

Reflection Paper: Cultural Analysis

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I live in New Mexico and my church populace is about half European background and half Hispanic background. In my teaching and other ministering, I regularly deal with people from these two predominant groups and some people from smaller groups. For this reason, I want to explore the culture of the New Mexican Hispanic Catholic, the largest part of the Hispanic population here, because I interact with people in this culture daily and want to better understand them to be a more effective minister of the gospel (Cowan 171). I will examine several of its key symbols, consider its worldview and the key aspects of its ethos, look at typical moods and behavioral habits of this culture, examine how the symbols pass on to its members a worldview and ethos, and finally review the sacred symbols in this culture. In doing this, I will compare and contrast my own background to make points more distinct.

Some of the key symbols of New Mexican Hispanic Catholics are the Spanish language, Mary the mother of Jesus, particularly in the image and story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the family, the crucifix, the rosary, the tabernacle and images. These are in great part directly related to a devotion to and belief in their religion and are explained by Herrera's "religious stance," an understanding of life that Hispanics generally have that God's action governs life rather than luck or chance (Cowan 180). English is the predominate language the people of this culture speak in my experience though there are many who speak Spanish at least nominally, using words and phrases such as *cursillo*, *mijita*, *mijito* and *recordar es vivir* frequently, as Herrera points out and my own observation bears witness (Cowan 172-173, 182 & Magallanes). This brings to mind a scene in the movie Selena when the singer is giving a press conference in Mexico. Not completely fluent,

she spoke as much Spanish as she could and filled in the rest with English (Nava). In considering the second symbol, images of Our Lady of Guadalupe recall the actual event when a pregnant Mother of Jesus, Mary, appeared to a Chicmecan Indian named Juan Diego December 9, 10 & 12, 1531. She gave him Castilian roses that only grow in one place in Spain that he carried in a cactus fiber cloak called a tilma. When he brought the roses for the Bishop to see, its unfurling revealed the image popularly known today as Our Lady of Guadalupe. The roses were reportedly in answer to the Bishop's prayer that they be spared a bloody uprising against the Spanish, expected for the severe rule of the Chicmeca (Lynch, Jones 122). This symbol reveals belief in Mary's maternal care for her children, the power of Mary's intercession and the understanding of God's love for all people. The title is also important because, appearing with darker skin, she looked like the "conquered" people of the Southwest¹, revealing the people's divine component (Magallanes). Books with art of Mary I have seen many years past make her look like the people where she is represented. In a similar way, my culture has great devotion to Mary and this is a fond one with those who know the story, but we do not relate as a conquered people. Family is another key symbol, stemming from both the imitation of the Holy Family: Joseph, Mary and Jesus, and from the love of family and importance placed on familial relations. While family is honored and revered in my culture, the emphasis is different for we do not see one another as often as in this culture and are more likely to live far away from parents and relatives. My family is a good example, being spread out through Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Guatemala, Maryland, Nebraska, New York, New Jersey and New Mexico. Hispanics are more homogenous than my culture and seem to stay closer or visit more often. The next symbol, the

crucifix, reminds the people of the suffering and death Jesus endured to provide all the blessings they enjoy, including family and friends. Devotion to it includes reverencing and praying before it. My culture has a very similar devotion to the crucifix and most homes usually have multiple crucifixes, just like the Hispanic culture. The rosary is another key symbol and devotional that reminds the faithful of the annunciation, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the immanent God. The rosary is used to pray in my culture and is deeply revered, most people have at least one. The New Mexican Hispanic Catholics I know pray the rosary more than those in my culture. The tabernacle, an important key symbol, holds the Body of Jesus in reserve in Catholic Churches throughout the world. This key symbol is knelt before as they worship, give thanks and make their requests known to their Lord and God. The devotion before the tabernacle is equal between our two cultures and many kneel in reverence to pray to our God, just as do the Hispanics. One difference is people in the Hispanic culture make the sign of the cross even when they pass a Catholic Church in their car, for example, since the tabernacle in the Church houses Jesus come sacramentally. Images such as statues and holy cards of saints remind this culture of older brothers and sisters, family who have gone before them, marked with the sign of faith. Often many people in this culture will pray to a saint asking for guidance or a need in the family. Our culture values both as well, but the use of these sacred objects varies. Whereas a Hispanic would most likely pray upon seeing a statue or holy card, someone of my culture would be inspired to live beyond themselves. Now let us explore the New Mexican Hispanic Catholic worldview and ethos.

The expectations of the way things are and the interpretation and corresponding living out of this worldview must correlate, according to Cowan (34). I understand this to mean that both presuppositions and the living out are all made of the same fabric of life and discontinuity between them reflects a disjointed, disordered person instead of a consistency that allows a person to live with him or herself in wholeness. For this reason, we tend to justify our worldviews by the way we live and vice versa. I will examine this culture's worldview and the corresponding ethos in three groups of people: men, women and grandparents/extended family. The first I will address is the man: strong, protects women and children, never backs down and is the handyman who fixes and takes care of the home. A man stands on his own two feet and takes care of his family, with his word as his bond. He has a firm, strong handshake and if someone he is not related to comes into his personal space, he does not shrink back or flinch, but stands up proud and strong and looks the person in the eye. He always keeps in mind the protection of the family, newcomers only being accepted after they prove themselves trustworthy to ensure they are not wolves in sheep's clothing, threatening their family (Matt 2:13-14, 22-23). The items listed above also express my culture quite well. It is in the following points that there is a small divergence. In a limited sense, this culture's view is similar to Cowan's "rugged individualism", but not as extreme as the "Marlboro man" or a superhero like the way Spiderman is portrayed in the recently released movie, telling the woman he has always loved that he cannot get involved with her after figuring out that anyone who is close to him will end up getting hurt (Bellah 144-147 & Raimi). The man in this culture is self-reliant only to a point and recognizes the domain of a woman. Self reliance and the ensuing isolated man are much more prevalent in my culture. The military part of my

