

La Familia as Locus Theologicus
And
Religious Education in lo Cotidiano

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Abstract

Latinos are deeply religious, and their way of expressing and experiencing God and life is often different from that of the U.S. dominant culture. With the importance of family, community, and the belief that God is actively present in daily life in a Latino context, this paper will address the conference theme by exploring the interplay between *la familia as locus theologicus* and religious education in *lo cotidiano* [daily life]. It examines Hispanic family life as portrayed by U.S. Hispanic theologians and religious educators. Thick descriptions and portraits of the families, parish religious educators and faith communities will be used as a way to address the conference theme.

In the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (no. 11), the family is described as a “domestic church” where all are called upon to work actively and responsibly for the common good, to return to religious traditions in the home, and to care for the marginalized in one’s family, community, and world. Latinos are deeply religious, yet, their way of expressing and experiencing God and life is often different from that of the U.S. dominant culture. The U.S. Catholic bishops point out that “[i]n many respects the survival of faith among Hispanics seems little less than a miracle. Even at times when the institutional Church could not be present to them, their faith remained, for their family-oriented tradition of faith provided a momentum and dynamism accounting for faith’s preservation” (1983, 8). With the importance of family, community, and the belief that God is actively present in daily life in a Latino context, this paper addresses the conference theme of “Theology and Religious Education: Relational, Practical, and Interfaith Dimensions” by exploring the interplay between *la familia as locus theologicus* and religious education in *lo cotidiano*. This paper begins by examining the lived faith experiences of Hispanic family life as portrayed by theologians and religious

educators. Special attention is given to the insights of U.S. Roman Catholic Hispanic theologians and religious educators. This paper is further grounded by reflecting on my research, a case study, which examines what it can mean to journey with Roman Catholic Hispanic families living in New York City from the perspective of a parish religious educator. Thick descriptions and portraits of the families, parish religious educators and faith communities provide insights and examples as a way to address the conference theme; in particular, the relational, “How is faith formed and expressed within religious communities?”

HISPANIC PRESENCE IN THE UNITED STATES

For many in the Hispanic community, the summer of 2009 has been one of joy and *fiesta*. The nomination and confirmation of U.S. Hispanic Theologian Miguel Díaz as U.S. ambassador to the Holy See; Judge Sonia Sotomayors’ confirmation to the Supreme Court; José Hernández and John Olivas NASA astronauts flight into space;¹ and, the many others who daily struggle to live life to the fullest giving witness to family as the heart of the Latino culture.

Striving to understand Hispanic families and their lived faith experiences and religious educational journey is a complex and challenging process. The Hispanic presence in the United States is rapidly growing and changing. Hispanics are the largest minority group in the nation, and account for 50 percent of the population increase (U.S. Census Bureau). Hispanics are a heterogeneous group (e.g., multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-socioeconomic, multi-racial, multi-religious) residing throughout the U.S. in rural, suburban, and urban areas. The majority of Hispanics are U.S. born. Hispanics are also a young population that continues to rank among the lowest in academics and in

¹This is the first time two Hispanic astronauts orbit space in the same flight. In addition, Hernández is the first person to use the Spanish language to *tweet* from space using Twitter.

socioeconomic class. Over two-thirds of the Hispanic population consider themselves to be Roman Catholic and constitute 35% of the U.S. Catholics.²

Hispanic family ties tend to remain strong and lifelong. Hispanics tend to embrace family and community even after residing in this country for generations. Many Latino families are immersed in transnational living between life in U.S. and their countries of origin. Transnational living impacts both those residing in U.S. and in their native countries. Transnational living impacts theology and religious education. Reflecting on the Hispanic community, U.S. theologian of Cuban descent, Roberto S. Goizueta writes:

What we offer to our adoptive country is, above all, the hope of a freedom grounded in community. From within our own history as Latinos and Latinas, we offer the opportunity of an individual freedom based in relationship. For, though we are aliens in both our countries of origin and in our adopted country, we U.S. Hispanics know that we are not alone. We walk with each other and with Jesus. (17)

In *Hispanic Ministry at the Turn of the New Millennium*, the United States Catholic Bishops' Committee of Hispanic Affairs identified "family strengths and values as an important gift of Hispanics to the church" (7). Hispanics are a most valuable resource for the U.S. and world, just as the U.S. and the world are most precious resources to the many Hispanic communities who daily struggle to live and thrive.

LA FAMILIA AS LOCUS THEOLOGICUS

The following are examples of *la familia as locus theologicus* and religious education as manifested in *lo cotidiano* as described in the writings of U.S. Hispanic theologians and religious educators. Hispanic Catholic

² Hispanics contributed 71% of the growth of the U.S. Catholics since 1960 (USCCB). Some estimates indicate that by 2030 almost 80% of U.S. Catholics will be Hispanic, and by 2050 only 20% of the world's Christians will be non-Hispanic whites (Allen; Gonzalez, 26).

theologians, although not a monolithic group of scholars, understand theology as more than dogmas and faith formulas. In “doing theology,” they base their theological reflections on the lived faith experiences of Latinos/as, in particular, those living at the margins, the poor and the oppressed. Embracing diversity as God’s gift, they delve into the historical, socio-economic, gender, political and cultural contexts. They reflect on the faith communities’ popular religiosity to understand the people’s experiences of the human and the Divine; popular religion is “one of the key bearers of cultural identity” and *sensus fidelium* (Espín and Macy 7). Moreover, “if Western theology stressed the fact that God is known in the form of the True (Doctrine), and liberation theology that God is known in the form of the Good (Justice), U.S. Hispanic theology stresses the fact that God is known in the form of the Beautiful” (Goizueta 106).

