spain.² Add here Spanish migration to other parts of the world. During the short period between 1960 and 1980, 1,200,000 Spanish workers went to Central Europe, France, Switzerland and Germany in search of employment.



At present, in Spain itself there are 1,100,000 foreign residents legally established, which amounts to 2.7% of the population, the lowest percentage of legal immigrants in Europe, compared with Switzerland (19%), Germany (9%), or France (6.3%). At the same time official figures from the Spanish government tell us that there are 1,300,000 Spaniards living and working abroad, especially in the Americas, other European nations, and Africa.³

Descendants of the Spanish who crossed the Atlantic to the Americas have also been migrant people and have experienced the hardships of being ethnic minorities in other places. A variety of historical circumstances lies at the origin of this constant movement. Take the case of the United States. The Hispanic people that lived in the Southwest were the first Europeans to establish themselves in the land, but when the United States took over that vast portion of territory, overnight those

¹ Juan B. Vilar and María José Vilar, *La emigración española a Europa en el siglo XX* (Madrid: Arco Libros, 1999), 7.

² Germán Rueda Hernanz, *Espanoles emigrantes en América (Siglos XVI-XX)* (Madrid: Arco Libros, 2000), 16.

³ Rueda Hernanz, *Espanoles emigrantes*; “Extranjeros en España,” *El País* (Madrid), 15 February 2002.

“We would be betraying the most sacred dimension of people if all we want is their cheap labor...”

Hispanics became an ethnic minority and were treated as newcomers in the land where they had long lived. Or take the case of Puerto Ricans. They are descendants of Spanish immigrants and part of the last colonial outposts of Spain; in 1898 they came to have a “special relationship” with the United States and became protagonists of a new migratory movement that has continued to the present and has left its mark on the identity of these people.

An Educational and Prophetic Task

The documents from the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church are a good example of the kind of educational task that is necessary among Christians facing the realities of Hispanic migration. When making up their minds about this issue, Christians need to be well informed about the facts and take them into consideration. In the case of Spain, bishops keep reminding the faithful that there are more Spaniards outside of Spain as immigrants than migrants from other places in Spain and that the history of Spaniards is a history of immigrants. Today Spanish workers do not have to emigrate in search of jobs as they did in the 1960s and 1970s. A letter from the Bishops’ Commission for Migration (September 24, 2000) reminded Spanish Catholics, “We live a sweet moment in the economic development of our country. This is due in good part to the effort and work of the Spaniards but also to the hard work of many immigrants who live among us and work hand in hand in the building of a new society.”⁴ The document mentions that due to the

low birth rate (the lowest of Europe), Spain will need more foreign workers in the future. “We would be betraying the most sacred dimension of people if all we want is their cheap labor, forgetting that those who come to work with us are persons with all their rights. The right thing to do, therefore, is always to welcome the stranger.”⁵

The documents of the Catholic bishops in Spain have consistently reminded Christians about their duty of compassion and reciprocity. Many times the documents quote well known passages from Exodus, the first immigration laws, as it were: “Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt” (Ex. 22.21); “Do not oppress an alien: you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt” (23.9); “Six days do your work but on the seventh day do not work so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well may be refreshed” (23.12). These passages should make sense to a nation from which so many people have emigrated in the past.

However, the Roman Catholic Church in Spain is slowly being disestablished, no longer enjoying the respect and influence it used to have in society. An analysis by Eloy Bueno de la Fuente, a missiologist who teaches in the Northern Spain School of Theology at Burgos, says that the country has been taken over by the process of secularization. His thesis is that Spain is not just a de-Christianized society in which the Christian stance has been eroded by secular and postmodern forces. What is

⁴ “El camino es la acogida,” *Ecclesia* (Madrid), 24 September 2000, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

“for the logic of paganism, the presence and challenge of the poor, the needy, and the vanquished is irrelevant”

actually happening is that the nation is becoming pagan and that paganism now has an articulate militant presence and voice in Spain. Not only is Christianity being treated as obsolete, but paganism is openly proclaimed as a valid option. And the fact is that “for the logic of paganism, the presence and challenge of the poor, the needy, and the vanquished is irrelevant....”⁶

Bishops in the United States have also engaged in an educational effort to remind the faithful of some important facts in relation to migration. I will limit myself to their documents about the Hispanic presence in the country. I quote from the pastoral letter of December 12, 1983:

No other European culture has been in this country longer than the Hispanic. Spaniards and their descendants were already in the Southeast and Southwest by the late sixteenth century. In other regions of our country a steady influx of Hispanic immigrants has increased their visibility in more recent times.⁷

The bishops also remind Catholics that the United States as such is the result of several waves of immigration.

