

Preaching Cross-Culturally to Spanish-Speaking U.S. Hispanic Americans

Thomas G. Rogers and Mauro B. de Souza

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While it may be true to say, “one size fits all,” when talking about ponchos or umbrellas, this is not the case for sermons. Since people’s cultural groundings significantly influence how they experience life (including sermons), a “one size fits all” approach to preaching is fairly certain to leave the expectations and needs of some hearers unmet. This creates a particularly serious challenge for teachers of preachers. While there often may be a great deal of *similarity* between the professors and students in many U.S. homiletics classrooms (for example, both Euro-American and middle class), the communities in which the actual preaching will take place are becoming more and more filled with people who are significantly *different* from many of those same future preachers. Changes in U.S. immigration legislation have led to a significant shift in immigration patterns. Whereas, at one time, the majority of immigrants to the U.S. were European, the vast majority of immigrants are now from the Americas (mostly Mexico) and Asian countries¹. The American scene in which many Euro-American preachers find themselves is increasingly filled with people who are ethnically different from those preachers. More than ever the question becomes: “What do I need to know about my hearer in order to preach in a way that creates a better *fit*?”

It is of course impossible for preachers to move to a place of awareness of and sensitivity to *all* the potential cultural differences in the communities they serve. In fact even to consider a journey to such a place can be overwhelming and often results in despair and doing nothing. We approach this topic assuming that such a journey can only take place one step at a time. In an effort to help homileticians help preachers with at least one step, we offer some reflections on preaching to one particular group—Spanish-speaking U.S. Hispanic Americans. We select this group because of its current prevalence and expected growth in American communities. It is estimated that by 2050 one third of the U.S. population will be Hispanic (113 million).²

Of course, any desire to learn more about preaching that *fits* for any group must begin with discovering more about the group itself. We sought help by turning to those with knowledge grown from experience—preachers currently working in Hispanic congregations who themselves preach in Spanish. We interviewed a number of such preachers, both Hispanics and non-Hispanics, looked closely at sermons they had created with this group in mind, and crosschecked the information with scholarly work in this field. The following is a brief summary of some of the most useful insights we gained concerning: 1) how members of this group are shaped by experience and religion, and 2) how preachers, especially non-Hispanic ones, might rethink and adjust sermons for a better fit when preaching to U.S. Hispanic Americans. We thank the preachers who assisted us in this research. We are indebted to them for their openness and wisdom.

¹ For a more detailed discussion, see James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*: Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001, p. 9-11.

² James P. Smith, research presented at Stanford University in 1999, cited by Victor Alvarez, “Preaching to *Generacion X*,” *Chicago Studies* 39:3 (Fall/Winter 2000), p.330.

Considering U.S. Hispanic American Sermon Hearers

Before turning to our findings, we should first note why we have chosen this label, “U.S. Hispanic Americans.” We borrow the term from Fernando F. Segovia. Although not ideal, the term seems to be the best expression to name U.S. residents that have Hispanic background. Segovia observes, “*U.S.* points to a present and permanent residence in the United States... *Hispanic American* points to the national origins of the group, whether immediate (by birth) or remote (by origin), in Latin America and, more specifically, in Hispanic America... The term encompasses such subgroups as Cuban Americans, Dominican Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and so on.”³ As noted above, it is the Spanish-speaking segment of the U.S. Hispanic American population with which we are primarily concerned here.

Since the following reflections include some generalizations about this group, we begin by acknowledging that making generalizations is risky business.⁴ It is impossible to encompass completely the totality and diversity of the experiences of Hispanic peoples using general terms.⁵ However, preachers eager to learn more about those who are different from them have no choice but to employ generalization to some extent. Even with the potential dangers inherent in using generalizations, they are, nonetheless, necessary as a starting point.

Shaped by Experience: In Search for a Place in the World

Our field research revealed three overarching characteristics relevant to preaching. Although there are exceptions, most U.S. Hispanic Americans are poor; they are or are perceived to be immigrants to the U.S.; and they place enormous importance on family.

