

# Against Inclusivity

## *Reclaiming the Latino Liturgical Agent*

by Juan M. C. Oliver



As a Latino Episcopalian, I am against being “included.”

The interpersonal dynamics of “inclusion” always involve an “includer” and an “included.” The first is active, the second passive. “Hispanics” (an Anglo name for us) are always being offered inclusion. In the

Episcopal Church, Latinos are always being invited, included and ministered to. We never get to do anything for ourselves. This usually means that we are welcome guests in someone else’s house. In what follows I attempt to sketch a different model of intercultural relations, using worship as the arena in which this model might be lived out.

If Latinos are going to be active, free agents of our ministry, Latino theologians have the task of developing our theology as we see fit, within the wider context of a catholic tradition. We have taken great strides in the last decade. One area of success is the location of our theology firmly in the Latino experience of poverty and privation. For Latino theologians, poverty is rightly a place of revelation. This insight connects Latino theologians in the U.S. with Latin American theological movements of the last thirty years.

But Latinos in the U.S., unlike our counterparts in Latin America, have another experience, which to my knowledge has not yet been named as a theological starting point: our experience of learning another culture: Anglo culture. Like poverty, our experience of learning a second culture is a theological gold mine.

Once we are “over here” (sometimes even before we arrive), Latinos in the United States spend most of our time learning Anglo ways. For instance, we learn, slowly and patiently, the myriad ways in which the verb “to get” can be combined with prepositions to mean almost anything. We learn that life is possible without subjunctives. We learn to tell time in a different way. We learn that people here are individuals, and that the family has usually just four people if you are lucky. We learn that religion is a matter of free choice and that “if you can think it, you can do it.” We learn that it is possible to be “a self-made man.” We learn that “net worth” is a dollar amount, not a feeling inside – what we would call *honor*. We learn that here being poor makes you morally suspect.

In short, since we spend all our time learning Anglo culture, most Latinos with a few years’ experience in the United States – even Latinos with very little education – are experts in multicultural ministry. We minister constantly to people of a different culture from ours: clean their homes, care for their children; pick their vegetables – some of us even teach their seminarians and grade their term papers. So I suggest that we Latino theologians include the experience of learning to be

bicultural, in addition to Latino poverty, as a theological place of revelation.

This may lead us to discover that our experience of learning Anglo ways reveals to us something about God and life which we did not know before; something that forms us as a people and which makes us who we are as immigrants to the United States: *Anglo culture is not God*.

By dint of having to survive and thrive through a process of learning another culture, we have discovered that culture and its components – language, manners, rituals, body language, etc. – is multiplex. We have discovered that the world created by a given culture for those who belong to it is a world *among other worlds*. Our experience reveals that there are many ways of being in the world, not only our own way, and that each way builds up its own world with its traditions, assumptions, values, virtues and sins. The bicultural person knows – from actual experience, not merely theoretically – that “the way things are” is *many* ways, and that there are other ways of doing whatever must be done “just this way.”

The immigrants’ place of revelation is also a place of dangerous knowledge. In the eyes of monocultural people, our “other ways of doing things” undermine the stability of their world. (This insight may throw light on the current nasty dialogue about immigration.) It is no wonder then that we, who have found out that the world is many worlds, are considered best ministered *to*. For the fact is, even monocultural people are sensitive enough to feel that if we Latinos are permitted to act out our world, we may well construct and express a different world from theirs.

What might we do if we were allowed to be active agents of our ministry? As Latinos we might, for example, paint the church in loud colors. Or we might insist that there cannot be worship without offering something (candles, flowers, *ex-votos*) to God. We might insist on being accompanied in worship by the saints, the Church triumphant. We might develop a long entrance rite to allow every one to arrive before the first reading. We might recover our lost sense of the dignity of the poor. We might insist that the two-track system of preparation for ordination (Commission on Ministry followed by seminary) be integrated into a single track so that the seminary’s daily experience of the ordinand features in his or her discernment process. We might consider the practical work in field education parishes every bit as creditable as academic work in the classroom. And, we might decide that since there are so few Latinos with Bachelor’s degrees, our seminary education must seek ways of assisting promising candidates to complete their advanced education. These are just a few creative examples. Clearly, Latinos *doing* (rather than receiving) ministry could be a dangerous lot.

