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A Latina Theological Reflection on Education, Faith, Love, and Beauty

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The world is much more than a problem to be solved,
it is a joyous mystery that we contemplate full of jubilant praise.

—Pope Francisco (2015)[1]

The majority of the articles in this volume are the fruit of careful research and thoughtful interpretation by specialists in education both public and Catholic, my contribution is somewhat different. This is a theological reflection. It is theological in that I engage jointly faith and reason, the religious tradition, and the contemporary situation. It is theological *reflection* in that it arises out of a community of belief, not only from data or theories, but from hearts fully engaged in a shared and sacred story of a loving God. As a Catholic Christian, I share in a very particular community's way of framing the human-God story, and as a professional theologian I have had the privilege of studying my religious tradition. Consequently, I am tasked to help articulate my community's wisdom and to confront the fissures that our actions, viewed in light of our avowed faith, may reveal. At this juncture (and this is always a moving target), I understand the theological task as a continually challenging process of wrestling with and exposing always deeper questions in light of a community's religious tradition. The Christian tradition, in what I will unabashedly call its splendor, awaits each new moment of our world's journey, longing to give itself anew and thus to light our way. I hope to

1 I translate from the Spanish text of the encyclical. I encourage readers with Spanish language proficiency to read Pope Francisco's documents in Spanish, as these are the closest to his normal speech. Often English translations made available by the Vatican fall into stock phrasing and fail to capture the freshness, and sometimes bluntness, in Francisco's voice. I also refer to the current pontiff as Pope Francisco to highlight his unique identity as the first Latin American pope, first pope from the "New World" and constant preferential option for the poorest and most marginalized among us.

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encourage you to engage this tradition in the vital work of education.

Just above I used the phrase "a very particular community," and clearly, for reflection to claim to be thus situated, it cannot arise out of the astoundingly varied ways of being Catholic of roughly 1.2 billion people. There is specificity to my reflection because I write as a Latina Catholic professional theologian who lives in the United States. My thought also arises out of the weaving together of several other distinct markers. I am an educator today, but my economic, linguistic, and cultural marginality as an immigrant child almost assured I would not be. I am able to write this reflection because multiple scholarships (secular and religious) supported my education, and extraordinary people mentored me through baffling and alien systems to which I was an outsider. Finally, I am "Jesuit educated," an identity I share with my students. Since my senior year at Loyola Marymount University I have carried in my wallet some version of the pledge I tearfully took that year:

> I promise to be committed to intellectual integrity and the pursuit of wisdom. I promise to be loyal to the moral, social, and religious ideals of my education. I promise to be genuinely committed to the well-being of others and active in serving them. I will do all this in light of the Jesuit concern for the greater honor and glory of God. [2]

The Catholic religious tradition reflected in this pledge makes clear the goal: forming new generations whose gifts of intellect and wisdom will be guided by a coherent understanding of God's longing for a world full of love. I am not, I emphasize, *not*, a story of success illustrating the journey from extreme marginality to voice, made possible by education. I am, or hope to be, a challenging reminder of the millions (with equal potential and desire) who were never able to even take the first step. I am honored to call Fatima my friend; her job is to clean our offices, classrooms, and bathrooms. Her mother died when she was in elementary school and her father announced that she would not go back to school and have to work full time by forcibly taking away her most prized possession, her one, single *book*. To this day she dreams of being a *maestra*, the title she uses for me. This reflection is for Fatima and the millions like her–a *grito*, a cry for them and with them.

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2 The Alpha Sigma Nu pledge. Alpha Sigma Nu is the honor society of Jesuit colleges and universities founded in 1915 and dedicated to scholarship, loyalty and service. http://www.alphasigmanu.org