We are all called to appreciate our own histories and to reflect upon the ethnic, racial, and cultural origins which make us a nation of immigrants. Historically

the church in the United States has been an “immigrant church” whose outstanding record of care for countless European immigrants remains unmatched. Today that same tradition must inspire in the church’s approach to recent Hispanic immigrants and migrants a similar authority, compassion, and decisiveness.⁸

A more recent document from US bishops, “One Family under God”⁹ offers a brief and rich summary of the biblical teaching and the missionary experience of the early church in relation to immigration, a sociological analysis of the present situation, and guidelines about the kind of policies that the nation should adopt. It states that “The United States is at a juncture in its history....”

Immigration as an Avenue for Mission

The idea that immigration might be a good theme for new missiological reflection came to me in 1998 while I was visiting Germany at the invitation of the Conference of Evangelical Workers, (COE). This association of Spanish speaking evangelical churches was formed in the 1960s at the time in which thousands of Spanish workers migrated to France, Germany, and Switzerland in search of jobs that they could not find in Spain. It was mostly the initiative of lay persons, an initiative that was matched by a missionary project of the German Evangelical Alliance. We spent three days of fellowship, Bible study,

⁶ Eloy Bueno de la Fuente, *España entre Cristianismo y Paganismo* (Madrid: San Pablo, 2002), 313.

⁷ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “The Hispanic Presence” (Washington DC: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1983), 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, “One Family Under God” (Washington DC: Office of Publishing and Promotion Services, 1998).

and prayer at an old castle that serves as a conference center near the city of Solingen. I was fascinated by the stories of these immigrants, many of whom had come to a living faith in Christ in the midst of the traumas brought to their life by relocation. The founding generation had been those who came from Spain, but today many of the members of these churches are Latin Americans who migrated to Germany in the 1990s.



One of the persons with whom I later traveled was José Antonio González. He invited me to preach at the Spanish-speaking congregation where he serves as a minister within the Baptist Church of Hohe Strasse in Hanover. Like many young people from Spain in the 1960s, José Antonio had left his beautiful town in Galitzia and emigrated to Germany in search of a job. There he was befriended by Mrs. Pinto, a Bolivian woman whose family had also migrated to Germany in search of economic

security. She not only provided José Antonio with good spicy soups but also shared with him the gospel of Jesus Christ and prayed for him. Should we call this proselytism? As a nominal Catholic, José Antonio had never thought that this story, which was part of folkloric songs in his native Spain, could have any relevance for an aspiring student of industrial design. Eventually, the story of Jesus started to make sense to him, and he

became a Christian believer. He could not have imagined then that as time went on, he would discern a call to the ministry and, after studying in seminary, would become a pastor and preacher.

I do not know how the gospel reached Mrs. Pinto in distant Bolivia, but the story of José Antonio reminded me vividly of a woman from the pages of the New Testament—Priscilla, the wife of Aquila and a good friend of the Apostle Paul. In Corinth, and then later in Ephesus, her home became a house church to which the apostle addressed some of his more famous epistles. As I talked with my Spanish brothers and sisters in Solingen, I sensed in their stories an atmosphere similar to the one I had come to visualize in my reading of Acts and Romans. While in Germany I had finished reading for the third time the book *The Obedience of Faith* written by Paul Minear (1971), a true missiological gem. I like it very much because it helped me to make sense of the Epistle to the Romans in a new way. John Howard Yoder had called my attention to that book at the Lausanne Congress of Evangelism (1974) as a book that provided solid basis for questioning the so called “homogenous unit principle” of the Church Growth movement. Minear’s thesis is that you may better understand the rich tapestry of theological themes in this pauline epistle if you keep in mind the missiological context that the apostle is addressing, the kind of pastoral challenges represented by a situation you can reconstruct by paying attention to the long list of greetings in chapter 16.

The long list of persons quoted at the end of the epistle were the people Paul had come to know in his trips, people that had migrated to Rome, the capital of the

The growth of Protestantism in Latin America and the growth of Hispanic Protestantism in the United States are closely related to the reality of immigration.

