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Called and Sent to Encuentro

A Pastoral Theological Vision for the V Encuentro Process

Listening to God's Call

The God of Life, who by the power of the Holy Spirit conquered death, sin, and darkness through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord, calls Hispanic Catholics in the United States with a renewed impetus to be *pueblo de Dios en marcha*. In God who is Three in One we believe. To God who is origin and wellspring of our existence we give our praise. In God who walks with us in the confines of history we place our trust and our hope as we enter into this process leading to the Fifth Encuentro Nacional Hispano de Pastoral, truly a moment of grace.

God rejoices in the beauty of the created order. God finds delight in the people from all cultures who live according to the truth, particularly the truth of the Gospel, and love with *caritas*: God's divine love. The United States of America is our share of creation. This is our land, our nation. This is where we find ourselves walking side by side with millions of people who believe that life is about opportunity, people who strive every day to build a better world. This is where we find ourselves walking together with God who not only called us into being, but also promised to accompany us along the journey. Here we live. Most of us were born in this nation; many others were reborn as migrants. In a land that promises new beginnings we find ourselves participating in a never-ending process of rebirthing... recreating... reinventing... renewing.

Our *experiencia cotidiana* as Christian disciples living in the United States is often complex, busy, noisy, tense. Much is negotiated at any given moment. Many realities change so fast around us that we barely have time to remember what was and contemplate what is. Notwithstanding we have the responsibility to imagine a shared future. Communities, large and small, change. Priorities change. Political dynamics, global and local, change. How we enter in relationship with God changes as well as how we practice our faith. We change. Yet in the midst of the drumming that engulfs life with its many changes, God invites us today to pause for a moment and ponder about who we are as women and men called to *Encuentro*, here and now.

We Are Hispanic...

Hispanic, Latino/a, Latin@, *indígena*, Hispanic-American... Yes, all of the above. We are all these and many more. Our people are Brown, Black, White, Mestizo, Mulato... When exercising our democratic responsibilities we vote all across the political spectrum... We are professionals, business people, educators, artists, service workers, *campesinos*... Many among us trace our lineage to families who have lived in the United States for centuries, even to ancestors who lived in the land before the country knew itself as a nation. Others more recently crossed borders, flew in, and sailed boats from Latin America and the Caribbean with the hope of finding better opportunities for them and their families. Though millions among our people are immigrants who have made this country

their permanent home in recent decades, we are not just an immigrant community. The vast majority, nearly two thirds of *nuestro pueblo* were born in the United States. We are Hispanic, Latino/a, Latin@, *indígenas*, and... American, that is to say: *estadounidenses*. This is our country. We are the United States along with many others who day by day work hard and long to build a better nation. We believe in dreams that inspire us as a people. We dream about building strong families in which parents, children, spouses, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins, *comadres* and *compadres*, and the many other relatives and friends who are part of our lives are always welcomed. We dream about the best education and opportunities for our children so they can live their lives to the fullest. We dream that the honor that derives from affirming the dignity of our human condition, an honor that has been denied to many of us, particularly our women and our children in the countries that many of us have left, and even in this land, is fully restored as we build a new society. We dream that our lives be filled with joy and peace as we trust in the Lord.

Poverty, low educational attainment, brokenness in our families, the hardships that are part of the immigrant experience, among other trials, negatively affect the lives of millions of our Hispanic sisters and brothers, especially the young, in our *barrios* and homes. Racism and classism are persistent social biases that some in this society, our society, inflict again and again upon us as a *pueblo* because of the consistent failure to understand who we are and what we contribute to Church and society. When one of us suffers because of those biases, we all suffer, the Church suffers, the country suffers. Yet, we still dream.