Seeking the Common Good

Just a few minutes of reading the news reveals that in the United States there are lines of separation between Catholic and public, secular and religious, liberal and conservative, politics and ethics, social science and theology that are unnecessary and unproductive. Perpetuating these divisions is expedient while we are working within the boundaries of one of these concerns. This is because accentuating differences often provides cohesion and passion as we rally around the discourse of "us vs. them." Yet, it doesn't take much analysis to see that such attitudes work against the common good. Polemics and shouting matches are a staple of contemporary political discourse and get headlines and donors; what they do not get are *results*. One of the early goals of the project that has yielded the research in this volume was to articulate the question of education as an issue of particular importance to Hispanic Catholics. This is where the particularity of Christianity is helpful, because even in the most basic understanding of the Christian message, the suffering of "the other" can never be ignored or worst, perpetuated. As we note in the Gospel of Mark's recounting of the conversation Jesus had with some of the experts in the law, there is a direct connection between a particular way of acting in the world (with love as the rule) and the Kingdom of God (when God's vision for reality breaks in transforming our world with our active cooperation).

> One of the scribes, when he came forward and heard them disputing and saw how well [Jesus] had answered them, asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, 'He is One and there is no other than he.' And 'to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself' is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that [he] answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared to ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34, *New American Bible*, Revised Edition).

For Christians then, this inviolable law of love requires an active response—always. Educators, parents, administrators, foundations, and school boards working in Catholic settings have the strongest advocate on behalf of education embedded within the Christian tradition itself. Using some of the tools of theological reflection will make it possible to pose new questions fruitfully, I will return to this.

However, the work required to actually live out this law of love must necessarily involve as many of us as possible. There are multitudes of people and organizations committed to the common good well beyond the church and the synagogue; their vision is clear and their work untiring. Part of my conversation with such partners invariably revolves around the possibility of providing a powerful helper to further their good work, overcoming apparent separations for the sake of a common goal. As we found in convening meetings around the concerns of Latinos and education, these coworkers for the common good are delighted to realize that the voice of the Catholic Church, when it is honestly centered on the Gospel, can be a formidable ally in discerning priorities, reaching communities, organizing them, and procuring resources. The coalitions formed by bringing together people of faith with those committed to human rights were key to the work of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. (theologian and pastor), Cesar Chavez and Dorothy Day (both committed Catholics), and Oscar Romero (Archbishop of El Salvador). They all brought together those that the Christian Gospel calls "people of good will" to critique unjust structures and then act in ways that would eradicate the suffering wrought by racism, labor exploitation, poverty, and war. Beneath the issues they faced (which are still very much with us) we can discern the perennial human sin of amassing power for a few by exploiting the many. Jesus died fighting against this. In our contemporary context, the front line is indeed education.

The many Christian people, who having some level of comfort and security, generously turn their gaze toward the beloved "other" Jesus commands to our care, likewise need help to discern the best and most effective ways to do this in their situations. These Christians honestly search for ways to use their resources to advance the common good. However, it is often easier to see the suffering and injustice beyond our shores, than it is to come awake to what is in our own backyard. Although aid to global projects is laudable, faith communities often misuse resources sending them to a far off charity, which is a temporary fix at best, and fail to invest in the welfare of their own communities. Key to this disconnect is the routine avoidance of the thorny

issue of root causes in which we often unwittingly participate. It is also these Gospel centered people of good will that we are called to invite to the table of dreaming a new dream.

The dream of educational justice as a project of the common good is something we can share across denominational and political lines, because in the end it is about the law of love written in every human heart. For this reflection I suggest a clearly defined focus: there is a suffering community, Latinos in the United States, whose marginality continues to be guaranteed by systems developed to prop up privilege, reinforce segregation and perpetuate the apparent inescapability of poverty. Yet, and this is the great hope, Latino Catholics in the United States are particularly suited to the task of overcoming many of the dominant culture's false separations because as quintessential bridge people we must live in a space of "ands." As communities, we often thrive in a borderland that combines human rights, religious identity, accountability to a community, and civic engagement. Pray the rosary tonight, and protest city hall in the morning. Latino Catholics in the United States are my community of accountability, and it is their suffering and their promise that fuels this reflection.

The Tools of Theological Method, Latino Style

As a theologian, it is my task to help the Catholic community interpret itself in light of two converging realities: the rich sources and practices of Christianity and the urgent demands of our times. What this makes evident is that rather than "answers," the budding coalitions of like-minded coworkers need to develop expertise in reflection, discernment and interpretation. For this, we currently have a most practiced and effective teacher, the Bishop of Rome, Francisco.

