

# Latino and Lutheran?

## Introduction



AS A VICAR IN CARACAS, VENEZUELA, I ventured every so often to one of the largest Roman Catholic bookstores downtown to peruse various collections of dogmatic treatises. On one of my visits, I started a casual conversation with a Venezuelan priest who asked about my background. After learning that I was a Lutheran seminarian, the priest, somewhat perplexed, exclaimed something like, “Latino Lutheran? That is not possible. You cannot be Latino and Lutheran.”

Prior to his ordination into the priesthood, my confounded conversation partner had been a sociologist. Although we did not make time to go a bit more deeply into the topic at hand, I could only imagine how easy it might have been for a sociologist to think of Lutheranism mainly as a German transplant in the Americas, a form of Christianity for a few immigrants of German background, a Protestant movement with no historical or religious roots in the minds and hearts of Latin Americans.

The priest with a sociological streak had not been entirely wrong. If one reads Rudy Blank’s article on Lutheranism in Venezuela, one will find stories of German immigrants or American (meaning South- and North-American) missionaries of German roots establishing Lutheran congregations in predominantly Roman Catholic territory. Some years ago I taught a course at Seminario Concordia in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I was graciously hosted by pastors with last names like Franck, Fischer, and Meyer. Needless to say, similar stories can be told of the origins of the Lutheran churches in Argentina or Brazil.

Where the Venezuelan priest had not been entirely on target was in his somewhat naive assumption that Spanish Catholicism had overwhelmingly won over the hearts and minds of the evangelized peoples of the Americas. Undoubtedly, after centuries of presence in the Americas, the Roman Catholic Church has definitely left marks among the people. Doug Rutt’s article points in particular to the image of the dying Christ who suffers along with us—an image with medieval Roman Catholic roots—as the dominant symbol that historically has captivated especially the suffering masses of Latin Americans. However, Rutt also implies that the popular appropriation of the dying Christ by the people, in spite of its accompanying fatalism and not always clear soteriological meaning, has functioned among the masses as a form of silent protest in the face of oppression. By identifying with us in his innocent human suffering, Christ shows his solidarity with those who suffer unjustly.

Moreover, little recognition had been given by the priest to the decline of Roman Catholic piety itself (or the rise of nomi-

nal or cultural Catholicism) in various sectors of the Americas as well as the modern rise of Pentecostalism of all varieties in the region. Blank refers to these realities of the context today in order to raise the need for a Lutheran confessional identity in a Latino world at odds with the Scriptures, the Confessions, and the gospel. Interestingly, the priest was raising the same issue but from a different angle, namely, by asking how one could actually be Latino and have a Lutheran identity. It is as if the priest had been saying to me, “Dare to show that a Latino Lutheran is possible!” I think that there lies precisely the difficult and ongoing challenge but also opportunity for Lutheranism in the Latino world.

The contributions in this special issue of *LOGIA* on Lutheranism in the Latino world embody in various ways the tension that takes place when “Latino” and “Lutheran” encounter and interact with one another in critical and constructive ways. On the critical side, for example, Blank warns against forms of Lutheranism that become divisive by capitulating to the promotion of political agendas or particular forms of governments and leaving aside her mission to preach the word. Similarly, in my Forum piece on immigration, I warn against allowing a particular position for or against immigration law to get in the way of the church’s unity in Christ or her work of proclaiming the gospel to all people regardless of their legal status. Our comments presuppose a Lutheran commitment to the teaching on the “two kingdoms,” which distinguishes between God’s work in the temporal realm to promote peace and justice through civil government and his work in the spiritual realm to reconcile sinners to God through the proclamation of the gospel.

On the constructive side, Rutt suggests that, although not adequate in its portrayal of the Christ who has already died “for us,” the bloody image of the Christ dying “with us” can nevertheless be seen positively as a Latin American contribution to North American Christians who, under the spell of Protestantism and consumerism, often fail respectively to see God in the face of the crucified Christ (preferring the empty cross to the crucifix) and show solidarity with the crucified peoples of the world today. In my article on hope, I argue that the Lutheran distinction between the “two kinds of righteousness” can aid us to affirm the responsibility of Christians under God’s command to promote the wellbeing of the neighbor and a more just society through vocation (active righteousness)—a matter of utmost importance among theologians and intellectuals in the Latino world—without making those efforts the condition for our righteousness before God through faith in Christ, which

the gospel alone can create (passive righteousness). A nonexclusionist reading of the “preferential option for the poor” in terms of what I would prefer to call a “priority of love” towards our neediest neighbors can help to give some shape to our discussions on what active righteousness actually looks like in a U.S. context where Latinos are statistically speaking the poorest vis-à-vis other ethnic groups.

