

WORSHIP IN A LATINO CONTEXT:

BLESSING OF THE FAMILY TABLE

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Background and context. My relationship with the Hispanic community in Worcester, Massachusetts, is about ten years old. In addition to teaching theology at Holy Cross College, I have been engaged in weekly bible study classes for Spanish-speaking Catholics and I celebrate the eucharistic liturgy each Sunday for the Hispanic community at Our Lady of Fatima Church. That community has strong roots in Puerto Rico, but it also includes a number of families from El Salvador, Cuba, Ecuador, Mexico and Colombia. The church building itself was formerly a Lutheran church; I would characterize the parish as inner-city. The church could not survive without weekly bingo, since the English-speaking members living inside the parish boundary have been dwindling over the years and the Hispanic families do not presently have the resources to maintain the parish on their own.

Besides the Sunday liturgies, I have contact with the families through baptisms, parish celebrations of reconciliation during Advent and Lent, marriages, wakes, funerals and occasional *Quinceañeras*.

We have a small, spirited music group which has added immeasurably to the quality of the Sunday liturgy. I used to invite the people to gather in the sanctuary around the altar for the eucharistic prayer, but the three steps leading to the altar platform proved difficult for elderly people. So each Sunday we position a smaller table in the aisle at the front of the pews as a way of overcoming the distance between the sanctuary and the assembly. Children move around church freely during the liturgy. Most spontaneously join hands for the praying or singing of the Our Father. After the Sunday mass, well over half of the hundred-plus who attend gather in the church basement for coffee and refreshments, and frequently with a large cake to celebrate a birthday, first communions, or wedding anniversary.

A diocesan-wide Guadalupe festival was started about two years ago. The festival brings together the communities from seven or eight parishes for an impressive and colorful procession along downtown Main Street in Worcester, a eucharistic liturgy at the Cathedral, and a party afterwards. The pastoral team in one of the local parishes organizes an annual Corpus Christi festival. This festival likewise consists of a procession, in this case through one of the city's heavily Hispanic housing developments. Families set up Benediction stations along the route, where the procession pauses, prays a decade of the rosary, sings and celebrates Benediction.

These sorts of events, however, do not get me inside the homes of the families comprising our particular parish community. I wanted to see for myself the conditions under which families are living and to form a clearer picture of where they were coming from spiritually, economically, culturally and sociologically. Without such a sense on my part, my homilies do not connect well with people's experience. Since a number of families had been requesting a house blessing, I decided that this might provide me the opportunity I had been looking for to get to know the community better.

The two tables. One recurring theme in my preaching had been the connection between the table in church where we celebrated the Lord's Supper each week and the family table. The two tables, I would explain, defined one another. There is a particular mode of the risen Jesus' real presence attached to each of the tables, while fundamental to each meal as a celebration of shared life there must be an openness to reconciliation and forgiveness. And so on.

I composed a prayer, which the bishop approved our using and a copy of which was left with the family. The Xaverian Sister who worked in the parish as pastoral associate and I visited two families a week, generally on Tuesday and Thursday evenings after the dinner hour. We would bring along the millennial cross, a two-foot, plain oak cross (no corpus) which every parish in the diocese containing a Latino community that assembled regularly had received. The crosses were made by a carpenter from one of the communities. On Sundays, the crucifix is set

prominently in the sanctuary. That cross made its “pilgrimage” to each of the thirty or so households that had asked us to visit them.

Our format was almost always the same. After the initial greetings, introductions to family members we might not have yet met, small talk, orientation to the apartment (no one occupied a full house) and so on, we would sit around the kitchen table -- parents, children, a few neighbors or relatives living close by, sister and I. Only two families had a formal dining room, while over half of the families had house shrines, generally on a shelf or table. These would consist of treasured pictures and statues of Mary or Jesus, a burning candle, a rosary, a bible very close by, maybe a few faded palm branches, a collection of medals and a small crucifix, and a few family relics. Occasionally a family would acquire a statue or framed picture from the place they had initially come from. These they would bring to church on Sunday to be blessed and place them in front of the pulpit. Before the final blessing and dismissal, I would say a special prayer and bless the object, inviting the whole assembly to extend their hands and join me in the prayer. These objects often become part of the household shrine.