Empire, from different provinces. Typical would be the case of Aquila and Priscilla who had to leave Rome during a period of persecution of the Jews (Acts 18.1-4). They had probably returned to Rome by the time Paul wrote the epistle. Scholars agree that there was great mobility within the Empire facilitated by the imperial victories that had put an end to wars.¹⁰ The trade with which Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla supported themselves was a specialized kind of work with leather for which few tools were necessary, making mobility possible.¹¹

Moving from New Testament times to the most recent century I find that the growth of Protestantism in Latin America and the growth of Hispanic Protestantism in the United States are closely related to the reality of immigration. In several Latin American countries the introduction of Protestantism by foreign missionaries found fertile soil in people who had a basic religious outlook and kept some Christian symbols but who could not find a spiritual home in the established church's dominant type of Christianity. The phenomenon was similar to that of Europe at the time of the sixteenth century Reformation, only within the Latin American context. Moreover, the introduction of Protestant churches in several countries was the work of nationals who had lived abroad and become militant Protestants before returning to their homeland. Such was the case particularly in some of the Caribbean countries. Marco Antonio Ramos has

documented this phenomenon in Cuba,¹² and Justo L. González has researched it in some denominations in Puerto Rico.¹³

Writing about Argentina, José Míguez Bonino pointed out the fact that the leadership of the mainline denominations in that country was made up of Spanish and Italian immigrants who had become believers in Jesus Christ when they migrated to the new world. When we consider the kind of popular Protestantism that has had an explosive growth in recent decades, migration from the rural world to the burgeoning cities was the context within which millions of people had a conversion experience. Míguez reminds us that Latin American Protestantism of the initial generations was marked by the memory of a dramatic experience of conversion, "In a way, immigrants or peasants who have migrated to the city—anonymous members of the new subproletariat—are thus challenged, perhaps for the first time, to take in hand their own destiny. Clearly we find ourselves here in the world of the 'free individual' of modern society."¹⁴

Conversely, in other cases, Hispanic Protestantism in North America has been the result of migration of Hispanic people who were already Protestants in their country of origin before they came to the United States.¹⁵

¹⁰ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

¹¹ Ronald H. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

¹² Marcos Antonio Ramos, *Protestantism and Revolution in Cuba* (Miami: University of Miami, 1989).

¹³ Justo L. González, *The Development of Christianity in the Latin Caribbean* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 109-110.

¹⁴ José Míguez Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics* (London: SCM, 1983), 60.

¹⁵ Santiago Soto Fontáñez, *Misión a la puerta* (Santo Domingo: Editora Educativa Dominicana, 1982), 25-27.

Only a fellowship marked by this spirit of acceptance of other sisters and brothers, beyond cultural and ethnic barriers, could be considered worthy of the name church.

There is not enough research to make an in-depth comment on how migrant Hispanics carried their faith with them. We can say in general that if maintaining the faith were a viable option, if they perceived the faith as life-sustaining, they took it with them to other lands. The presence and work of Puerto Rican Protestants in their United States exile is an important chapter of mission history that needs research. The career of Santiago Soto Fontánez is an interesting example of how one young Puerto Rican evangelical church member engaged in missionary work in other parts of the world. His leadership of Baptists in New York and later on in the whole of the United States has been recorded in his previously referenced book of memoirs. His story is similar to many other cases. Before I refer to the present situation of Hispanics in the United States, let's go back to the Pauline text mentioned earlier in this paper.

Immigration as a Missiological Question

In Romans 16 Paul mentions Aquila and Priscilla first with great affection and recognition and goes on to say, "Greet also the church that meets at their house" (v. 5). Paul's list of greetings includes at least four other house churches (16.10, 11, 14, 15). In *The Obedience of Faith*, Minear comments that these five house churches, segregated into primarily Gentile or Jewish congregations, did not relate adequately among themselves. Addressing the lack of mutual respect and acceptance, the intention of Paul's letter could well have been a pastoral initiative to encourage them to change, to receive and accept one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. The vocabulary

of an earlier exhortation has a definite theological connotation and a pastoral intention: "Accept one another then, just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God" (15.7). Then there are injunctions that develop the practical side of the acceptance: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me" (16.1-2).

Only a fellowship marked by this spirit of acceptance of other sisters and brothers, beyond cultural and ethnic barriers, could be considered worthy of the name *church*. Following Minear's suggestions we could even argue that the word *church* is not mentioned in the salutation of the letter because until these house churches came to accept one another, they did not have the kind of fellowship essential to a church's existence. Only that kind of church could become a base for Paul's mission to Spain, an enterprise about which he writes with the intention of getting the Roman believers to send him as their missionary: "I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there" (Rom. 15.24).

In reference to the Hispanic presence in the United States, the bishops' document of 1983 points to a reality that could be considered a modern parallel to the situation in Rome during Paul's time.