In *Mujerista Theology*, Ada María Isasi-Díaz describes the Hispanic family as an *amplified family* consisting of a nuclear family and an extended family of aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents, friends and neighbors. She describes *la familia* as “a vast network of relationships and resources in which Hispanic women play a key role” (139) and the community as “an extension, a continuation of the family” (140). She contends that a new form of Hispanic family is emerging, as the patriarchal family is coming to an end. She names *embodiment* as a major challenge for the Hispanic families to embrace, especially for women. Isasi-Díaz contends that Latinas “do not have control over their bodies ... [for example] the aspects of sexuality that have to do with pleasure, communication, and affection are negated and only procreation is valued” (141). She associates exploitation of labor with the negation of embodiment, and points out that Latinas are often expected to do much of the household work, even though they too leave the home to work, and that it is a custom in many Hispanic families at meals to serve the children and the men first. Both women and men of all ages and socioeconomic classes are constricted by these patterns of life, and thus, women

and men are denied the opportunity of becoming whole. Ironically, Isasi-Díaz notes that it is also in the family where women have a sense of wholeness, of interdependence; the home is their domain (143). Isasi-Díaz proposes that those striving to undertake a study of family from a Hispanic perspective and in a particular context should, “look at how *la familia* has changed, and we must evaluate those changes not by comparing them with the way family has been in our culture, but in view of the role it has today “ (137).

Reflecting on Latinas’ central role in the family, Orlando O. Espín writes “[t]he ministers of Latino Catholicism are primarily the older women Women are the center and pillars of the families, and Latino popular Catholicism is definitely woman-emphatic.” He emphasizes that “older woman are our people’s cultural and religious hermeneuts. They are the ministers and bearers of our identity” (1997, 4).

The concept of family is enriched and broadened in *Caminemos Con Jesús* where Roberto S. Goizueta, husband and father, seeks to develop a theology of accompaniment grounded on Hispanic popular Catholicism and a preferential option for the poor. For him, “a preferential option for the poor must include a preferential option for the home as a privileged *locus theologicus*” (193). He emphasizes that he is not attempting to idealize and romanticize family life; rather he seeks to emphasize that the poor are often denied access to many areas of public life. Thus it is in the home life that accompaniment with the poor truly begins. Goizueta argues that the oppressive power of geographical separation, isolation, and confinement must be overcome in concrete ways (200). To reveal the affective dimension of accompaniment, justice, and a preferential option for the poor, he engages in a conversation with *justice* and *beauty*. Goizueta articulates how Hispanics tend to embody an organic anthropology where relationships, in particular familial relationships, are of primary importance. For example, he notes that when Hispanics meet they are more likely to ask, “Who are

your parents? What town is your family from?” Whereas members of the U.S. dominant culture tend to be more individualistic and thus are more likely to ask, “What do you do for a living? ... Where did you do your training?” (51) Goizueta contends that Hispanic self-identity emerges from their relationships within the community; community is constitutive of the person. For him, the church is an extension of the family and the city (192).

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN LO COTIDIANO

Religious education in the context of the family is manifested in *lo cotidiano* in many ways in their families, workplaces, schools, neighborhoods, and parishes. A major challenge, for families as well as for parish religious educators, is to become conscious of these religious encounters. Theologian, religious educator, and priest Virgilio Elizondo contends that “the task of religious education is to take the stuff of everyday life and reread it through the eyes of the Gospel” (1981, 269). In *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee*, Elizondo reflects on his early formative years and how he experienced religious pluralism in his father’s grocery store, even though segregation existed in his surrounding communities and institutions. He recounts:

In our neighborhood, and especially in my Dad’s grocery store, things were completely different ... Blacks, Jews, poor Baptists and Methodist whites, and of course Mexicans came by the store to shop and to make friends. I grew up with friends of various races, ethnicities, and religions. Everyone loved being who they were, and they all had the best jokes to tell about their own race or ethnicity and even more so about their churches! Everyone was faithful to their church or synagogue, yet they all poked fun at their own ministers and religious traditions ... Yet never was the faith of any one of us challenged or questioned. We had a deep respect for everyone, and that is why we could joke so easily together While the rest of society was building barriers of segregation, my Dad’s store was, as I see it today, very much like the table fellowship of Jesus in Galilee: Everyone was welcomed and appreciated. (144-145)

U.S. Hispanic theologians and religious educators are engaged in the ongoing process of unveiling and articulating the lived faith experiences of Hispanic communities. With each new insight, new pedagogical opportunities can potentially emerge. The sources highlighted above serve as a buildup for the rest of this paper.