Seated around the table, then, we would bless ourselves and, facing the millennial cross at the center of the table, recite together a special prayer for the millennium that had been circulated by the diocese. Next, I would slowly recite the prayer composed for the table blessing, bless and sprinkle the table with holy water, and finally walk through the rooms of the apartment, sprinkling each with holy water (which we would leave with the family). Following the sprinkling, we would sit around the table for a while, talking (usually) over coffee, a long loaf of bread, and cheese. The prayer reads as follows:

Bendición de la Mesa

Señor Jesús, tu apareciste a los dos discípulos de Emaús mientras estabas a la mesa con ellos y cuando tomaste el pan en tus manos. Multiplicaste unos pancitos para los hambrientos, y después de la Pascua preparaste un desayuno para los apóstoles. Almorzaste en la casa de Zaqueo, y en la de Marta y María. ¡No se habrían olvidado nunca de aquellas memorias preciosas!

Nos has dejado un memorial especial de tu presencia entre nosotros: la cena pascual, que celebramos continuamente. Te recordamos sentado tantas veces a la mesa con tus discípulos, con pecadores, con los justos y con los pobres. Tú hiciste de la mesa cristiana un sacramento, un recuerdo permanente en nuestras casas de tu presencia, de tu amor y de tu fidelidad.

Te rogamos, pues, Señor Jesús, que esta mesa sea siempre un reflejo de la mesa en nuestra iglesia y un memorial de tu amor para con nosotros. Bendícela. Te pedimos que todos que se sientan aquí encuentren alrededor de esta mesa su pan de cada día: la paz, tranquilidad, perdón, alegría y fuerzas que necesitan para vivir con esperanza. Cada vez que compartimos pan aquí, ojalá que profundicemos nuestra comunión contigo y con toda la comunidad cristiana. Amén.

[ET: Lord Jesus, you appeared to the two disciples of Emmaus while you were at table with them and when you took bread in your hands. You multiplied loaves for the hungry and after Easter you prepared a breakfast for your apostles. You had lunch in the home of Zacchaeus and in the home of Martha and Mary. They would never have forgotten those precious memories!

You left us a special memorial of your presence among us: the paschal supper, which we celebrate continually. We recall you seated at table so many times with your disciples, with sinners, with the righteous and with the poor. You made the Christian table a sacrament, a permanent reminder in our homes of your presence, your love and your faithfulness.

We therefore ask you, Lord Jesus, that this table might always be a reflection of the table in our church and a memorial of your love towards us. Bless it. We ask that all those who sit here should find around this table their daily bread: the peace, security, forgiveness, joy and energy that they need to live with hope. Each time we break bread here, may we deepen our communion with you and with the whole Christian community. Amen.

The faith context. As I said, there were two motives behind developing this particular blessing. The first was homiletic, to underline the relationship between what goes on in the home and what we do each week as a worshipping community. The second was pastoral, to come up with a clearer sense of the spiritual location of the families themselves: their piety, their needs, their way of interacting, and their histories (which they were universally willing to share, generally with the help of old photographs).

Except in the case of older couples, the families appear to have fallen into the same meal patterns as the rest of society where households have children. Where there are teenagers, people often eat in front of televisions, or at different times from one another, or with the interruption of telephones. In homes where the children are younger, one or both parents are

constantly attending to their needs as well. The rice pot on the stove usually signals that someone has not yet come home for dinner. The little prayer I had composed was hardly capable of reversing the pressures and patterns of the society in which we find ourselves where meal-taking appears far more incidental to everyday life than, say, in the Aymara culture of Bolivia, which operates in a very different rhythm. I realize that I am not alone in calling attention to this limitation in our social existence as one of the factors that make effective liturgy difficult to achieve.

There is, of course, the dimension of popular religiosity to consider. I alluded to this in mentioning the house shrines one frequently encounters in Hispanic homes, especially among Puerto Rican families. For the most part I find the level of everyday faith within the Hispanic community, *when it is complemented and nourished by regular participation at the eucharistic liturgy*, to be vibrant and heartening. Last September's Guadalupe procession, for example, was truly memorable. It was a typical cultural expression of devotion to Mary, it possessed remarkable sign value for the Catholic Hispanic presence in the city, it was both prayerful and festive, and it culminated in the Eucharist.

I have added the qualification *when everyday faith is complemented and nourished by regular participation at the eucharistic liturgy* because among those who do not regularly practice their faith within the setting of community I have noticed a fair amount of superstition. Non-churchgoers are more likely to be concerned about my blessing a house so as to drive out evil spirits, listen to astrologers on television, or place pictures of demonic-looking spirits alongside their saints and statues of Jesus and Mary.