Our shared history is like a colorful tapestry weaved during five centuries, a tapestry made of multiple narratives that are part of one common memory: *nuestra memoria histórica*. Many of these great narratives evoke moments that have brought hope and the promise of new beginnings. Others remind us of the clashes that have caused pain and despair. It is in the walking together through history, motivated by the passions that drive us every day, mindful of the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of our people, that a new identity is being forged. Not an identity that does away with differences, diversity of cultures, national origins, accents, and memories —because without these we would not be who we are today —but an identity that has the power to hold unity and plurality in dynamic tension. Many ask when is it that the process of forging such identity will finally be completed. Are we there yet? All we can say is that we are still being born. For centuries we have been becoming something new; we are not done. We are becoming something new and so are the people with whom we live, our neighborhoods, the towns and cities where we are *presente*, the larger society, the Church...

We Are Hispanic Catholics...

At the heart of the always evolving U.S. Hispanic identity, in all its variations and manifestations, remains a spiritual constant: Christianity, particularly mediated by Catholicism. The majority of Hispanics in the United States self-identify as Catholic (about 58 percent). The Catholic experience has served perhaps as the most widely shared quality among Hispanic and Latin American peoples in the continent. Rooted in the experience of Iberian Catholicism, the Church throughout our history in the United States, the Caribbean, and in the rest of the continent has been a major force shaping culture, education, the arts, and social life. Hispanics are heirs of this tradition and we carry it in what many have come to recognize as a form of cultural Catholicism.

The Hispanic Catholic experience is a treasure that permeates the life of the Church in the United States and the larger society in many ways. For decades, theologians and pastoral leaders in this country, the Caribbean, and Latin America have recognized the immense power of popular Catholicism as a vehicle not only to celebrate and interpret the faith, but also to pass on that faith from one generation to the next. Marian devotions, especially the love for Our Lady of Guadalupe, have a special place in the U.S. Hispanic Catholic imagination. Liturgical life remains important for Hispanic Catholics. Parishes where Hispanics are present have a higher number of faithful attending Mass and the number of children baptized in these communities is higher than in the rest of parishes in the country. Of course, the record is not perfect and much more needs to be done at the pastoral level to help the many Hispanic Catholics who sporadically or never come to Church to appreciate more the richness of its liturgical experience. But there is a sense of the sacred, what theologians call a sacramental imagination, deeply ingrained in Hispanic cultures, much of it nurtured by the centuries-long relationship with Catholicism. In recent decades the emergence of the apostolic movements (e.g., the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Cursillo) has inspired waves of spiritual revitalization among U.S. Hispanic Catholics. All these experiences point to what has been identified as *mística*, that lens through which Hispanic Catholics see and understand the world as a place where it is always possible to have an encounter with the divine.

For Hispanic Catholics, the experience of *encuentro* is an opportunity to retrieve the cultural, spiritual, and ecclesial roots of our shared identity. In Latin America and the Caribbean the spirit of *encuentro* has, without a doubt, shaped the pastoral theological reflection of CELAM (*Conferencial Episcopal Lationamericana*) for more than half a century. The meetings in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), Santo Domingo (1992), and most recently in Aparecida (2007) can be considered *encuentro* milestones. At these meetings pastoral leaders and theologians from around the continent came together (*se encontraron*) to reflect on how God's Reign was being experienced by *el pueblo*, the people. Those experiences of *encuentro* in Latin America have inspired some of the most exciting processes of pastoral planning, parish renewal, and missionary activity in our recent history. Many of the 20 million immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean now living in the United States have been formed and transformed by those dynamics: catechists, teachers, lay pastoral agents, vowed religious, clergy, and countless people in the pews. As we enter the process leading toward the Fifth Encuentro, their experiences and memories should be a great source of inspiration.

We Are Hispanic Catholics in the United States...

