

5-17-2017

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ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Maty, Alyssa. 2017. A Three-fold Historical Trejano Perception of Jesus. *Obsculta* 10, (1) : 57-67. <http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol10/iss1/5>.

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A THREE-FOLD HISTORICAL TEJANO PERCEPTION OF JESUS

Alyssa Maty

The culture of a given people is shaped by what it receives from its roots - but also by what confronts it from without. It is sustained by hope and by contestation. Threatened by death every time it puts a foot forward, it pays a price for the privilege of continued life. ¹

This quote identifies the life of Hispanic immigrants, Tejanos, in Texas. Throughout the 19th - 21st centuries, this specific group of people have struggled to make ends meet in their newly acquired land in the United States. However, one would find that religion, “protected the culture... from the worst of all failures: the loss of the people’s confidence in their way of life.”² A certain aspect of religion, stood out most to Tejanos, specifically, the image of Jesus as a refugee, as this led them to see three particular perspectives of Christ; that in him could be found friendship, comfort and understanding, and the love symbolized in the sacred heart of Jesus. In examining the historical context that shaped the Tejanos and their religious insights, and in recognizing the richness of these insights, we also recognize the richness of the Tejanos themselves, and see in these people, Christ himself.

In the 1800s, Tejanos experienced several challenges. Specifically, in 1846, the Mexican-American War erupted between

the United States and Mexico. This event occurred because the American President Polk sought to have the United States extended to the Pacific Ocean; claiming certain Mexican territory which included Texas to California.³ During this war, many immigrants fled for their lives; to which came about the first *barrios* or Hispanic neighborhoods. However, newly Tejano land-owners along the San Antonio River Valley, experienced land-hungry Americans and Texans, ready to take over their ranches and farms by any means.⁴ Even foreign-born priests, living in this area recognized what was happening as they said, “not a week goes by that some domain, a patrimony left by ancestors, escapes from its early processors to enlarge the fortune of some industrial entrepreneur of the white race.”⁵ Therefore, the effort for a new life for these newly immigrants was extremely hard. Along with this, many received little support from the church as it seemed that “favoring the urban areas and Anglo Americans proved to be a good decision for the Church as an institution.”⁶ As a result, the Hispanic dioceses of Brownsville, Santa Fe and Tucson whom were up-and-coming in Texas, received disproportionate backing from the church. Thus, Tejanos were living in an “Anglo-American world that looked down upon “Mexicans.”⁷ Looking for a friend, Tejanos placed their trust in God.

From this 19th century overview, emerges the first perspective of Jesus, as he is the “Migrant Son of God.” Therefore, human mobility has interpreted Jesus Christ, as the

Migrant Son of God,” as the one through his incarnation pitches his tent among us (Jn 1:14) and in doing so crosses the border between the divine and the human worlds; the one who identifies so much with our humanity to the point of not limiting himself merely to approaching the stranger, but of himself becoming a stranger (Jn 1:10-11, Mt 25:35).⁸

This metaphor relates to Jesus in a unique way because, it identifies the important struggles that immigrants face as they settle down in a new location, as they still feel out of place and have little to call

their own. Through the theology of migration, it has specifically “rediscovered the true Christian believer, who, even though he or she has a homeland, live in it though as a foreigner and a stranger.”⁹ In this instance, Jesus is a symbol of friendship, as he humbles himself to be as one with the Tejanos. Thus, one can be comforted in his or her longing for a true home, in the midst of despair and can instead place one’s anxieties at the base of Jesus’s tent.

Moving into the early 1900’s, Tejanos faced a new challenge that swept across the United States; the Great Depression. Even though, they still had little resources, they believed in the new life that the United States could give them and decided not to return to Mexico. Instead, Hispanics moved closer to the city, seeking to find any form of relief. It was during this time that the Church first merged with Hispanic communities to provide them with goods to survive this challenge. The Church strove to understand how to counter the economic exploitation of persons and how to promote their assimilation into the mainstream society.¹⁰ Therefore, the Church sent more priests and religious into the Southwest... such as the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word, the Sisters of the Holy Word, etc.¹¹ With this, the Catholic conquest of the Americas brought with it a new people, a new ethnos- *la raza mestiza* (“mixed clan, family or race”).¹² However, poverty was even worse in the city as an observer recounts a Mexican *barrio* (neighborhood) in San Antonio, Texas:

Over all hung the stench that comes from disease and death, from the filth that is born of complete lack of sanitation. And over all lay the heavy hand of poverty and human suffering. In one square mile 12,000 men and women and children were stuck like struggling flies caught in the sticky mess that is fly-paper. Here thousands of God’s children lived in squalor and died in wretchedness.¹³

Looking at the struggles of the poor, in the 1900s, highlights the next perspective of Jesus, as he is related to the Blessed Mother, who appeared as the Hispanic “Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe” or

“Our Lady of Guadalupe.”