I should also mention that the level of superstition seems to decrease as people's educational and financial background improves. In other words, the level of popular religiosity is very much determined by social class. Where people are poor and maintain a steady relationship with the worshipping community, faith seems to be more healthy, supportive and alive. In cases where people are poor and keep only a marginal relationship with the church, I find myself having a hard time trying to understand what their religion means and resisting their

expressions of popular religiosity. I do not believe the Latino context is theologically special because it is Latino. After all, there are many cultural differences in the world, each one of them inviting a particular form of inculturating the gospel. Rather, Latino culture is special because, or perhaps insofar as, it is poor yet trusting in God. That is what makes it so endearing and revelatory.

The table blessing became an occasion for noticing both of these elements: (1) An everyday faith that took God seriously as the basis of life, the reason for hope, the one to be loved above everything else, and as deeply yet reverently familiar. I have never noticed loose or careless language among the Hispanics of the parish in talking about God. They are as careful about the way they speak of God as they are in addressing me as *Usted*. There is among them an unspoiled matter of factness about the presence of God in their lives. The household shrines, the ease with which they talk about God, the eagerness with which they invited us to visit and bless their homes: all this points to a strong, vivifying belief. (2) The people are for the most part poor, and the poorer they are the more matter of fact God seems to be in their lives. There was nothing fancy about what we were served in the homes. There, during those visits, we would learn more about a son or spouse in prison, someone infected with HIV, economic hardship, encounters with various agencies, and so on. We often heard, in other words, what one might expect to learn about the lives of people of modest means.

I offer these statements as simple pastoral observations after a number of years of being involved with a particular Latino community. But I could make similar observations in light of my contacts with other parishes in the diocese and after numerous visits to the church in Bolivia. The context within which the Hispanic community that I serve gathers itself is determined largely, first, by an uncomplicated everyday faith that readily accepts the immediacy of God and, second, by limited financial resources, a condition which forecloses most of the social, cultural and educational options that people with means take for granted.

The table blessing was designed to reinforce everyday faith. Yet while it is true that the eucharistic table and the kitchen table mutually interpret one another, for both are the Lord's

tables, in a number of cases there is a unity which is *not* expressible at the eucharistic table but which does become evident at the family's. One element of the context in which families worship is marital status. A number of couples attend mass regularly, and even assist liturgically as lectors, commentators, choir members, or bearers of the offertory gifts. Yet because of their marriage situations they cannot receive the Eucharist. At home, however, they can celebrate a oneness as family around the Lord's "second" table, and they can invite to that table others like themselves who might not be free to receive Communion in church.

This point is important to notice. Even though they are prevented from sacramentally expressing their oneness with the whole church, families with unresolved marriage issues do express around the family table a graced oneness with others that is (1) ordinary, (2) real, and (3) broadly sacramental. While I do not want to diffuse the notion of liturgy to the point that we fail to acknowledge the differences between church space and family space, I think it is important that people recognize the Lord's presence in the meals of their daily life together. In many Latino households, particularly in cases where a sacred space is arranged and displayed, there is an antecedent readiness to visualize a real presence of the Lord. What cannot be celebrated in church can be celebrated at home; what has not been juridically resolved through a church tribunal finds at least some resolution in the reassuring holiness of the everyday.

My insight into the interaction of the two tables, and the way families sometimes implicitly or unconsciously rely on the sacredness of the family table stemmed in part from an anthropological study by Gerardo Fernández Juárez which I came across in Bolivia entitled *El Banquete Aymara* (La Paz: HISBOL, 1995). Not only does the sacramentality of everyday life have the potential to enhance what happens liturgically in church; but sometimes the effective sacramentality in people's lives enacts more clearly than we can in church the sacredness of the home. To me this is liturgically troublesome. In Bolivia, for instance, among the Aymara campesinos, it leads to dual celebrations: the official church celebration of a sacrament, and the unofficial but real celebration later in a village.

I am not simply suggesting that in the setting where I assist the eucharistic liturgy would be more powerful if the irregular marital situations were straightened out (I think it well might). Rather, I am suggesting that people's thirst for sacredness and reconciliation will often lead them to establish sacramentality elsewhere, outside the sanctuary, when they cannot be fully integrated into the life of the worshipping community. The family table thus becomes all the more religiously important and, properly understood, revelatory.