PART II



A CASE STUDY

FAMILIAS EN LA LUCHA [FAMILIES IN THE STRUGGLE]

Exploring How is Faith Formed and Expressed in Latino Families

Mother: I also teach my children that when we finish eating or my sons finish eating, they tell me “Thank you, Mami” and they give me a kiss. I tell them, “Thank You, God. Thank You for giving us our daily bread.” The way I teach my sons, I also teach the little girl whom I babysit. If we go somewhere and we must cross a wide street, when we finish crossing, I say, “Thank You God that I crossed with my children and that nothing happened to us.” My sons, the little one now also says the same thing and the little girl too. However, since the little girl speaks more English, she says, “Thank You, *Diosito*.”³

Through their daily way of being, many U.S. Hispanic families are striving to lead a religious life. *En la lucha* [In the struggle] is a phrase often heard within Hispanic communities. Daily life is perceived as a struggle to

³ Interview with a Mexican family. A careful translation from Spanish to English.

survive and thrive, and the struggle is also one of hope and in accompaniment with others (human and divine).⁴ This study examines religious education in the context of multicultural, multi-socioeconomic Roman Catholic families residing in New York City. It probes the role of families as religious educators, and the role of parish religious educators who are striving to be in solidarity with families. Conducting case study research is particularly important within the context of Hispanic communities, especially those in New York City where the diversity in families, neighborhoods, parishes, and schools is immense and multifaceted. Fieldwork was conducted at six parishes. Twenty Hispanic families with young children and adolescents were interviewed (7 Dominican, 2 Ecuadorian, 1 Honduran, 6 Mexican, 3 Puerto Rican, and 1 Spanish). Fourteen were two-parent families; five were single mothers; and one was a grandmother as primary caregiver. Also, interviewed were three pastors, four directors of religious education, and two coordinators of religious education. Parish observations included Eucharistic celebrations and processions; parish sacramental programs including parents' sessions; faith-sharing sessions with parents; monthly family activities; and family retreats.

FAMILY CHALLENGES AND RESILIENCY

Most of the families interviewed experience economic difficulties. Two families had experienced homelessness in New York City. One family had twice experienced fires in two different apartments. At least five families arrived in the U.S. as undocumented immigrants. In time, some had been able to change their status. Several families had children enrolled in special education; some mothers felt their children were doing well, while others did not. A mother regretted putting her oldest son in special education since third grade. At age 16 and in

⁴ *En la lucha* is also a metaphor used by Ada María Isasi-Díaz in her construction of Mujerista Theology. In this study, I seek to explore *familias en la lucha*.

high school, her son is still in special education. This mother regrets that he has not learned any skills or a trade. Once again, this mother has been approached by school officials to give permission to enroll her youngest son in special education. She has refused, indicating that she will not follow the advice of professionals without obtaining more information and seeking alternatives. Another family had one child enrolled in a bilingual program while another son was in a regular program. Some families had children who had remained in the same grade for several years. A pre-adolescent girl was relating her academic weaknesses as being a bad person. Seven families had one or more children enrolled in Catholic elementary or secondary schools; most of these families received some financial assistance toward the tuition. Three families were dealing with incarceration. One father had been in prison for over a decade. In another family, the father had been released from prison after serving a three year sentence. In the meantime, the mother proudly expressed how she continued to work, attended school, and provided for her children alone. A grandmother had a son in prison in her country of origin. She had journeyed to the United States to care for her recently divorced daughter's three children. There were also families confronting some of the consequences of *machismo* such as domestic violence and infidelity.

PORTRAIT OF A FAMILY INTERVIEW

“YA DIOS PROVEERÁ [GOD WILL PROVIDE].”

On a cold rainy Thursday evening, the researcher was welcomed into the home of a Dominican family. Interviewed were the mother (41), two daughters (15, 12) and two sons (11, 13) gathered around the dining table situated in the living room. This was a lively family. The children were computer savvy, loved music and television. There was much activity during the interview; yet, everyone was attentive to the

questions and responded to them. School experiences were often shared, especially as experienced by the 15-year-old daughter. For several weeks, the mother had been overwhelmed babysitting eleven children in her home. Two years ago the mother lost her job. Now, she expressed that she must do what she can find, or rather what she is told to do so that her family can receive financial assistance. During the day, her home becomes a daycare center where she usually cares for seven children, five days a week. The children begin to arrive at 7:30 a.m. and the last one leaves between 6:30 and 7 p.m.

As the researcher arrived at the apartment building and telephoned, the mother had forgotten that the family was to be interviewed that evening. The children whom the mother babysat had left just a few minutes earlier. When the researcher entered the home, the first thing seen was a Dominican flag hanging on a bedroom door and on the wall a large picture of Jesus as portrayed in the Divine Mercy image. In the living room, the furniture was white and the sofas had plastic covers on them. The 15-year-old daughter was sitting at the computer. Displayed on the computer screen was a 5"x7" image of their maternal grandparents that she was about to email to another family member. Music was playing and the television was on. The mother informed the children that they were going to be interviewed; everyone gathered around the dining table. Some sat while others remained standing. When the 11-year-old son heard that the researcher was conducting an interview about religious education, he rushed to his room. He returned with his religion book and a collection of prayer cards that he placed on the dining table; now, he was ready to be interviewed.

When the interview was scheduled, the mother did not recall that the father, who has been in prison for many years, was going to call them that evening. Usually, he called on Saturdays, but they had not been able to speak with him the prior Saturday. Thus, at one point, the interview was interrupted to permit each child to speak with his/her father. The children and the mother would leave the room to speak with their father. The mother spoke last with her husband. The family had a total of thirty minutes to speak with him. At one point, the 11-year-old son, after leaving the room, returned to get his religion textbook, to speak with his father about religion class and this interview. He was preparing to become an altar server. The mother indicated that the children had not been able to see their father for two years now. In the prison only four people can visit him at a time, and since they are five, she said they do not want to leave any one of them behind. The mother's facial expression revealed that she did not want her children to visit their father in jail; the mother later confirmed this.