Thus, all generations would call her blessed, but how about her own generation? They probably called her something else...did Jesus's own generation not have many devastating names for him- blasphemer, diabolically possessed, rabble rouser.”¹⁴ This very beginning, which might seem scandalous to the polite societies of the powerful- is beautifully salvific to the oppressed and margined of society. God becomes our broken and stepped-on humanity. ¹⁵

This perspective of Jesus seems to have a more concise meaning as to how the oppressed can look to Jesus, as someone who understands them because of his own individual experiences with hardships and encounters with other people in his generation. This instance, plays a unique role to Jesus as it brings out the comforting, mother-like qualities, he receives from his own mother. Thus, the trials and tribulations of life, including exploitation, persons could share with the suffering Son, who...had gained the Father's love and forgiveness for them.¹⁶ Similarly, just as the Tejanos were not welcomed in their land and experienced name-calling, one can see from previous examples, that these new / diverse customs were not always cherished. Thus, Tejanos were in a way, a suffering people; striving to keep their faith alive. In a time of ruin, this diverse group of people at times experienced the Church to be either distant or removed from Spanish-speaking communities and many Hispanic clergy members were replaced by French men.¹⁷

Tejanos only survived the changes of these times as they continued their own traditions, such as home altars and adapted others to fit the lifestyle of their new American culture encounter. This action can be defined as *sincretismo* or syncretism which is the fusion or combining of different forms of belief or practice.¹⁸ Another example, is the retainment of their *vaqueros* (cowboy) and *pastor* (pastoral) culture that also linked their livestock traditions to the new markets as best as they could; growing American products.¹⁹

Pastors began to ride horses out to farther out communities and wanted to find ways to meet people where they were.

In 1987, Tejanos received their chance to take more responsibility in the Church. In central Texas, the ACTS program was conceived at Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church by three men who were formerly involved with the Cursillo movement, Ed Courtney and Joe Hays of Our Lady of Perpetual Help and Marty Sablik of St. Luke's parish.²⁰ This Cursillo movement brought about a retreat that prepared church members to become spiritual leaders.²¹ This movement brought to light a need for retreats, especially events that gave religious renewal and a greater desire to serve the Church. For instance, two attendees said that they "feel closer to the Holy Spirit" and that they are "spending more time at church and helping out in the community."²² ACTS stands for adoration, community, theology and service.²³ During this time, many Tejanos were experiencing the joys of this retreat, and began to take more action in the church as a number of men found their vocation to the priesthood. Looking at this retreat, it gave Tejanos a community action to heed or partake in. Instead of solely worshipping in the home; something other than home altars and prayer groups.

Thus from the above Cursillo movement and ACTS program, one can see the last image of Jesus, as it summarizes the essence of the heart of Jesus and how the Tejanos found this perspective significantly important as many Tejanos felt closer to the Holy Spirit and grew deeper involved in the Church; thus they were growing closer to the heart of Jesus.

The heart is the symbol of the person. And because their knowledge or awareness of Christ is not so much through the medium of messianic titles or of doctrine, but through their personal and intimate friendship with Jesus of Nazareth, it is the heart that best expresses it. The Sacred heart of Jesus is the symbol that best images the full reality of Jesus to the Mexican-American: unlimited, unconditioned love. Tejanos want to relate to a living Christ who

has an understanding face and a compassionate heart. Mexican-Americans are not satisfied with reading the truth; they want to see the truth. And it is in the image of the Sacred Heart that they “see” the truth of Jesus and the Father fully revealed.²⁴

This quote perfectly characterizes the relationship of Jesus with Tejanos, as both yearn for a relationship with each other. Thus the symbol of Jesus’s heart, Tejanos can truly grasp and identify with. One way that Jesus called the Tejanos to be in a deeper relationship with him came through the ACTS program and Cursillo movement which helped the church community see the beauty of their ways of worship, during the retreat. This third perspective or image of Jesus brings the emotional and physical likeness to the image of Jesus as a refugee. Thus, religious symbols, the heart of Jesus, are the final justification of the group’s worldview and the force that cements all the elements of a group’s life into a cohesive, meaningful world order.²⁵

Presently today, the Catholic Church is continuing to evolve and strives to head the call to “welcome the stranger,” as it promotes inclusion. This term expresses the call to break all cultural boundaries that exist between various ethnic backgrounds. Along with inclusion, there is another term that is also working to support the call for communion among various ethnicities. This term is *mestizaje* or *mestizo* which stands for “mixed or hybrid”.²⁶ A priest named Virgilio Elizondo uses an analogy for this term as he relates *mestizaje* to a stewing pot. He describes it in the following words,

I have called *mestizaje* the “stew pot” model because to make a good stew, you have to include various ingredients, then you have to let them boil for a while. Yet if it is not based on love and respect, it will not come about. In the process, everyone has to give up something, but everyone receives of what everyone else has given up and the sauce that bonds them together is made up of what everyone has contributed.²⁷

This is a powerful analogy that can speak to older cultures accepting new cultures. The main idea of respect comes into play as Pope Paul VI, recalled that “every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated.”²⁸ However, respect was not always given to new incoming Tejanos into the region of Texas as many “Immigrants... also formed their own communities, because Mexicans, like other immigrants had never been fully welcomed by Anglo Americans.²⁹As all good stew does not go without boiling, something that all new humanity experiences, Tejanos faced ridicule, pain, anger, and a sense of rejection.