As the first Latin American pope, and indeed, the first pope in history from our hemisphere, Pope Francisco shares many cultural and religious markers with US Latinos/as. As a quintessential pastor, his concern for the least and discarded, for those Jesus most loved, is the fuel that launched the first encyclical of his pontificate, *Laudato Si'* (Francisco, 2015). The document addresses what he calls "the care of our common home," and is an effective analysis of the urgent ecological crisis, which disproportionately affects the poorest of the world. Although I am not going to discuss the encyclical here, I point out how in it Francisco has taken the robust power of the Christian Gospel, brought it to bear on an inordinately complex contemporary reality,

and purposefully effaced as many false separations as possible, both in the discourses engaged (economics, science, etc.) and in the world community he hopes to address. At the very end of the encyclical the Pontiff includes two prayers, one for the great monotheistic religions to pray and then work together, and another, more particularly, for all of the Christian churches. He knows it will take all of us, all, to do the work. In *Laudato Si'* Francisco also provides a methodological map, articulate and discrete steps that can be replicated in other contexts and to other urgent questions. It is to my analysis of this text that I now turn.

Learning from Francisco

The first thing Francisco (2015) makes clear is that this is an "urgent invitation" (para. 14). The centrality of the act of invitation cannot be overstated. Is it only in this way that the force of experience and context can be harnessed. Francisco writes,

> We can all collaborate as God's instruments for the care of creation, each one from her or his culture, experience, initiatives and skills. (para. 14)[3]

In the section that follows, Francisco briefly outlines his method, providing us with an efficient plan for tackling any future challenge that he characterizes as great, urgent and beautiful.

1. Start at the present situation.
2. Take into account the very best research available and allow it to ask deep questions. This provides a concrete foundation to the rest of the work.
3. Go back to the Judeo-Christian sources with the goal of seeking coherence in the way the issue is addressed.
4. Dig down to the roots of the current situation by going beyond the symptoms to the causes.
5. Look at the role of the human person in a correct relationship with what is real.

3 I translate directly from the Spanish text of *Laudato Si'* as I find that Francisco's use of language is often bold, purposefully new and far from "churchy speak." The official English translations provided by the Vatican often fall into stock phrasing, fail to grasp colloquialisms or neologisms (very much his style) and are generally sanitized. This blunts the power and wakefulness that his use of language occasions.

6. Open up dialogue toward action that will have political force.
7. Finish by providing motivation, the necessary education and formation for a mature human response from the particularity of Christianity. Here he is bringing it "home" to the very particular context of his flock and his role as teacher. (para. 15)

Religiously Speaking

A radical stance about the basic right to education is a theological necessity for a well-articulated Catholic faith and not an "add on" or an "option" arising from particular political leanings. Universal access to quality education is not "politically correct," it is a theological good because it speaks well of God. In other words, the God of Jesus Christ is a God who cannot be adequately mediated by the Christian Church, while those who are God's most beloved —the poor and discarded—are not the object of active and preferential love by the rest of us. Very simply put, for Christians to speak well of God means to work tirelessly to create the conditions necessary for integral human flourishing, to create beauty, and extend it to all. Education is one of the most basic of these conditions.

The second part of my argument flips this premise, and I posit that the Christian Church cannot actually claim to search for an intimate and knowing relationship with the God of Jesus Christ, while the beloved poor are kept from being able to help articulate that search and the insights they can give to us about "who" this God they know is (theologize). We cannot know God's multi-faceted beauty if those God loves most, the poor and discarded of the world, are not given the possibility of leading our Church in its ministries, its teaching and its liturgical practices. The poor themselves have to be provided the tools, platforms, support and training to join the Church's leadership. With a billion of us globally there's plenty of work to go around, and especially among the fastest growing segments of the Church, Hispanics in the U.S. as well as the non-European churches, we need ministerial leaders from those very communities to build the thickness of the Church's reflection on its mission in the world. Without access to quality education the utterly dismal number of Latinas/os in Church leadership in the US will not change (Nanko-Fernandez, 2010). As Virgil Elizondo (2000) prophetically told us in *The Future is Mestizo*, only some Latino young men "survived" seminary, and many left in dismay. The same can be said of almost every one of the roles that Latinas/os feel called to fill within the structures of the Church and its