Those we interviewed made it clear that the majority of their Hispanic sermon-listeners are *poor*, belonging to what they called a “working class” or a “working poor” class. Some are struggling in two or three different jobs to make ends meet. Although one finds Hispanics in all socio-economic classes and professions, the majority tend to have a lower level of formal education, to be less skilled workers, and, therefore, to take lower wage jobs. Moreover, there continues to be a large number of “undocumented workers” who will take almost any kind of job at nearly any wage.

Hand in hand with being poor comes an increase in substance abuse, domestic violence, and gang related criminality. Clearly, these problems are not limited to poor people or to Hispanics, but, the more affluence people have, the more means they have to deal with these problems, to hide them, or to seek (pay for) assistance.

³ “Aliens in the Promised Land: The Manifest Destiny of U.S. Hispanic American Theology.” Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Fernando F. Segovia, Eds. *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, p. 16.

⁴ We take Maynard-Reid’s advice seriously: “It is a serious error of judgment to make sweeping generalizations regarding a people who should not be seen as monolithic and undifferentiated, as if they share the same origins, history, culture and customs. Any generalizations need to be made with caution.” See *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean & Hispanic Perspectives*, p. 161. Elsewhere in this work, Maynard-Reid offers a good description of the variety and diversity of Hispanic cultures.

⁵ Nonetheless, attempts to do just that can be helpful. Jose David Rodriguez, for instance, understands *mestizaje* and marginality as the “collective social identity of Hispanics in North America.” “Confessing Our Faith in Spanish: Challenge or Promise?” In: Isasi-Diaz and Segovia, Eds. *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, p. 354.

Our interviewees noted that, largely because of the hardships facing them, many Hispanics have a sense of hopelessness and a lack of trust in the possibility of change. Consequently, virtually all our informants reported that the primary goal of the sermon in a Hispanic context is to keep hope alive, as did this preacher:

Brothers and sisters, we live in a world where we are fighting against evil, but I hope we don't lose trust. Trust in God and trust in ourselves, and also with hope it is possible to go ahead with what God has given us.⁶

Justo Gonzalez notes that suffering makes eschatological expectation a focus of much attention for Hispanics. Rather than being an upward escape from the world, Gonzalez sees that expectation as the fuel for political action. In *Manana*⁷, he asserts,

For impoverished Hispanics and others, the real *manana* is a time unlike today. It is a time of a new reality...For some Hispanics, the only hope for such a break between today and *manana* is 'pegarse el gordo'--hitting the jackpot. And so they gamble. For others, the break comes through drugs, which promise release, no matter how brief, from a hopeless today.⁸

Gonzalez's remarks strike a chord with the repeated pleading we heard from our interviewees urging preachers to bring hope to their listeners.

In addition to issues connected to poverty, our respondents spoke a great deal about how being perceived as an *immigrant* impacts the culture of U.S. Hispanic Americans. Even those who are second or third generation U.S. citizens, those who were born here and may have never even visited their ancestors' homeland, are seen as immigrants or, as one of our interviewees phrased it, "second-class citizens." This perception is not altered a great deal by the reality that a majority of all Hispanics in the United States are citizens by birth. The fact that "U.S. Hispanic Americans as a group are not at all the product of recent migrations to the country but rather the product of the migration of the country to their lands"⁹ compounds the inherent unfairness even further.

Seen as immigrants, U.S. Hispanic Americans are eternally outsiders and, therefore, socially dislocated. This creates ambiguous feelings. The literal exiles are grateful because the U.S. received them when no other country offered refuge, yet these same immigrants are angry. They live in a land that, for many, will likely never be theirs, and the country that received them as exiles is often also the same country that created their need for exile in the first place.¹⁰ This feeling of exile can be complicated still further. For instance, Mexican-Americans are socially dislocated twice. First, Mexicans reject them because they apparently lost their native cultural heritage to foreign influences; second, both Mexicans and Americans reject them because they are too Mexican to be considered real "Americans."¹¹

⁶ Sermons quoted here are our translation of sermons delivered in Spanish.

⁷ *Manana* literally means "tomorrow," but the word is used pejoratively against Hispanics meaning that they are too lazy to make any kind of effort and they never get anything done.

⁸ Justo Gonzalez, *Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990. p. 164.