Anyone looking for relevant demographics on the Latino presence in the United States can take a look at Doug Groll’s contribution to the issue. More likely to ruffle feathers, however, is Groll’s call for the North American Anglo Lutherans (particularly, its leaders) to repent of their consistent inability to back up with resources its manifold public announcements on the importance of making Hispanic missions a priority. Moreover, Groll calls them to repent for their inability to be a faithful model of confessional Lutheran identity to a young Latino church, referring particularly to what he sees as the gradual loss of basic elements of the historic liturgy in Anglo Lutheran churches. Eloy González sees the need for worship to be countercultural, but not on account of some abstract “church culture” notion defined by appealing to ethno-cultural expressions of the faith that presumably transcend all our particular cultures. Rather, González, while affirming the catholicity of the church’s liturgical expression, warns against making any particular “transcendent” expression of the faith in hymnody the reason for the gap between the church and the Latino hearer. Instead, González argues that the liturgy should only create such a gap in its function as a vehicle for the proclamation of the law and bridge the same gap through the proclamation of the gospel. It is entirely possible then to have Lutheran liturgy with “Latino flavor” that is at the same time catholic and does not water down the liturgy’s function as servant of the word. The call to unmask idols, repent, and heal does not only apply to North American Anglos. If one reads Mark Kempff’s Forum piece on the current state of the Latino family, one realizes that no romantic visions of naturally family-oriented Latinos will be able to replace what the law and the gospel alone can do respectively to convict families of their sins and reconcile members of broken families to one another.

Can one be Latino and Lutheran? The short answer to the question is, of course, yes. But it takes some work. It takes faith-

fulness to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, along with the disposition to engage creatively and in an ongoing way in critical and constructive responsiveness to the Latino world. Latino Lutheran identity will have to draw its boundaries but also venture to deal with issues that are not in every way clearly outside of such boundaries. Compare, for example, Conrad and Trovall on the Virgin of Guadalupe. Daniel Conrad draws a boundary on a Lutheran appropriation of the Virgin of Guadalupe in his review of Maxwell Johnson by pointing to the Lutheran Confessions’ warning against the invocation of the saints. Carl Trovall’s Forum piece, where he acknowledges the potential of the Guadalupan symbol to obscure the gospel, also proposes that the same could potentially serve as a bridge and even preliminary sign of the gospel in that the brown Virgin signifies that God’s love in Christ is also for the *mestizo* and the *indio*.

It has been a great pleasure to serve as guest editor for this bilingual issue of *LOGIA*. Many thanks to the editorial staff of the journal under the leadership of Rev. Michael Albrecht and to all the writers who contributed articles, forum pieces, and book reviews. Many of these writers have also contributed in various ways to the mission of the Center for Hispanic Studies at Concordia Seminary to provide leadership and theological education in the Lutheran tradition from and for U.S. Hispanic Latino communities. Their expertise has been valuable in the production of this project. Summaries in Spanish for all articles, Forum pieces, and Rutt’s review of Bustamante were provided by this editor. Rev. Héctor Hoppe provided the Spanish summary of Holst’s review of Blank, and Coles and Conrad provided their own summaries. All editing in Spanish is the sole responsibility of this editor. My hope is that this issue will not only be educational and thought-provoking, but also encourage Lutherans to participate and contribute in their own ways to the proclamation of the gospel among and with Latinos in the United States and Latin America. It is not only possible to be Latino Lutheran, it is also a joyful task to work in the formation of confessional Latino Lutherans everywhere. Above all, to be Latino Lutheran is a gift from our gracious Father, from whom all blessings flow, and a much needed gift to the Latino world itself.

*Leopoldo Sánchez*

*Guest Editor, LOGIA, Volume 19, Number 1*

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