At the end of the interview questions, when the children went about their business preparing for the next day of school (for example, the older daughter was ironing her uniform), and the interviewer had turned off the audio recorder and placed it in her backpack, the mother remained and reflected on the interview questions. She reflected on how her children had responded and how they had been critical of her. She also reflected on her life. She perceived this interview as an act of God for the benefit of her, her family, and perhaps also the interviewer. Several *dichos* [aphorisms] were used in context during the interview. The mother, reflecting on her family life poignantly, said, “*Ya Dios proveerá. Como dice el dicho* [God will provide, as the saying goes].”

Manifestations of familial participation are many in this household. The mother showed a family photo album to which everyone is contributing. She was surprised to see some of the pictures that had been added. The album still had empty pockets for future additions. Manifestations of family leadership were also observed. All in the family cared for each other. For example, the next day, the 15-year-old daughter was going to be a proctor at the Catholic High School entrance exam, and her 13-year-old brother was going to take this exam at another school. This sister was arranging for someone to accompany him to the Catholic High School where he would be taking the exam; she did not want him to go alone. This is a family that is caring and protective of each other. The mother tries to shield the children from their financial situation; she expressed how she manages the credit cards that she has from several department stores. For example, the mother was expecting to receive two hundred dollars that she had already designated for her 12-year-old daughter. The children expressed that their mother is too clean and too good. Their home was spotless, and the mother is always willing to help those in need, even when her own family is in need. A sense of justice is emerging in this family. Through their parish religious education processes, the children have had the opportunity to participate in service learning at a local soup kitchen; yet, the 12-year-old sister was critical that some people whom she perceived as not in need were seeking food. The 13-year-old brother recalled that a boy was wearing a girl's coat at his school. He felt sorry for this boy, yet he did not know how to help him without hurting his feelings.

This family is positively influenced by their maternal aunts,

uncles, and grandparents. Over the years, all have immigrated from the Dominican Republic and live in another borough of New York City. The family regularly travels to gather with them on weekends. The 13-year-old son was upset that his aging *madrina* [Godmother] had been placed in a nursing home without consulting the family members. The grandparents are actively involved in their parish. Thus, the children are exposed to two parish communities, and they are critical of both. The 15-year-old daughter is also actively involved in her Catholic High School's liturgies; she is preparing to be an altar server.

This is a family that greatly values their academic education, and the parish community has been a positive influence in all aspects of their family life. Years ago, as a priest was being reassigned, he left with the mother the name of a person to contact when the daughter would be preparing to attend high school. This priest saw the potential in the daughter and family. The mother treasured this resource, and they contacted this person when the time came. The daughter was accepted in a Catholic High School; a person whom they do not know is helping this family pay for the tuition. At first, the daughter did not want to attend Catholic school; yet, now she is encouraging all her siblings to do likewise.

The mother recounted how all the children, except the 15-year-old, were born in the U.S. The 15-year-old immigrated to the U.S. with her mother when she was a baby. When the mother was 23 years old, her husband was arrested; the children were taken from their home and placed in foster care. The mother poignantly described how she fought for over two years to get them back. She expressed that it was wrong to have had her children taken from her. She explained that in their home,

there was never any fighting nor were the children mistreated. The mother desires and encourages her children to pursue a higher education. She recounted attending school in the Dominican Republic only until she was 11 years old when she left school to care for newborn twin siblings.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents a summary of key findings that emerged from the data analysis and provides recommendations for effectively supporting Latino families in New York City in light of the study.

WE ARE ALWAYS UNITED

As the study revealed, Latino parents were seeking to create a safe, secure, harmonious, life-giving, and faith-nurturing environment for their families. Family unity was perceived as a way of seeking fullness of life and not being limited by one's circumstances and daily challenges. These families were striving for fullness of life in the context in which they found themselves, whether it was in dual-parent households, single-parent households, or blended-parent households. In the home, large or small, apartment or house, the families dwelled together. Mothers often said that they were trying to maintain balance between home, school, work, and church. Some parents were trying to reduce the "noise" of excessive clutter with television, movies, internet, and other activities. Parents were seeking opportunities for their children to safely explore their environment and to experiment in it. They were using affirming and empowering language with children. They were seeking to discover and nurture the abilities, skills, talents, and interests of their children, and also to observe and guide their character strengths and weaknesses in constructive ways. Respect and humility were the values most mentioned by the interviewees. Humility was often used in

relation to daughters. Some parents proudly indicated that gender roles were being broadened. Some fathers were teaching their children how to cook. Boys and girls had household chores such as cooking, mopping, and ironing. Some parents proudly shared how their children were teaching them how to use the computer. The families enjoyed engaging in projects, playing games, and watching television together at home. Some enjoyed caring for and playing with pets. They looked forward to playing sports outdoors and on special occasions going together to fast food restaurants. Some had regular family meetings to discuss family issues, concerns, and plans. Families enjoyed gathering with the amplified family in their homes and outdoors where stories, pictures, and meals were shared, and new stories were being born to be passed on to future generations. Some families were immersed in transnational living between life in U.S. and their countries of origin. Through their family life in *lo cotidiano*, parents realized that they were in the ongoing process of striving to come to know and understand their children. Family members were discovering who they were through their sharing of family life and through their interactions with other families, and with their parishes and communities.