⁹ Fernando F. Segovia, "In the World but Not of It: Exile as Locus for a Theology of the Diaspora." Isasi-Diaz and Segovia, Eds. *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, p. 204.

¹⁰ Gonzalez, *Manana*, p. 41.

¹¹ Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican American Promise*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983, pp. 20-22.

The U.S. Hispanic Americans who actually did immigrate face an existential decision: to stay or to go back. We learned from interviews that many Hispanics, at least in the more recent immigration movement, came to this country searching for a job that would provide the money for a decent life back in their home countries. Many planned to go back, but, for a number of reasons, some stayed. This tension between origin (where they come from) and destination (where they are and where they want to go) is very much present in the lives of many U.S. Hispanic Americans.

In addition to poverty and immigration, the preachers we interviewed reported the essential role that *family* plays in most Hispanic cultures. In spite of the fact that the degree of identification with the family varies, depending on whether one is a first, second, third, or fourth-generation Hispanic¹², the family is still the single most important group to help form character and pass on the traditions, values, and beliefs. At an even deeper level, possibly from their Amerindian heritage, comes the concept that people are born “faceless.” It is through incorporation into one’s *familia* (not limited to just relatives, but also including friendships and the *barrio* [neighborhood]) that they receive a face or personhood.¹³ Accordingly, *la familia*, not the individual, is the main focus of social stratification. The fundamental religious values that shape a U.S. Hispanic American’s sense of wholeness are taught primarily by the grandparents and parents; “*la familia es lo mas importante*” (the family is what is more important).¹⁴ Our respondents told us sermons that utilize family stories are very effective. One preacher used a personal story to tell how his mother, by rebuking his unbelief, helped to convert him: “And my mother said to me: ‘Today you committed a mistake because you did not believe. You did not believe that the Virgin is capable of doing miracles.’” In this example, the preacher was connecting to the experience of many of his U.S. Hispanic American hearers, since many of their mothers also pushed them into church and a life of faith.

The Hispanic emphasis upon family can be a bit surprising for preachers from mainstream Euro-American cultures where the individual, not the family or the group, is usually valued as central in almost all aspects and stages of life. The preachers we interviewed said that everything Hispanics do or are hinges on relationships with God, family, nature, and other people. Preaching, they advised, should consciously reinforce those relationships.

We also heard that domestic violence against women (unfortunately a global phenomena) seems to be especially prevalent in U.S. Hispanic American families. Sadly, women have to pay the price for all the frustration caused by a situation of socio-economic-ethnic oppression and uncertainty. “Machismo, heightened by the use of drugs and alcohol, leads to the abuse of women and children.”¹⁵ *Mujerista* theologians assert

¹² For instance, first-generation U.S. Hispanic Americans have strong ties with family and ethnicity; they speak Spanish primarily if not exclusively. Third and fourth-generation are bilingual but prefer to speak English, and family has a lower degree of influence on them. *The Hispanic Experience in the United States: Pastoral Reflections Using the Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, p. 6.

¹³ Raul Gomez, “Preaching the Ritual Masses to Latinos.” *Chicago Studies* 39:3 (Fall/Winter 2000), p. 302.

¹⁴ Alberto L. Garcia, “Christian Spirituality.” *Social Thought* 11:3 (Summer 1985), p. 6-7.

¹⁵ *The Hispanic Experience in the United States: Pastoral Reflections Using the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 12.

that patriarchy and machismo are very strong in Hispanic families.¹⁶ They teach us that women have rights only so long as those rights do not conflict with men's power. Our respondents agreed that preachers should not overlook this situation of oppression; rather, they urged preachers to approach sermons as opportunities to challenge patriarchy and machismo, to call perpetrators of domestic violence into accountability, and to empower women to seek their rights and justice. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops took an important step in that direction by recommending that pastors and pastoral staff "make sure that parish homilies address domestic violence," because, "if abused women do not hear anything about abuse, they think no one cares."¹⁷

Shaped by Religion: Roman Catholic Background

With very few exceptions, our informants noted the important role that a Roman Catholic background plays for a large majority of the U.S. Hispanic Americans.¹⁸ This significantly influences their expectations and perceptions of preaching even when they attend Protestant worship. Some Protestant preachers interviewed for this research pointed to the fact that part of their Hispanic community came to their churches, not only because there were services in Spanish, but also because they found a *different kind of authority* from that previously experienced in their Roman Catholic tradition. Many Hispanics within mainline Protestant churches seem pleased that they can actually talk personally to their pastors—something which was not as easy for many in their former church. Respondents suggested different reasons for this. Perhaps the typically smaller size of many Protestant congregations allows for a warmer sense of community, or perhaps a typical Hispanic understanding of priest as mediator between the people and God creates a kind of distance from the priest in the minds of many congregants.