Within our memory, Hispanics in this country have experienced cruel prejudice. So extensive has it been in some areas that they have been denied basic human and civil rights.... Despite great strides in eliminating

60,000 Hispanics became Protestants every year. Catholic concern about these facts is understandable.

racial prejudice, both in our country and our church, there remains an urgent need for continued purification and reconciliation. It is particularly disheartening to know that some Catholics hold strong prejudices against Hispanics and others and deny them the respect and love due their God-given human dignity. This is evident even in some parish communities where one finds a reluctance among some non-Hispanics to serve with Hispanics or to socialize with them at parochial events.¹⁶

One related concern of the bishops in this document is what they call “active proselytizing among Hispanics carried on in an anti-ecumenical manner by Protestant sects.” The bishops propose a mature response to this situation:

Our response as Catholics is not to attack or disparage brothers and sisters of other Christian traditions but to live the gospel more authentically in order to present the Catholic church as the fullness of Christianity and thus nourish the faith of our Hispanic peoples. Other Christian churches have been part of the history of salvation. Prayer, dialogue, and partnership in efforts of common concern remain high on the Catholic agenda.¹⁷

Five years after the bishops issued their document about Hispanics, Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley wrote about “Defection among Hispanics.”¹⁸ His research

showed that 60,000 Hispanics became Protestants every year. Catholic concern about these facts is understandable. Sociological analysis provides an explanation. In an article published in 1994, Roof and Manning quote a Gallup poll from 1986 in which nineteen percent of Hispanic Americans identify themselves as Protestants. These authors mention an estimate by Loesch in 1985 according to which in the United States fifteen percent of the Hispanic population is Catholic, five percent “other Christians,” and the remainder eighty percent “unchurched.” These statistics need to be qualified:

Such estimates are biased for a population who does not equate church involvement with being religious in the way that, say, Protestants in the United States do. The distinctions between “practicing” and “non-practicing”, “churched” and “unchurched” are more a function of institutional priorities than they are of religious significance to the people themselves.¹⁹

The denominations that are apparently most successful in attracting Hispanics are those that have plans and methodologies to meet the needs of the changing population. They organize new congregations in homes in residential areas and storefront churches in poor urban sectors. They provide the possibility of face-to-face personal relations in small groups, a personal relationship with God, and opportunities to express their feelings by festive singing. Baptists, Pentecostals, and

¹⁶ Catholic Bishops, “The Hispanic Presence,” 24.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Andrew Greeley, “Defection Among Hispanics,” *America*, 20 July 1988, 61-62.

¹⁹ Wade Clark Roof and Christel Manning, “Cultural Conflicts and Identity: Second- Generation Hispanic Catholics in the United States,” *Social Compass* 41, no. 1 (1994): 180.



Seventh Day Adventists are the denominations that have grown the most.²⁰

How do we evaluate these facts from a missiological perspective? The growth of Protestantism among Hispanics elicited very negative reactions from some quarters. For example, here are the words of Mario Vizcaíno from the Southern Pastoral Institute of Miami, regarding the Southeastern region of the United States:

Protestant proselytism is growing incredibly throughout the country. We are particularly affected by it because our region has more Protestant and fundamentalist churches serving Hispanics than Catholic churches. This is something dramatic. Hispanics are not only Catholic in creed but also in culture. In the process of becoming members of another religion or sect, Hispanics not only experience an external religious change but also a change in the way they see and react to the reality around them. Furthermore, families are being divided because of religious differences.²¹

Other observers look at the phenomenon from a more pastoral and self-critical perspective, that, in my opinion, goes to the heart of the matter. Juan Díaz Vilar, a Spanish Jesuit who directed the Evangelization Department of the Northeast Hispanic Catholic Center of New York, states it in this way:

The sects as I see it are not a threat or an invasion, nor a fanaticism that will eventually go away. But they *are* a challenge to our pastoral focus and planning. The sects are showing us where the emptiness is in our pastoral thrust and evangelization efforts. In this sense they can be a help in alerting the Catholic church to the need for making a move towards fashioning a church that is more personal, caring, and communitarian—a Church where everyone, regardless of race, ethnic background, or language, can feel needed and wanted and “at home.”²²

A similar evaluation comes from the Franciscan Roberto O. González, Auxiliary Bishop of Boston, who stresses the heterodox nature of the “sects” that in his opinion highlights “aspects of the Christian message they have detached from the whole”.²³ He then goes on to ask and respond:

What are they saying? That the heart of Christianity is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, in whom I find forgiveness of sin and newness of life. That Christ is everything! Then everything else that the church stands for in terms of faith and morals comes out of the relation with that center of universal history which is the person of Jesus Christ.²⁴

The agenda he proposes to the Catholic church is “to reflect on our own faith and to rediscover its center and

²⁰ Ibid., 181.