“SI VAZ CON DIOS Y JESÚS, NO TE PASA NADA [IF YOU GO ACCOMPANIED WITH GOD AND JESUS, NOTHING WILL HAPPEN TO YOU]”

As U.S. Latino/a theologians and a recent Pew study have noted “for the great majority of Latinos, regardless of their religious traditions, God is an active force in daily life” (17; Martinez). Theologians describe Latinas understanding of the divine as relational, friend and family member; Jesus, Mary, and the saints are perceived as family members (Gonzalez xiv). Isasi-Díaz writes Jesus “simply is with us in the midst of ordinariness of life, that He simply walks with us And how do we know that He always accompanies us? Because He is *familia*. We are not alone. He is never alone” (257).

So, too the families interviewed are in a constant conversation with God. “*Si vaz con Dios y Jesús, no te pasa nada* [if you go accompanied with God and Jesus, nothing will happen to you]” are the caring words of a mother to her son and daughter as they head to school each morning. School was often a fearful experience for the families interviewed. The words of Virgilio Elizondo were echoed in these families, “the paradox of the large city is that there are so many people living together – as strangers” (1999, 5). The families were fearful of the negative influences that surrounded their children especially in *el lobby y la calle* [the lobby and local streets]. Most families lived in apartment complexes along with over twenty other families. In an effort to protect their families, parents were most discerning of the people with whom they interacted. Some parents indicated they did not want to associate with anyone in their building while others associated with one or two neighbors. Sometimes parents encouraged their children to avoid, ignore and to keep silent. At times, families came to know their neighbors through the parish. This study showed that families with young children were already pondering what will happen to their children as they become adolescents.

FAMILY EVANGELIZATION, CATECHESIS, AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

It was difficult for some families to describe how religious education emerged in their families. Some parents said that they were teaching their children what and how they had been taught when they were young. Parents recalled their own parents at prayer. Joyfully some mothers described how their fathers sang to them back when they were young and even as they became adults. Fathers described how their own mothers prayed *novenas* for their families. Most parents had a bedtime ritual with their children; some prayed and read books. Family rituals should evolve as the family changes, as children grow and develop, yet, some families were unable to do this transition on their own. Most families

prayed before meals, as they left their homes, as they walked the local streets, in school and work, and as they returned home. In the home, families had religious images and *altarcitos* [home altars]. The Bible is important to many of these families. One mother fondly remembers how she and her 8-year-old daughter engage in Bible reading and faith-sharing in their home. The mother is in awe and delights at the questions her daughter poses. Another mother shares in what ways she seeks to learn about God in order to share this with her family.

Mother (34 year old): Before anything, I try to learn the Bible and books about God. Then I try to transmit this information to my children, to my family. At dinner and lunch, we give thanks ... We recall something about the life of Jesus, something about my childhood. I studied in Catholic school. What was taught to me, I try to teach my children; my husband does likewise. There the four of us begin to converse about God. At all moments, we give thanks for what we have and that we are here present, from the moment we open our eyes, another day of life.⁵

Another family described their home as follows:

Mother (37 year old): At home, we have statues of saints and Our Lady of Guadalupe. Our Lord is also very important for us. We celebrate the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. They know it. We celebrate this feast in our home by decorating the apartment, giving candy, and singing *las mañanitas*. For us, the Virgin is Mother Lupita. We have to go to church, perhaps what we cannot tell her in our home, we do at church and the priest. We have religion classes. My [9 year old] son asked me to buy him a Bible because he wants to learn more about the Bible.

Daughter (15 year old): Each day we thank God for everything and we pray for other people whom we care for.

Mother: We have church activities; and, we also have other activities. [The daughter says, "Exactly."] For example, my husband likes sports. Both my children play soccer. On weekends, the [amplified] family also gathers in our home where we play a variety of games on the table, and we talk and share stories.⁶

⁵ Interview with an Ecuadorian family. Translated to English.

⁶ Interview with a Mexican family. Translated to English.

This study shows that mothers were concerned about how evangelization and catechesis could occur with their spouses and other adult members of the family. Some mothers indicated that they can *just* suggest and inform their spouses, but beyond that they did not know what else to do. Several mothers indicated they wanted to be sacramentally married, but their husbands were not open to this. Throughout this study, mothers, children and parish religious educators indicated that they wanted the fathers/husbands to be more involved in their family and parish life.

This study points to how family evangelization could occur in the family and beyond. One father's dream was to write the story of his life; he even had the title for his book, "The Story of a *Mojado* [Wetback]." This was particularly significant, since parish religious educators often indicated that their Latino faith communities were not a reading community. But in fact, this study found that mothers were reading their children's bilingual religion books, and that families were reading the Bible and other prayer books; yet, there is an absence of inculturated resources.