Connected to issues of authority are the use of and acquaintance with the Bible. In spite of the efforts of the small Christian communities¹⁹ that are trying to place the Bible in the hands of the whole people of God, many Hispanics still tend to be unfamiliar with the Scriptures. According to those we interviewed, most U.S. Hispanic Americans have had minimal encounters with the Bible. That does not necessarily mean that Protestant Hispanics know a great deal more about the Bible. The reading and interpretation of the Scripture seems still to be seen primarily as a clerical task (something for the ordained minister) and not an ecclesial task (something for the entire community of the baptized). Protestant interviewees were quick to notice the "lacking knowledge of the Bible and basic doctrines" of their Hispanic hearers and to view the preaching event as an opportunity to *teach* the Bible. It is for this reason, we surmise, that one Protestant preacher, preaching a topical sermon on "God's forgiveness," utilized eighteen biblical texts to make his point.

¹⁶ See, for instance Maria Pilar Aquino, "The Collective 'Discovery' of Our Own Power." Isasi-Diaz and Segovia, Eds. *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, p. 258. Victor Alvarez asserts that the unquestioned authority of the father and the necessary self-sacrifice of the mother are the foundation of most Mexican families. "Preaching to *Generacion X*," p.320.

¹⁷ *When I Call For Help: A Pastoral Response to Domestic Violence Against Women*. Bilingual Edition. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1992, p. 4.

¹⁸ Roman Catholics estimate that 95% of the Hispanic population of the U.S.A. have been baptized in the Roman Catholic Church. *The Hispanic Experience in the United States*, p.5.

¹⁹ See Maria Luisa Iglesias, "Participative Preaching: Laity as Co-Authors of the Homily." *Chicago Studies* 39:2 (Fall/Winter 2000), 259.

Some of our Roman Catholic interviewees told us they view the sermon as simply one of many other parts of the liturgy, within which the Eucharist is central. They stated there is little need for proclamation since the entire liturgy is a proclamation in itself. According to one priest interviewed, most of the Catholic preaching happens outside the liturgy. “Singing in the liturgy or touching the feet of Mary’s image, for instance, have an effect more powerful than any preached word could have.”²⁰

In listening to our respondents, it seemed that the overall question for preachers, regarding issues of authority and biblical literacy centers on whether gospel and law (or comfort and challenge) are properly balanced. Apparently, at least some U.S. Hispanic Americans stand in need of preaching that can address a previous imbalance in their lives toward law or, even worse, toward legalism. (Note: We want to be especially clear in emphasizing that law-oriented theology and legalism are not inherently tied to Roman Catholicism or any other particular church or faith tradition; rather, they are by-products of poor theology. History provides examples of poor theology everywhere; no particular denomination has an exclusive claim to it.)

Considerations for Preaching

Having examined some of the characteristics common to most U.S. Hispanic Americans, we now address some possible considerations for preaching to this group. Those offered by our experts are grouped under three categories: preaching in Spanish; preaching from heart to heart; and theological/religious practices issues.

Preaching in Spanish

Most Spanish-speaking U.S. Hispanic Americans have been part of the Roman Catholic tradition in the U.S. for a long time. For a number of reasons, however, some of them are joining mainline, Protestant churches that, largely and historically, do not speak Spanish in this country. Even though not all U.S. Hispanic Americans speak Spanish,²¹ our respondents indicated that what best attracts Hispanics to Protestant churches is, not any particular doctrine or theology, but worship services in Spanish. One preacher told us, “They come here because I preach in Spanish; they never heard of the Lutheran church.” Certainly preachers who do not already speak Spanish are encouraged to start learning it. Some degree of competency in both languages, English and Spanish, is very important for preachers who live and minister in the midst of that intersection of cultural diversity.