many institutions in this country. It is not uncommon to find a parish that is 98% Hispanic with a few salaried pastoral ministers that are non-Hispanics because they have degrees, and a majority of unpaid Latino volunteers doing most of the work. As a Mexican American, when he became a priest Elizondo was the exception, not the rule, and his monumental breakthrough in beginning US Latino theology must be continued and enlarged by many other voices.

As I elaborate this proposal I develop three principal points. First, education is a theological good mandated by the Church's preferential option for the poor and our following of Jesus. Second, the Church cannot adequately carry out the important work of ministry and teaching globally, unless and until the voices of those on the peripheries (as repeatedly evoked by Pope Francisco) are included. In order for this to occur priorities must be shifted, and access to education must be prioritized. Third, the future of the Catholic Church in the U.S., fast becoming a church of color, is in serious jeopardy unless aggressive measures are put into place to improve the "pipeline," involving all of the ministries of the Church in a coherent way to support increased school success for Latinos/as. Leadership in the ministries of the Church cannot continue to be imported, leading to a drain of resources for an already severely under-resourced Latin American Church. Consequently, U.S. Latinos/as must be prepared and formed through a preferential option for education to take their rightful place in leadership, as the largest single and youngest group of the Catholic Church in this country.

Education is a Theological Good

In the Christian community, martyrdom, the death of an innocent occasioned by their adherence to Christ in their life, has been a constant and heartbreaking reality for over 2000 years. We keep alive the memory of our martyrs through calendars, rituals and images, understanding rightly that these friends of Jesus are examples to us of faithfulness and right priorities. Our martyrs form us, as their brethren, by teaching us what truly matters. A little over twenty-five years ago a group of men, a woman and her teenage daughter were martyred, and it is the uniqueness of their circumstances that becomes theologically significant to this reflection on education.

Ignacio Ellacuría, Ignacio Martín-Baró, Segundo Montes Mozo, Amando López Quintana, Juan Ramon Moreno Pardo, Joaquín Lopez y Lopez, Elba Ramos, and her daughter Celina were brutally murdered by the Salvadoran military in on November 16, 1989. Their identities, location and life work

were their death sentences. In other words, their murderers were silencing particular people, in a particular place and for a particular reason, and their deaths were martyrdom to this cause. The six men were Jesuit priests, Señora Ramos was their housekeeper and her young daughter lived with them. The identity and work of the murdered men fills in the contours of the cause to which they gave their life: Ellacuría, the Rector of the university, was a renowned philosopher and theologian; Martín-Baró, a social psychologist and philosopher, was the founder of the UCA's Institute for Public Opinion; Montes Mozo, a social anthropologist, founded the UCA's Institute for Human Rights; López Quintana was a theologian and philosopher; Moreno Pardo was a theologian specializing in Ignatian Spirituality and began the UCA's Center for Theological Reflection; L**ó**pez y L**ó**pez was an administrator and responsible for the Fe y Alegría (Faith and Joy) program to provide quality education to children and teenagers from the poorest sectors of society. The two women were murdered because they were witnesses and could have identified the perpetrators.

Their blood was spilled on the grounds of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), a Jesuit university founded in 1965. UCA's mission statement is worth quoting in full, I translate:

> The UCA is a university inspired by Christianity, at the service of the people of El Salvador and Central America and committed to social change. This change should be fostered by the university through research, teaching and action in the midst of society [proyección social]. UCA's starting point is the national reality, which perpetuates grave structural injustices through its cultural and socioeconomic dynamics. Because of this the university aspires to the social transformation of the country, wishing to contribute to this change from its identity as a university. In other words, from the areas of the production and sharing of knowledge, analyzing in a creative and critical way the Salvadoran and Central American reality and proposing new forms of human action and coexistence [convivencia social] inspired by the values of the Gospel. In this way, the UCA places the center of its identity and work beyond itself, orienting its internal life toward the Salvadoran reality, and from there to the Central American reality. In this way, the identity of the UCA comes from its mission: to cultivate the understanding of the national reality is the essence of being a university; solidarity with the excluded and dispossessed that make up its horizon obeys its Christian