The families are immersed in religious pluralism in a variety of ways at their places of work, school, neighborhood, residence, and in their families. Several families allow their children to participate in trips and outings with other Christian denominations. Some have family members who are Protestant, Evangelical, Mormon, and Jehovah's Witness. Some families live in harmony with this familial diversity, while others do not. In the workplace, a father fondly recalled how he regularly engages in Bible study with an older man who is Protestant. A mother is a home attendant to seniors who are Protestant; she attends services with them. She expressed how warm and caring these communities have been with her and wishes some people in her own parish would be this way. A mother taking an English as a Second Language course became friends with Muslim women; she fondly recalled how they have opportunities to

talk about their religious customs and practices. Mothers and children appeared to be more immersed in religious pluralism than some fathers who indicated that religion and politics are not to be debated under any circumstance.

PARENTS AND GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

The study surfaced generational differences between the first and second generation families interviewed.⁷ For example, second generation mothers were less likely to see the good and beautiful in their places of residence and neighborhood.⁸ Some had lived all of their lives in the same New York City neighborhood. For these parents, their family life was lived in their apartment and beyond their local streets. They described their one-on-one interactions with parish religious educators as meaningful and enabling experiences. These parents were using secular resources, especially movies, to enhance and reinforce their parenting skills.

On the other hand, the first generation parents interviewed regarded the U.S.A. as the land of opportunity. Although they too described the dangers in their neighborhoods, they were able to name the good. Most had journeyed to this country to better provide for their families, and noted that they wanted their children to have the opportunity to attain a higher academic education. These parents were more likely to describe their parish involvement in small group settings and they gathered at the parish and homes. They were more likely to attend family-centered and intergenerational parish events along with their children. Too, some mothers were reluctant to participate at events that they did not know what to expect and where they might be asked questions in a group

⁷ First generation families are those where the parents were not born in the U.S.

⁸ Latin American theologian Ivone Gebara notes that “to recapture the beauty of life is to find once again new pathways and roads to bring about justice in our societies, to recommence yet again a global struggle for valid global change for the better” (118).

setting especially when they did not know the participants. Thanksgiving had emerged as a most special holiday for them.

FAITH, CULTURAL AND LANGUAGE ISSUES

“*Que no se olviden sus raíces* [That they not forget their roots]” are the words of parents who wanted to introduce their children to their ethnic heritage. To accomplish this, they were using the parish, Latino television and music, and books as resources.⁹ Some parents were concerned that if they taught their children Spanish, this would negatively impact their academic schooling. This was especially unfortunate since as Ada María Isasi-Díaz observes for Latinos:

language is the main means of identification here in the United States. To speak Spanish, in public as well as in private, is a political act, a means of asserting who we are, an important way of struggling against assimilation. The different state laws that forbid speaking Spanish in official situations, or militate against bilingual education, function as an oppressive internal colonialism that ends up hurting the United States society. (25)

Roberto Goizueta contends that “what unites us [Hispanics] is language and culture” (7). Recalling his childhood as a Cuban exile, being raised in Atlanta, Georgia, he writes:

In our home, we continued to celebrate traditional Cuban holidays, eat Cuban food, and sing traditional Cuban songs, accompanied by my mother on the guitar. Moreover, the children all knew that, once we set foot in the house, we would be allowed to speak only Spanish (even though both of my parents were fluent in English) ... Today, we consider the Spanish language – passed down to us with such great love and against such stubborn resistance – one of our parents’ most important legacies. The Spanish language is what made it possible for me, in later years, to recover what had been destroyed by exile. (3)

⁹ *Telenovelas* [Spanish Soap Operas] are often watched by families and some parish religious educators object to this daily activity. Theologian Neomi De Anda’s work can help parish religious educators to understand how popular culture can be an opportunity to critically reflect on family life.

In this study, some parents were enabled seeing their children learning and speaking English. Consequently, parents enrolled in English as a Second Language courses at their parishes, children's schools, and community colleges. A mother said she is learning English, but she has limited opportunities to practice conversational English since people immediately begin to translate for her.

Most families indicated that they wanted to be bilingual. For example, a Puerto Rican mother described how at three years of age her son said that he wanted to learn Spanish. Recalling her son's words, she said, "Mami, I want to learn to talk the way you and grandma talk." The mother continues by saying,

Mother: At 3 1/2, I started teaching him Spanish. His great grandmother was baby sitting him. I figured she was speaking to him in Spanish, but she was speaking to him in English. One time, I heard her talking to him in English, so I told her, "No, talk to him in Spanish." So forget it, once I taught him and he learned. Now, he can speak it anywhere he goes; he speaks really beautiful.¹⁰

This mother proudly recalls how her now 18-year-old son, a freshman in college, often tells her how grateful he is to have learned Spanish.

The importance of culture and language in *lo cotidiano* is also seen as a 42-year-old mother raising three sons ages 9, 11, and 12 imagines the parish supporting her family as follows:

Mother: For me, to support me so that my children can learn new words or new things and customs. Customs that I perhaps do not know or may not be capable of teaching them. That what I do not teach them, the parish can teach them over there And this is it, that they learn good things over there ... I think every parish, not only this one, teach good things and a good future for all families.¹¹

This mother reported that she learns from her sons how to pronounce words when she has mispronounced them. Her sons accompany her to various offices where

¹⁰ Interview with a Puerto Rican family.

¹¹ Interview with a Mexican family. Translated to English.

they translate for her, and guide her as to what to do, what to say, and where to sit. This family lives an isolated life, since the father restricts them from going places. The oldest son has told his mother that he is going to take her places when he grows up.