Our informants emphasized that the Spanish spoken by their congregants is basically a language of images—not propositions. It is language essentially tied to facts—not concepts. Abstract theological constructions or deductive sermons seem limiting for U.S. Hispanic Americans. Conversely, sermons that move from the particular to the general, especially those employing storytelling, work better.

²⁰ For a further discussion on the use of visual images for Hispanic preaching, see Jaime Lara, “Visual Preaching: The Witness of Our Latin Eyes.” *Chicago Studies* 39:3, pp. 267-284.

²¹ Relatively recent data (1999) by Justo Gonzalez indicates that 25% of the U.S. American Hispanic population declared that they speak or prefer English; 56% are bilingual but prefer Spanish, and 19% spoke only Spanish. Cited by Alberto Garcia, “Christian Spirituality in Light of the U.S. Hispanic Experience.” *Word & World* 20:1 (Winter 2000), p. 56.

Preaching from Heart to Heart (Balance between head and heart)

When asked what works best in preaching to U.S. Hispanic Americans, virtually all preachers interviewed responded by saying it is essential to preach with emotion, from heart to heart. In their own words: “They want to be spoken to their hearts;” “Touch the heart of them;” “Show emotion is important;” “Express your feelings;” “It’s not about understanding.”

In talking with each interviewee it was clear that *heart* is an antonym for *head* (in the cerebral sense). Heart means home; heart means concreteness; heart means words, images, stories, and experiences that resonate with the lives of the hearers. Heart means everything that speaks to the hearers at the deepest level of their existence and, for this reason, is able to forge tears, laughter, surprise, wonder, and awe. Conversely, *head* relates to everything that is exceedingly logical, rational, abstract, and emotionless.

We repeatedly heard that many U.S. Hispanic Americans tend to have a hard time with sermons that are not heart-oriented. To put it another way, they will probably not hear what they cannot “feel” as being truth. Hispanics generally communicate “person to person,” that is, with their whole bodies and emotions, and not merely “brain to brain.”²²

We were told the sermon that speaks to the heart is usually a sermon that is spoken, not read. It is a sermon preached looking in the eyes of the listeners, noticing their feedback and building on it. It is a sermon that can be preached from the aisle, with the preacher walking back and forth. This kind of sermon often utilizes stories from everyday life. It is full of metaphors that leave room for feelings. It is preached with emotion; it frequently includes instances of autobiography from the preacher.

We were strongly encouraged to preach showing our emotions (or at least not hiding them) and with conviction and excitement. Using simple sentences, repeating them if necessary, and never showing off (such as pompously referring to the Greek passage we translated or the commentaries we consulted) are other ways to get our message heard. One preacher cautioned, “Don’t ever let your exegesis come between the message and the congregation.”

This does not mean that “head” issues are unimportant in preaching to U.S. Hispanic Americans; it simply means that the preacher must begin by touching the heart with the grace of God so that the head may take part in the decision-making toward a life committed to creating freedom, solidarity, justice, and love. As Virgilio Elizondo notes, “Doctrine taught does not penetrate the minds of the needy, if a compassionate heart does not commend it to the hearts of the hearers.”²³ While we hear our interviewees saying: “preach to their hearts,” we think they actually mean, “make the connection between heart and head.” One preacher spoke the following words with great emotion:

Brothers and sisters, the Lord also wants to visit you...in a very personal and friendly way, as he did with Zacchaeus. Pedro, Maria, Margarita, Teresa, Carlos, Benjamin...it doesn’t matter what your name is. He says to you, “Pedro, Marcos, Benjamin, Teresa, I want to visit you in your house, will you have a place for me at your table?”

²² Virgilio Elizondo, *Christianity and Culture*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1975, p. 166.

²³ Quoted by Thomas R. Swears, *Preaching to Head and Heart*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000, p. 17.