At the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Hispanics constituted less than 10 percent of the Catholic population in the United States. In a Church that was mostly Euro-American, Hispanic Catholics were clearly a minority. This is how we had been perceived for quite long. As a minority, the history of Hispanics had been influenced by the ups and downs of the racial, social, and even religious tensions that dominated major conversations in the larger society. But much has changed in only half a century. Today Hispanics constitute more than 40 percent of all Catholics in the country. More than half of Catholics under the age of twenty-five are Hispanic. Seventy-one percent of the growth of Catholicism in the country since the 1960s is the result of the Hispanic presence. It is practically impossible in our day to speak about the present and future of Catholicism in the United States without looking closely at the Hispanic Catholic experience. Has the Church in the United States come to terms with the process of hispanization that is currently redefining its identity? Are Hispanic Catholics aware of the role we now play and the commitments we must

assume in the context of the new phase in the U.S. Catholic experience? The Fifth Encuentro process is the perfect opportunity to reflect upon these two questions.

This is not the first time we enter into a process of Encuentro. Prior to the present Fifth Encuentro process Hispanic Catholics have been part of several other Encuentros Nacionales Hispanos de Pastoral: 1972, 1977, 1985, and 2000. In 2007 took place the First National Encounter for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry. The Encuentros have been instances of communal reflection where pastoral leaders involved in Hispanic ministry came together through a series of processes and gatherings at various levels to address how the Church in the United States is best meeting the pastoral and spiritual needs of Hispanic Catholics. The Encuentros quickly proved to be prophetic moments. But perhaps their most important contribution has been the development of a shared consciousness among U.S. Hispanic Catholics. The first three Encuentros focused explicitly on the Hispanic Catholic experience. In doing so, they named the strengths and weaknesses in the Church's response to the growing Hispanic presence. The Third Encuentro (1985) was preceded by a two-year (1983-1985) process of consultation at multiple levels involving hundreds of thousands of Hispanic Catholics. The Third Encuentro also inspired the development of the 1987 National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, approved by the bishops of the United States for all Catholics in the country. The Plan's general objective continues to inspire major initiatives and conversations about Hispanic ministry nationwide:

TO LIVE AND PROMOTE...
by means of a *Pastoral de Conjunto*
a MODEL OF CHURCH that is:
communitarian, evangelizing, and missionary,
incarnate in the reality of the Hispanic people and
open to the diversity of cultures,
a promoter and example of justice...
that develops leadership through integral education...
THAT IS LEAVEN FOR THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN SOCIETY.

Encuentro 2000 (considered the Fourth Encuentro) raised awareness about the gift of diversity in the Church. It was not focused exclusively on Hispanic ministry, yet it was an opportunity for Hispanics to share the experience and methodology of *encuentro* with other Catholics in the country. The First National Encounter for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry not only reminded us that Hispanic Catholic youth must remain a central focus in the Church's evangelizing mission in the United States (about six in ten Catholics under the age of eighteen in the country are Hispanic), but also demonstrated the capacity and potential for leadership of U.S. young Hispanic Catholics.

Today 55 million Hispanics, 17 percent of the entire U.S. population, constitute a major force in our society. Hispanics are present in every state, every major urban center throughout the country. Hardly a group to be ignored! Nearly 30 million of us self-identify as Catholics. There are more Hispanic Catholics in the United States than in most individual countries in Latin America. This is without a doubt a different moment in our shared history. Our reflection at this time is not merely about how the larger ecclesial community can serve a small group of people who share common languages and cultures. It is about embracing the fact that Catholicism in United States is being — and will continue to be — deeply redefined by the Hispanic Catholic experience in dialogue with the

many other Catholic experiences that are part of the culturally diverse matrix in which we hear and answer God's calling to *encuentro*.

We Are Hispanic Catholics in the United States in the 21st Century...