FAMILIES COPING WITH ISSUES OF ILLNESS, DEATH AND CHANGE

Many of the families interviewed were coping with illness and death of family members. Eldercare had become an issue for some. In this study, a pastor was in awe at the sense of respect the Latino community demonstrates toward the elderly, dying, and the dead. Recalling an experience when a woman died, he said:

When she died, I did not know what to do. They kept touching the body and tried to bring her back to life. In the *velorio* [the wake], it is a terribly beautiful part. It gives them time to release that body and to release that spirit. Hispanics are all over the cemetery because that is where the body is; that is the memorial ground.

He described how suffering and death often unites and reconciles Latino families and parishioners including those who have not spoken to each other for extended periods of time as well as those who have never spoken to each other.

Theologian Virgilio Elizondo describes death as it is experienced in a Latino/a context, as follows:

To die is to live forever in *la memoria* of those who stay behind, in the communion with those who have gone before, in communion with the cosmos, and in communion with the giver and source of life, God Himself. Death is sometimes hard and painful, but it is not the pain of failure, only the pain of separation for a new birth. (1981)

Loss was also experienced as families journeyed to the U.S.A. First generation children and adolescents were realizing that they were forgetting the details of their lives back in their country of origin.

FAMILY AND JUSTICE

Families interviewed for this study were responding to the call of the preferential option for the poor in many ways. They helped family members and friends both in U.S. and in their countries of origin. Many aspired to receive an academic education in order to work with those most in need and, in particular, with those in similar conditions as they themselves were or had been. To mention but a few, some mothers were, or were studying to become, bilingual teachers, paraprofessional teachers, social workers, and home care providers. An adolescent boy wanted to become a lawyer. Girls wanted to become pediatricians and veterinarians. A father hoped and prayed that his daughter will become a lawyer in order to help undocumented immigrants. The prophetic voices of the youth were emerging. An adolescent boy sees peers in need, but does not know how to help without offending them. They were questioning the unjust social structures in their neighborhoods and world. They were advocates for immigration and housing issues. Most families were concerned about their children's academic education, yet it was not evident that they were confronting this issue as a group, perhaps in a parish setting.

FAMILIES' PARISH EXPERIENCES AND EXPECTATIONS

The families were not bounded by a parish's geographic area, five families traveled, often taking several buses, to be members of their parishes. Some had joined these parishes when they immigrated to this country; for others, it was the parish since their youth. For some, their children attended the parochial school, and yet for others, it was the parish where their families or friends were members. Families were involved in the life of their parishes in various ways such as parish ministries and groups, sacramental preparation processes, and social events. Some families have been actively involved in parish life for years. Others are now participating because their children are enrolled in a sacramental preparation

process, and others are striving to attend Sunday Eucharist on a regular basis now that their children have celebrated the sacraments of initiation. The families acknowledged the centrality of Sunday Eucharist for their spiritual life. The homily (in particular, the affective and relevant dimension) was cited as a very important component of Sunday worship. Some families stressed their commitment to attend Sunday Eucharist as a family in order to foster family unity. Eucharistic celebrations were shown to provide opportunities to encounter Latino families as they worship God and celebrate life. In these communities, Mass was often followed by fellowship in a church hall or cafeteria.

Families were empowered seeing Latinas and Latinos in leadership positions and engaged in ministry. They felt welcomed when individual persons, couples and groups of persons came to their assistance providing them information, supporting their efforts, and encouraging them to act. Most families participated in parish social events where all members of their families could participate. Some families perceived their monetary contributions as a participatory act. Some also described how they seek to bring parish customs to their homes. Household curtains, tablecloths and the *altarcito* [home altar] are decorated in similar colors as the sanctuary in the parish. On holidays, a son enjoys decorating the windows in his home; it is his family's manifestation of stained glass windows.

Some families were serving in a variety of ministries. Parish religious educators often recruited catechists from the families who were participating in the sacramental preparation processes. Couples were recruited to engage in like-to-like ministry with the parents whose children were preparing to celebrate the sacraments of initiation. One family was immersed in many ministries, groups, and movements. For example, the mother was a Eucharistic minister, usher, and a folkloric dance director; the father was a musician, member of the choir, and usher; and the children were altar servers. They also participated in the

asociación Tepeyac which strives to serve undocumented Mexican communities. This family acknowledged that their time at home was most limited. A mother who accompanied her daughter to a folkloric dance ministry, described how she was strengthened by seeing the assertiveness of her daughter. Not only are the parents touched by their children, but all the family members and the faith community are inspired by the curiosity, wonder, and awe of the children. A faith-sharing group emerged from among the parents who waited and watched their children rehearse.

EMERGENCE OF FAMILY AND PARISH PARTNERSHIP

The physical layout of the parishes was as diverse as the faith communities. Some parish buildings were large and majestic, while others were smaller and hidden within the neighborhood blocks. Most were surrounded by huge apartment buildings or private houses. Local shopping areas, bus stops and subway stations tended to be in close proximity. Traffic noise, adults talking and children playing could be heard throughout the day and evening hours. The artwork at the rectories often embraced diversity. Images of Jesus and Mary, often representative of different ethnic groups and parish devotions, were displayed in prominent locations. Some rectories had displayed hand painted images of the parish church building. At times, bulletin boards and parish bulletins could be seen highlighting monthly and weekly events. Pamphlets and brochures were hanging outside the doorway of the parish staff; these tended to be available in Spanish and English. Some rectories had a parish pet curiously wondering around. Some had gathering places that looked like an apartment's living room much like the ones this researcher visited during the family interviews. These rooms were furnished with sofas, coffee tables, carpeting, curtains, pictures, and plants. Some appeared more like an office; and others

seemed to have furniture relocated from other parts of the parish such as pews, cafeteria tables, and school chairs.