In continuation, there are various examples that exemplify the conditions in which Tejanos are now cared for. Tejanos are looked to as “rather the downtrodden of society that become God’s instruments of new life. God has started not in any great enter of power but in the ethnically mixed margins of great civilization.³⁰ Thus, from this above sentence, Tejanos are more embraced as an instrument of new life. Ministers of hospitality in various parishes containing diversity have discovered that at the heart of hospitality is not the “giving” or the “doing” but the “being with” somebody.³¹ Therefore, with these ministers of hospitality, folks that are even Anglo-American along with their parishes are heeding the call to welcome the stranger. For instance, Deacon Pedro Juarez, works in the Diocese of Amarillo, Texas with a majority of Hispanic parishioners from Mexico present in his three parishes that he serves.³² He says that “the diocese is very generous and tries to help them get papers; legal resident documentation. Therefore, the Church is welcoming and trying to help these Tejanos as they enter the States looking for better jobs and opportunities for their families as previously stated. Deacon Juarez travels to all three parishes that he serves at, as he visits the sick, helps families prepare for baptism as well as holds various bible studies and times for adoration. His main goal is to try to meet the

needs of the people, a different yet embracing attitude compared to the early 19th century.

Along with this above example, in Houston, Texas, there is a Casa Juan Diego, which was founded in the late 20th century, following the Catholic Worker model of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, to serve immigrants and refugees and the poor.³³ This house among ten others, works with Spanish-speaking immigrants and refugees to provide shelter, food, clothing, medical services and English classes. This foundation also publishes a newspaper that shares the values of the Catholic Worker movement and the stories of immigrants and refugees uprooted by the realities of the global economy. One volunteer stationed at a Casa Juan Diego described her experience of truly welcoming God as she said the following words:

“I realize that God is present in each and every single individual knocking at the door and that I have to attend to them with the same love and attention that I would bestow if God himself were at the door. I realize that God is the Honduran, the El Salvadorian, the Hispanic, young, old, sick and disabled.”³⁴

In summary, the Catholic Church has a good amount of welcoming leaders who ensure that all who desire a closer relationship to God are genuinely received and welcomed, in a spirit of heartfelt hospitality, openness and eagerness both to give and to receive.³⁵ They are also inclusive leaders, such as Deacon Juarez, who invite, support, and animate diversity in the parish, paying particular attention to diverse cultures, abilities, and beliefs in ways that are respectful and mutually enriching.³⁶

In the long run, it is important to learn and acknowledge the struggles and stories of the livelihood of Tejanos in Texas. These people have overcome many struggles such as losing their land to Anglo-Americans, the Mexican-American War and the Great Depression. However, they looked to Jesus, as the image of a refugee. They saw

that he welcomed and humbled himself in order to be a friend, a servant and someone who could fill their lives with love in the midst of suffering. This man was someone that Tejanos could identify with as he experienced similar events in his own generation or lifetime. Throughout the centuries the Catholic Church has worked to provide aid to these Hispanics through various forms of sister orders, the Cursillo Movement and as ministers of hospitality etc. Now, the Church are welcoming the stranger as the invitations is sent out for more people to join the Church's diverse spiritual family. One should recognize that in the end diversity is a gift. Tejanos can be looked to as an instrument of God or of new life instead of other negative viewpoints. Even though, various people can struggle sometimes with this idea of "welcoming the stranger," there is one thing that unites us; we are all human and deserve respect.

Notes

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- 3 Charles, Lippy, *Faith in America: Changes, Challenges, New Directions*. (London: Praeger Perspectives, 2006), 130.
- 4 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 23.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 21.
- 7 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 25.
- 8 Gioacchino Campese, *The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in*

- the 21st Century*, (Theological Studies: 2012), 22.
- 9 Gioacchino Campese, *The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in the 21st Century*, (Theological Studies: 2012), 23.
- 10 Gioacchino Campese, *The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in the 21st Century*, (Theological Studies: 2012), 31.
- 11 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 39.
- 12 Virgilio, Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1983), Chapter 1.
- 13 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 49.
- 14 Virgilio Elizondo, *Mary in the Struggles of the Poor*. 1986. <http://www.virgilioelizondo.com/1/portfolio.html>, Introduction.
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- 16 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 121.
- 17 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 26.
- 18 “Sincretismo,” Merriam Webster Dictionary. 2014 Edition. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>.
- 19 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 24.
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- 29 Jay Dolan and Hinojosa Gilberto, *Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965*. (London: University of Notre Dame, 1994), 34.
- 30 Virgilio Elizondo, *Mestizaje Theology: As a Promising Cultural Future*. 2005. <http://www.virgilioelizondo.com/1/portfolio.html>, Section 3.2
- 31 Gioacchino Campese, *The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in the 21st Century*, (Theological Studies: 2012), 29.
- 32 Carole Ganim, *Shaping Catholic Parishes: Pastoral Leaders in the 21st Century*. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 21.
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