As we move forward as a Church well into the second decade of the still young twenty-first century, Hispanic Catholics insist that our challenges, questions, and hopes are those of the Church in the U.S. —and vice versa. Every historical moment brings its own challenges. And every challenge is in itself a new opportunity. At the dawn of this century our society experienced the horrors of terrorism and large-scale violence. These events profoundly changed our perception about the kind of world in which we live today. A new wave of socio-political crises in Latin America threatens the wellbeing of many, especially women and the young, leaving them no other alternative than to flee their homelands. Many look “North” as an option as did millions throughout the twentieth century. The recent economic downturn underscored the vulnerability of the institutions in which we have come to rely almost blindly. A growing anti-immigrant sentiment, particularly during times of political elections, reveals worrisome xenophobic attitudes in our society that need to be seriously addressed. This seems to be a time when turning to God and religious institutions for guidance and wisdom is more urgent than ever, yet our society collectively is moving in a different direction: secularism. About 1 in 5 people in the United States self-identifies as non-religiously affiliated or “nones”. Hispanics are not the exception.

These are precisely the conversations where Hispanic Catholics can lead with our voices, witness, and leadership. These are our realities as well. This is our time to be a prophetic voice! Our children and grandchildren are growing up in this context. The response to these dynamics is what in many ways will determine the vibrancy and relevance of our parishes, dioceses, organizations, and institutions. In order to respond to the challenges of our day, we stand before a unique opportunity to draw from the best of our Catholic tradition as well as from the richness of our cultural and historical experiences. We Are Hispanic Catholics in the United States in the twenty-first century who accept God's call to *encuentro* and stand ready to make preferential options. We continue to embrace the *preferential option for the poor* that has characterized the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean as well as Hispanic ministry in the United States during the last half a century.

We also renew the *preferential option for our Hispanic youth*. The majority of U.S. Catholics under the age of 30 are Hispanic, most of them born in this country. There is plenty of evidence that our ministerial structures, including parish youth and young adult ministerial programs, Catholic schools, and Catholic colleges, are not doing enough to serve them well. If we do not invest in Hispanic youth now, what kind of Church do we expect to have in ten or twenty years? Investment in Hispanic youth today is nonnegotiable.

As we enter the process of the Fifth Encuentro, we must make a *preferential option for the family*, more specifically the Hispanic family. Hispanic Catholics in general have a strong sense of family life and value the importance of this social unit. The openness to life in Hispanic families, expressed particularly in the number of children at home, serves as a countercultural sign to what some have identified the “culture of death” in our society. Hispanic families, rooted in the conviction that individual identity is primarily shaped in the context of the home, remain by and large paradigmatic in terms of sharing traditional values about culture, faith, and mores. These strengths are to be

cultivated in our ministry and shared with others as much as possible as Hispanics continue to grow roots in this society. However, it is easy to confuse “a strong sense of family” with an idealized view of the Hispanic family. Hispanic families also struggle significantly. Yes, there is brokenness in our families. There is pain when our families are divided because of migratory policies that are taking too long to be revised. There is grief when marriages in our communities fail. There is hardship when our families must permanently deal with poverty and marginalization. There is frustration among our parents when they dream about the best education for their children and know that millions of their little ones go to failing schools that put their future at risk. There is reason to be concerned when realities like machismo, domestic violence, and other forms of abuse at home directly affect the lives of many in our families, particularly women and children, yet are often met with a deafening silence by leaders in our faith communities. There is confusion when our own ministerial structures, including current efforts in Hispanic ministry, invest little or nothing in *pastoral familiar*. If we do not invest in Hispanic families now, what kind of Church do we expect to have in ten or twenty years? Investment in the Hispanic family today is nonnegotiable.

Sent by God as Missionary Disciples...

As the Church throughout the world continues to embrace the call to the New Evangelization, Hispanic Catholics do so in our day in a spirit of *encuentro*. Blessed Paul VI reminded us that the Church exists to evangelize (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14). Hispanic ministry in the United States only makes sense if its ultimate goal is to announce the Good News of Jesus Christ. As Hispanic Catholics and those walking with us in a mutual spirit of accompaniment, we have heard the voice of the God of Life who calls us to discipleship. We follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, the Risen One who makes all things new. We open our hearts to the guidance of the Holy Spirit for our discipleship to be authentic and life-giving. Hispanic ministry in the United States is the Church’s commitment to bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ with new ardor, new methods, and new expressions to all Hispanic women and men living in this land, those who walk with us in our communities, and those with whom we are Church amidst the cultural diversity that shapes our communal identity.