*Parish: Community of Communities*¹²

All parish religious educators noted that for many Latinos the parish is where they journey for worship, information, resources, and guidance. The church building is often called *la Casa de Dios* [the House of God], the rectory *la casa parroquial*, and the parish faith community “*mi segunda familia* [my second family].” Parishes visited for the study were found to be dynamic, and parish religious educators were willing to take risks in order to better respond to the changing needs of families. Given the diversity of the Latino community, parish religious educators were constantly striving for unity in diversity and fostering community among the parishioners. Their goals included providing welcoming and hospitable environments where all could nurture their spiritual needs, serve one another in their faith community, develop their collaborative leadership skills, and also socialize and have fun. Many members of the faith community were included in the visioning, planning, and decision-making processes, constantly discovering that there were different ways to meet the needs and wants of the families. They realized that they must meet the families in the parish, in the streets, homes, schools, hospitals, wakes and funerals, and beyond.

Popular religious beliefs and practices were being integrated into the parish processes. Parish religious educators indicated that they rely on parish ministries and sodalities to assist in the fashioning of the community. In some parishes, the sense of belonging is especially fostered through many ethnic Marian groups such as *los Altagracianos* (Dominican community), *Los Guadalupanos* (Mexican community), *La Providencia* (Puerto Rican community), and *Suyapa* (Honduran community). During the year, members of these groups

¹² In this study, Hosffman Ospino’s model of an urban parish as community of communities and Allan Figueroa Deck’s evangelization framework was emerging in some of these parishes.

gather to pray together, address issues, outreach, and plan for their annual feast days. Frequently, as a feast day approaches, unity in diversity begins to emerge as more and more members of the parish community of various ethnicities become involved in the planning, implementation, and *fiesta*. Advent and Lent became special times for outreach. Parish religious educators sought opportunities to conduct home visits, blessing of the home, and encouraged the formation of small Christian communities in the homes and parish.¹³ A major challenge in trying to establish small Christian communities was that families invited their neighbors to their homes and some were not Roman Catholic. These became opportunities for ecumenical and, at times, interreligious faith sharing; yet, the leadership teams were not always prepared for such gatherings. Most parishes organized a live outdoor Good Friday procession; fathers who were reluctant to participate in parish retreats looked forward these manifestations. Processions were opportunities for the faith community to proclaim to all in their neighborhoods the story of Jesus and Mary and their Christian identity. As parish religious educators partnered with families to provide more options and opportunities, it was difficult for some families to choose, perhaps, because having options was a new experience for them.

Parish: Community of Resources

In observing these parishes, it was evident that social service was integrated into the life of the parish. Most parishes employed or had a person volunteering who had knowledge in social service and immigration issues. Parishes organized monthly food banks for those families most in need. A pastor

¹³ In "Communion and Mission," the U. S. Catholic bishops affirm the contributions of small Christian communities in a Latino context. They write, "Among Hispanics, small Christian communities are becoming an important and useful vehicle for the new evangelization ... They are a place in which the religious and cultural identity of Hispanics is affirmed. In addition, the Christian household is a privileged place in which persons relate a faith journey, find nurturing support, and focus on missionary efforts. The strong sense of family which Hispanics retain in their daily living is strengthened in the small church communities."

proudly described how by actively seeking resources and applying for grants, they are able to provide meat and milk to families. Furniture and clothes were often passed from family-to-family. For example, as one family outgrew a crib or bed, another family welcomed it into their home. Some parishes responded to the needs of their communities by offering courses such as English as a Second Language; they also ran homeless shelters, especially during the winter months, and groups such as Alcoholic Anonymous and Narcotic Anonymous. Parish religious educators were serving in community coalitions seeking ways to provide affordable and decent housing for families. They were concerned with the academic schooling of the children. They were guiding families in ways to obtain scholarships and financial assistance to afford paying the monthly tuition to enroll their young children in Catholic elementary schools, and adolescents in Catholic high schools. Some parish religious educators were seeking ways to better interact with the local police department. Some were wondering what they could do to bring back the young Latino adults who had left for college and who had returned home, but had not returned to the parish (Deck 2004, 297).¹⁴ Parish religious educators were seeking ways to enable women/mothers/wives, men/fathers/husbands, and children. The emergence of the family and parish partnership was not solely to bring families to the parish but rather to empower families to live their faith more fully in the world.

¹⁴ Allan Figueroa Deck observes that an effective Latino practical theology must also explore what it means to be Hispanic, middle class, and Catholic attentive Latinas/os sense of solidarity and community.

CONCLUSION

In summary, to regard families as *locus theologicus* and religious education in *lo cotidiano* is a model of the “Relational, Practical, and Interfaith Dimensions” of “theology and religious education.”

This researcher is inspired by and challenged to journey with Hispanic families who, valuing education and the spiritual growth of their children, often seek the help of the parish faith community for support and guidance – “*Can you please help my child?*” This researcher is equally challenged to support families in realizing that education, in its broadest and richest sense, is also embodied in homes as they strive to live each day to the fullest.

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