Latino bicultural ability is not only a source of great anxiety for monocultural folks who realize in their bones that we truly are beyond their control, it is also source of spiritual development for Latinos, and a foundational experience for our liturgical praxis. Our spirituality as bicultural people is shaped by the knowledge that the dominant culture is not God. This frees us to let God be God, unconfused with “the way things are” and allows our experience of God to be a God who contemplates – even promotes – different worlds coexisting cheek by jowl.

As a liturgist I find this deeply consoling. It means that liturgical do’s and don’ts are relative, for they are determined by cultural context, not by God, and so they are fallible and always in need of being reformed, like the Church itself.

If my experience as a bicultural person is that ways of worship are many – as many as there are cultures and subcultures – I can relax my grip on liturgy and allow my hand to open to receive liturgical practices from another world (in my personal case the Anglo world in the United States). And so, this Latino has grown to enjoy not only good Anglo hymns but even occasionally bad interminable boring ones, too. I have learned to talk *about* my feelings instead of *being* my feelings. I have even grown to learn that less can be more and can enjoy an Anglo liturgy designed with Zen aesthetics even though my Latino self keeps wanting a profusion of flowers, saints, candles, litanies, incense, gold leaf and color, for in the Reign of God, there is no poverty.

Experiencing the multiplicity of cultural worlds teaches me to free myself from cultural determinism in worship, such as “Anglican worship must have Anglican chant in it” or “Hispanic prayer books in the Episcopal Church must be translated literally from Anglo prayer books.” This cultural determinism has brought us to the sad state of Latino worship in the Episcopal Church today, where Latino worship is basically Anglo worship in Spanish. Only after our Latino congregations have actively developed their ways of worship as Latino Episcopalians will we have a real Latino Episcopal liturgy.

This will not happen overnight. First, the Episcopal Church must return

liturgical agency to its minority populations. This means, practically, that instead of sending out liturgical resources translated from English, our dioceses and the national church need to spend more time and resources encouraging liturgical creativity and praxis in our Latino congregations. Our national officer for Hispanic Ministries, Anthony Guillen, has already begun this process of encouragement.

Second, it means that Latino Episcopalians must grow up as liturgical agents and stop living off Anglo liturgical welfare. We must take up our ministry – even our liturgical ministry – and create it, developing new forms of worship, some brand new, others rooted in our centuries-old history as a people. We have begun to do some of this at the General Theological Seminary, where for example, the customary for the Spanish language Eucharist on Saturdays is different from the customary employed in English language liturgies. Latino seminarians are also encouraged to engage many expressions of popular religiosity in Latin America and the U.S., and to integrate them with a sound Anglican liturgical theology.

Latinos, of course, should invite Anglos to join us in our ministry. The fields are white and there are not nearly enough of us to harvest them all. But Anglos who generously want to assist Latinos in our ministry must be extremely careful lest their imposing presence shut us up in the process; careful lest their liturgical praxis swallow up our nascent Latino Episcopal liturgy. Moreover, since we spend our entire time learning Anglo culture, it is very tempting for us to just give up our own Latino liturgical instincts and do things the Anglo way. Sometimes this even gets us promoted.

It turns out then that our liturgical agency is deeply connected to our biculturalism. But it must be agency, not passivity. Our homework as Latino worshippers is to create our worship.

Finally, this process is a good thing for monocultural Anglos in the U.S. as well. Despite some pain and discomfort in the process of change, the monocultural Episcopalian can gradually learn to be comfortable in the “other world” of a different culture. Even more rewarding, monocultural people may learn to integrate that experience without fear or

anger, neither fleeing nor fighting, but contemplatively and respectfully joining these “others,” patiently embracing the feeling of being at sea in a different context from his or her own. This is fertile soil for spiritual growth, as it requires the monocultural person to let go of his or her certainties and be a learner in the “other world.”

Thus, the most important liturgical statement an Anglo can make to a Latino is not, “Here’s how you do it,” but “Tell me, how do you do it?” We would love to tell you.

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