Christian discipleship is about following Jesus, the Teacher. Yet the act of following must be preceded by a moment of listening and contemplation. At the feet of the Lord Jesus, like the first disciples, we listen to his words and our hearts are filled with the joy of the Gospel (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1). We contemplate the truth that makes us free. We humbly allow the Lord to love us with the sacrificial love of the one who lays his life down for his friends. The *encuentro* with the Lord through his Word in the Scriptures, his sacraments, and our neighbors, especially those most vulnerable (Cf. Mt 25:31-46), empowers us to say with the author of the First Letter of John: “what we have seen and heard, we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us” (1 John 3a).

The proclamation of the Good News inherently implies a movement outward. If we have seen it, heard it, and contemplated it, we know how worthy it is! Then we must share it. Authentic discipleship and the Church’s missionary impetus go hand in hand. As the pastoral leaders from across the continent recently gathered in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007 concluded, this is the time to embrace our identity as missionary disciples. The calling to missionary discipleship clearly resonates with the pastoral experience of U.S. Hispanic Catholics. For decades we have been in

close dialogue with theological and pastoral movements from Latin America. Many of those movements have profoundly influenced our own reflection as is the case of the earlier Encuentros Nacionales Hispanos de Pastoral. The 1997 synod that led to the landmark document *Ecclesia in America* modeled how the conversation could continue. Much energy is being generated in the Latin American ecclesial context inspired by Aparecida, the commitment to a Continental Mission, and without a doubt the witness of Pope Francis, the first Latin American Pope in history. This is truly a *kairos* moment for U.S. Hispanic, Latin American, and Caribbean Catholics, a time to embrace the calling to be missionary disciples. This is an opportunity to be missionary to all our sisters and brothers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, in the United States. As U.S. Hispanic Catholics, we enter this moment rooted in our own reality, yet mindful of the need to develop a wider awareness of the experiences beyond our own boundaries and most immediate perspectives.

To Experience the Fullness of God's Love through *Encuentro*!

Catholicism in the United States in the twenty-first century will be profoundly defined by whether and how we build communities of *encuentro* and embrace. It is in these communities where everyone, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, should find ourselves at home and experience the fullness of God's love. This is a time when Catholic parishes, dioceses, organizations, and institutions are to renew their commitment to identity and mission by becoming spaces where all Catholics are welcomed with their gifts, questions, and hopes. To build such communities it is necessary to develop a *pastoral de conjunto* that builds on the best practices that have given life to many communities to this day. This *pastoral de conjunto* also requires the incorporation of the wisdom that new pastoral leaders, young and old, immigrant and U.S.-born, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, bring to our communities.

Pope Francis often refers to the idea of fostering a *cultura de encuentro* (a culture of encounter). A culture of encounter brings people together mirroring the *encuentro* between God and humanity, particularly through Jesus Christ. Such an encounter is always life-giving and transforming. It is an encounter that affirms the best of who we are as people created and loved by God. A culture of encounter is predicated upon the conviction that forgiveness and reconciliation are possible. It is a culture that speaks the truth with clarity, although with kindness and mercy. A culture of encounter mediates differences, brings together those who are alienated from each other, heals conflicts, and opens us up to the beauty of the mystery of being together with one another. Yes, we are in this as a pueblo. We are the Church, *el Pueblo de Dios*.

As we enter into the process leading to the Fifth Encuentro Nacional Hispano de Pastoral, Hispanic pastoral leaders and those who accompany us on the journey of building strong communities of faith are invited to foster *una cultura de encuentro* that makes it possible for all to experience the fullness of God's Reign. May the God of Life, who by the power of the Holy Spirit calls us to follow our Lord Jesus Christ as missionary disciples and accompany one another on this journey of fashioning the U.S. Catholic experience in the twenty-first century, grant us the wisdom to remain faithful to our vocation.