²¹ Mario Vizcaíno, Sch. P., “The Hispanic Presence in the Southeast,” *The Catholic World*, November/December 1990, 271.

²² J. Juan Díaz Vilar, S.J., “Hispanics and the Sects in the United States,” *The Catholic World*, November/December 1990, 265.

²³ Roberto O. González, “The New Evangelization and Hispanics in the United States,” *America*, 19 October 1991, 268.

²⁴ Ibid., 269.

Protestantism seems to be especially adequate for the transitional experience of migrating people.

its point of departure in the person of Jesus Christ—to proclaim above all and in all the sovereignty of Christ.”²⁵

From this missiological perspective the question of Protestantism and Hispanic identity is also perceived in a different way. What we could call the contextual genius of Protestantism is recognized as an important factor of its missionary and pastoral work. Díaz Vilar observes that what he calls the sects do not accept the superficial approach of multiculturalism that lumps all minorities together in “minority programs.” On the contrary he observes:

They try to adapt as much as possible to each minority group, making use of ministers who speak their language. Very soon these marginalized groups are not only made to feel welcome, they are allowed to participate in ministries and to make decisions in their new church.²⁶

The consequence of this contextual approach is that far from robbing Hispanics of their identity, the Protestant experience enhances it. In fact, it seems to be especially adequate for the transitional experience of migrating people. Sociological observation based on factual statistical data is enlightening at this point. Here is what sociologists Roof and Manning observe,

Much of the success of these groups lies in their ability to provide Hispanic ministers who are sensitive to the people’s wishes to hold on to as much of their ethnic culture as possible while adjusting to

American life. In one study, for example, over eighty percent of ethnic ministers said that the people they serve would want to maintain their own culture or blend American ways and ethnic ways but be identified as “their ethnic selves first and American second.” ... It would appear that these churches have found the right balance between ethnic identity and American assimilation.²⁷

It should come as no surprise then that these sociologists have reached conclusions similar to those of Greeley, pointing out that the experience of conversion to Hispanic Protestantism has a positive social effect on the lives of people:

Hispanic-style evangelical Protestantism, so it seems, offers a kind of resolution, a religious fervor combined with ethnic identity plus legitimization of the newer, more “American” values of work and family responsibility. According to Greeley, Hispanic Protestants in the United States have higher income and educational levels than Hispanic Catholics. Whatever the explanation for this pattern, the emotional experiences in Pentecostal and evangelical congregations probably do help Latinos take charge of their lives and perhaps are a stabilizing influence on personal and family life.²⁸

This discussion about the challenge of the immigrant presence in the United States is especially relevant and valuable for me at this point in my missionary life. It

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Díaz Vilar, “Hispanics and the Sects,” 265.

²⁷ Roof and Manning, “Cultural Conflicts,” 181.

²⁸ Ibid.

This immigrant presence could well be a force of renewal for missionary vision and vigor in the Spanish churches.

provides me with a mirror that I can use in my teaching in the evangelical churches of Spain. The wave of Latin American immigrants to Spain has surprised these Spanish churches with new challenges. In a way it stirs up social disturbance caused both by cultural differences in spite of a common language and by the social needs of the newcomers. But it also sparks a kind of Christian life marked by enthusiasm and vitality that can have a rejuvenating effect. This immigrant presence could well be a force of renewal for missionary vision and vigor in the Spanish churches. Furthermore, it begs new patterns of relationships. It challenges the church to demonstrate that Christ can fashion new attitudes in people of different cultures that learn to accept one another as Christ has accepted them. In today's society of tense pluralism, such transformation is the only way to become the people of God.



Harold Segura

Originally from Colombia, Segura now works with World Vision International from Costa Rica. He and his wife have two children. This article is a translated chapter from his book *Más allá de la utopía: Liderazgo de servicio y espiritualidad cristiana* (Kairós, 2005).

Jesus in the Face of the Needy

Spirituality and Leadership in Latin American Theology

Even though liberation theology is out of fashion as a system and has been condemned by the Vatican its impact on the theological conscience of Latin American Christianity has endured.

Emilio Antonio Núñez¹

The stormy decade of the 1960s occurred when, together with the stirring of new social and political revolutions, churches were also asking themselves how to renew their message of faith and how to proclaim the gospel in the midst of the world's chaotic situation. The Catholic church was experiencing the renewal movement of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), and Pope John XXIII, the "good pope," announced that the moment to open the windows of the church had arrived so that the fresh breezes of renewal would blow upon her. It was the era of *aggiornamento*, of breathing in fresh air

¹ Emilio Antonio Núñez, *Teología de la liberación* (Miami: Caribe, 1986), 256.