We learned from our informants that, in issues regarding their church, U.S. Hispanic Americans tend to be somewhat conservative or traditional. Perhaps the church is one of the only places left that they can claim as their own. Any change, therefore, requires time, patience, and communal participation. Nonetheless, they seem to be very open to non-traditional forms of preaching, such as theatrical presentation, passion plays, pantomimes, dance, and visual images.

Music is always welcome in the liturgy as well as part of the sermon. Highlighting the importance of music within the worship service and within the sermon, one preacher said, “If people miss everything else, they get something out of the music.” An experienced Roman Catholic preacher put it this way, “Singing in a given liturgy is more powerful in the life of someone than the preaching itself; it [the music] is a stronger carrier of the gospel message than the preaching. It touches the heart.” An example of how this translates into actual preaching is seen when a Presbyterian preacher includes a well-known hymn in his sermon:

Brothers, help me sing. And those, no matter whether they are men or women, youth or adults, if you feel that (a call to the ministry) truly, stand up here so that we can pray together. We sing: *Aqui estoy, Señor!* (Here I Am Lord).

Theological/Religious Practices Issues

As noted already, most U.S. Hispanic Americans live in poverty and are viewed by many as eternal immigrants and second-class citizens. Those who are disgraced further by being undocumented workers live with the ghost of the INS officer always in their nightmares. Since, in many instances, their situation seems not to improve, they can lose trust in themselves and develop low self-esteem. Complicating their lives even further, the free market ideology (“You can be/have whatever you want in America!”) keeps telling them there is no one to blame for their situation but themselves.

One might expect that worship would serve as a place of healing for people experiencing this kind of low self-esteem; indeed, it should be a place where U.S. Hispanic Americans find nurture and support from God through the sacramental meal and the preached Word. Unfortunately, our interviewees reported that Hispanics do not always perceive the worship in this way. Some still have a kind of superstitious, law-oriented view of religion, in general, and of the Eucharist, in particular. They view the Eucharist, not so much as a means of grace, but as a moment to further confront their brokenness and sin. Some feel unworthy to be a guest at Jesus’ table. As one priest stated, “Hispanics do not come to communion if they have not confessed their sins.”²⁴ Ironically, they feel the need to be “sinless” in order to join Christ at the Table—a place where God, through Christ, welcomes and forgives sinners.

Our experts in ministering to U.S. Hispanic Americans encouraged priests and pastors to emphasize a theology of *grace* both in the celebration the Eucharist and in preaching. Within a context of injustice and hopelessness, grace reverses one of the most important ideologies of the free market (“You have value according to what you are able to purchase.”) and affirms people’s intrinsic value. God loves U.S. Hispanic Americans and wants to redeem them (materially and spiritually—indivisible realities) especially

²⁴ Victor Alvarez, “Preaching to *Generacion X*,” p. 323.

because they are seen and may be pushed to see themselves as less than worthy. God loves them as they are and shows this love in Jesus Christ. Because they are saved through faith by the grace of God, they have dignity, acceptance, affirmation, and the right to a life of fullness. The church, through its preaching, needs to function as an oasis of life in the midst of death. One pastor preached it this way: "... because of Her (Virgin Mary) we stand up and get ourselves walking on this world so that it looks a little more like a world of brothers and sisters, a world where all are God's children."

Our interviewees also told us, alongside the ceaseless reminder of God's grace, there needs to be an equally ceaseless reminder of God's *justice*. Since suffering is a reality ever-present in the lives of most U.S. Hispanic Americans, they need and long for the proclamation of God's justice. As Harold Recinos observes, "Only God's justice will alter the social structures of the barrio and steer them toward life. Thus, Latinos seek God's justice as the defining reality of their lives and the power that converts society."²⁵ U.S. Hispanic Americans are tired of living at the edge of dignity; they are tired of suffering discrimination; they are tired of having little or no share in the richness of the country that they help build. They want God's justice, and they want it now. One sermon we encountered stated it this way:

Many live in insecurity of being here without legal documents. And they know that, because of this, their lives are much more complicated. Many live with the experience of racism and discrimination because of the simple fact that they are Latinos. As a people we are always at the bottom. We are at the bottom in resources for medical assistance, at the bottom in academic level. And sometimes that tires, wears out, despairs.