> inspiration; and the word, critical and effective, reproduced in many diverse ways, results from the need to create proposals that will aid the transformation of unjust structures and the defense, development and respect of human rights. (UCA, n.d., p. 1)

The goals of the UCA and the life of the martyrs bear witness to the formidable power of education that the millions of voiceless so desperately desire. The deaths of our brothers and sisters those nine thousand days ago were precipitated precisely by their role as educators, and I want to look at them as what they are collectively in their lives and in their tragic deaths --an expression of exquisite beauty. In a Christian understanding beauty is not what is pretty, for a religious tradition that understands its most beautiful symbol to be a crucified man, beauty is what reveals and points unambiguously to the fullness of truth and of goodness. As beautiful then, the lives of the martyrs, dedicated to education on behalf of justice, reveal the truth of the power of education and its inherent goodness. In what follows I want to speak briefly of education's beauty and propose an aesthetics of what it is education can do, and in Catholic institutions, what education *must* do.

First, as carrier of traditions and the learning of all who have preceded us, education allows us to understand who we are in complexity and difference. This means that we must tell our stories even when those stories are not innocent or clear. Schools must be the daring carriers of the human story, preserving it, expanding the reaches of its memory, and unearthing all the stories, not just the stories of the powerful.

Second, as a practice, education must allow us to wrestle with what is unclear, ambiguous and difficult. Far from certainty and univocity, education must give us the space, tools and courage to engage the moment, struggle with its many possibilities, turn it in every direction, view it in full light, or in penumbra. Ambiguity and multivocity must not frighten us, but rather, as with any great work of art, invite us to enter ever more deeply into relationship, knowing the process itself to be worthwhile, and truth-telling to be only possible when we are willing to do the hard work of seeking it. We wrestle with real beauty, it does not yield easy answers, or cheap grace, but requires much of us and through this builds us into ever better wrestlers and truth-tellers.

Finally, in an aesthetics of education we know it must aspire to provide us with moments of wonder-making insight which have the capacity to change everything. In Spanish, we have the word *asombrados*, which means we have taken wonderment into ourselves and become wonder-filled beings. *Asom-*

bro takes our breath away as we suddenly know, in that very same place from which we weep, that we now understand something that a few minutes ago eluded us. As we become *asombrados,* we take into ourselves the power that fueled our insights, and we multiply it, and then we discover cures, planets, economic models, unleash creativity, and write exquisite melodies.

The martyrs, whose lives were destroyed but whose lights were not, knew the beauty of education, its power to help us know ourselves, to wrestle with our questions and to lead us into insights. Their violent deaths tell us that those who would subjugate the world hate such a power, and that education must continue to be involved in such a profoundly risky business. The power of education is a theological good when we share it, not only when we use it for the common good, but even more, *when we make it common*. Every time we make education possible for one human being, who otherwise would never have access to it, we are speaking well of God. In extending education out to the many without privilege, we are embodying the very God of Jesus, who, after learning of his friend's death wept and this filled him with the courage to walk to Lazarus's tomb and to dare to believe the impossible—that God's love was stronger than death (John 11:1–44).

When we do with a little less luxury and simpler sharing of our communal lives and our resources, and when we turn those savings over to fund the education of those who have none, we have spoken well of God. When we, look around at our worker communities and dream up ways to make more education and equitable wages possible for them, we have spoken well of God. When we use our ingenuity to imagine new models that will reach beyond traditional campuses and spread the good of education to places near and far, we have spoken well of God. Jesus stood at the tomb and rolled away the stone; our brothers and sisters who died on that fateful day 25 years ago have already joined him in the work of bringing life from death. Honor their memory, and fulfill many hopes. Unleash, unbind, give life, and let loose the beauty of education… for the greater glory of God.

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