Preaching justice to Hispanics is primarily a matter of dealing with the relationship between the powerful and the powerless. The preacher's task is to call those who abuse power into repentance and accountability and to strengthen the powerless. However, to one degree or another, people experience situations of power and powerlessness simultaneously. We all sin, in different ways. Therefore, even if preaching must confront a particular unjust power relationship, it must be done in a way that allows all hearers to see themselves in it.

Gonzalez affirms that justice is not *a* theme to be preached only in special occasions. Justice is *the* very heart of preaching to Hispanics. He states, "...we do not need to speak constantly about justice because the constant experience of our people is one of injustice, and therefore the good news is necessarily a word of justice."²⁶

Our informants noted how extremely important it is for those who preach justice to embody it in their lives. U.S. Hispanic Americans, perhaps more than others, expect coherence between the preacher's words and deeds. Hispanics, we were told, open their hearts to those they trust.

Some preachers went on to give us *practical advice* to make traditionally non-Hispanic churches more welcoming. One preacher suggested hanging a picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a very important figure in Mexican Catholicism and history, in the sanctuary. Even if Protestants do not share devotion to the Lady of Guadalupe, they can build on the spirit of this figure. As Victor Alvarez notes, "With Our Lady of Guadalupe,

²⁵ Harold J. Recinos, "The Barrio as the Locus of a New Church." Isasi-Diaz and Segovia, Eds. *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, p. 183.

²⁶ Gonzalez, "A Hispanic Perspective: By The Rivers of Babylon," Smith, Ed. *Preaching Justice*, p. 85.

every preacher can find tenderness, compassion, respect, care, faith, passion and love. These are elements that are necessary for the word to be home among us.”²⁷ Another protestant preacher said she keeps water at the entrance door of the church (a common Roman Catholic custom) so that people can use it to make the sign of the cross when they enter.

The crucified Christ is another image that is very important for Hispanics. Although a passive aspect of suffering seems to be overemphasized where “the crucifixion of Jesus is used to show the suffering, death, and desolation of the faithful in the world,” there needs to be an active appropriation of the cross as the symbol of God’s unconditional love for the weak against the “demonic powers of the world.”²⁸

Finally, the physical location of the church’s actual doors seems to be a significant determinant for successfully opening those doors to U.S. Hispanic Americans. Churches physically situated in Hispanic neighborhoods will be well positioned to serve.²⁹ Likewise, preachers who live in those neighborhoods are highly valued. One preacher, however, warned us that going “down” from nice suburbs to the inner city or to the countryside, where most Hispanics live, takes a lot of prophetic courage, especially if the preacher does not belong to the ethnic groups represented in the congregation.

We began by acknowledging the ongoing homiletical challenge of preaching across cultures in a way that creates a better *fit* in relation to specific ethnic expectations and needs. This is a challenge as old as the Gospel message itself. Jesus, a Galilean, preached to Samaritans; Paul from Tarsus preached to Romans. Throughout the history of the Christian church, preachers have met this challenge with varied levels of sensitivity and success. It is our hope, as the number of U.S. Hispanic Americans grows, so will the ability of preachers to understand the ways in which experience and religion continue to shape this group. We are grateful there are preachers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, who are serious in considering how best to craft sermons that speak to the heart of U.S. Hispanic Americans. We thank these preachers for sharing their sermons, insights and suggestions with others who seek to join them in doing a good job of proclaiming Good News among U.S. Hispanic Americans. For those of us who must cross cultural boundaries when preaching to these sisters and brothers, may we always remember that “our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy.”³⁰

²⁷ Victor Alvarez, “Preaching to *Generacion X*,” p. 329.

²⁸ Alberto Garcia, “Christian Spirituality in Light of the U.S. Hispanic Experience,” p. 58.

²⁹ Harold Recinos observes another phenomenon regarding location. “Storefront churches surfaced on the edges of barrio in the free space left by mainline denominations most commonly fleeing to white suburbs.” “The Barrio as the Locus of a New Church.” Isasi-Diaz and Segovia, Eds. *Hispanic/Latino Theology*, p. 193.

³⁰ Unknown. Cited by Victor Alvarez, “Preaching to *Generacion X*,” p. 312.