culture taught me to be completely self-reliant, to the extreme, more than any other source that informs my mixed culture which is in direct contrast to the culture we are examining. While the New Mexican Hispanic Catholic male values and treasures his religion, its symbols and actions, many times he is absent from its practice or teaching because he must be about making a living and providing for his family, not because he does not believe. This is also true of my culture where the woman is more inclined toward the religious and the husband follows her lead, generally speaking, in this area. The Hispanic man repairs the house and follows the direction of his wife, the Hispanic woman, who is the second part of the worldview and ethos to be examined. She bears, raises and teaches the children, cooks and cleans, is submissive and follows her husband as the head of the household, and is the household leader in the practice of religion. Her domain is the house and everything that goes on in it. She raises her children, teaching them the moral lessons they need to live as a Catholic in the world and doing all the cooking and cleaning that make their house into a castle and bulwark from an unfriendly world. She reveres her husband and follows what he says, not in a fearful way, but as a co-partner. This submission also includes asking his opinion before she does something to make sure she is doing the right thing, not because she is unable to make a decision, but out of respect. While this can be the exclusive conclusion when witnessed by an outsider, many women in this culture run the family and are only behind the man socially (Magallanes). She makes the rules and sets the course for the family in religious practice and lessons. This includes going to Mass, praying the rosary and honoring Our Lady, especially on her feast of Guadalupe. The feast usually involves getting the entire family up very early on that day to go to Mass, pray special prayers and share a meal. To a

certain extent, life revolves around the Church calendar of feasts and holy days. With one exception, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the women in my culture are nearly identical to the women in this culture. The third part of worldview and ethos in our study concerns grandparents and extended family. There are some cultures where the nuclear family consists of parents and children alone with extended family an acceptable descriptor for all other family. In my culture, while grandparents and blood relatives one grows up with considered part of the immediate family, the nuclear family is much more limited than the New Mexican Hispanic Catholic culture. When they speak of *mí familia*, they include grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. This is similar to Hawaiian culture, in which I lived for a time, which is even more inclusive where everyone is part of *ohana*, be they blood relations or neighbors. Grandparents and other family help with the children providing regular time with these people as a normal part of a child's life. This way of living and the impact on the children and parents gives meaning to the saying that *it takes a village to raise a child*. The impact is that the parents are not so stressed in trying to raise children by themselves with only occasional breaks by paying a babysitter as happens in my culture, and the children get to know their grandparents, other family and benefit from a much larger group of children with which to play. Grandparents and others in the family call the children *mijita*, girl, or *mijito*, boy, terms of endearment and contractions "used colloquially to mean little son or daughter" (Magallanes). Now that we have explored the worldview and ethos of this culture, we need to consider the typical moods and behavioral habits displayed by this cultural group.

This group is very optimistic, sending one off with a *vaya con Díos*, go with God. This optimism is directly related to their belief that God holds all things in His hands and that He takes care of his people, even through difficulties, struggles, pain and suffering (Cowan 180). Their ultimate trust in God makes for a very optimistic people. Coupled with that, the second point is shared song. In church, the songs are all very upbeat and have a light feeling to them, compared to music in English in my culture which is a little more subdued and less exuberant. The songs and melodies reflect the optimism of the culture and lift up my spirit, making me smile and want to dance. The evocation of joy in this culture's music is similar to my experience with Hawaiian and African American church music because both are joy-filled, lifting the spirit. The expressions of friendship and love used in greeting or parting are the third point. It is not a rare sight to witness people from this culture greeting one another with hugs, kisses and handshakes that are clearly heartfelt. This echoes the strong familial bonds shared by this culture and expressed outwardly. Related to this is the concept of personal space. In my culture, there is a space around one that is not breached. This culture's approach includes more touching without the sexual meaning my culture associates with it. For this reason, it is not rare to see gestures such as a hand on a shoulder or some other touching to add to the communication of the message. This method of touching as a part of communicating makes one feel closer to friends and less threatened whereas in my culture, most people are so concerned about inappropriate touching that they cannot communicate as a culture in this way. Another point is family time spent together. From my experience with friends from this culture, the families always seem to be together. A friend of mine has one family relative who will be moving his family about 500 miles away for work. For

this reason, the families spent the entire week together being able to say goodbye and are already planning visits in the near future. It is this type of closeness that differentiates this culture from mine. In my culture, we plan to see one another, but the urgency is less than in this culture where most people stay geographically closer. In my family, I described above how we are geographically separated by many thousands of miles. The two variables that make it much more difficult to see one another more often are distance and money. If we lived closer, we would most likely get together a couple of times a year. The culture I am examining seems to get together twice as much or more than my culture. A final observation concerning this culture is its concern for those they know. In my activities and dealings with the Hispanic parishioners in Immaculate Conception Church in Alamogordo, New Mexico, I have always experienced the warmth of acceptance and concern for my well being. In conversation, an answer is always awaited to questions about how I have been. This makes it a very enjoyable place to be, unlike the atmosphere in many other places of the United States I have lived where people would ask how you are doing as they were rushing out the door to leave, as if this was their way to say hello, never intending to get into a conversation with whomever they were speaking. Now that we have examined the moods and behavioral habits of this culture, I want to examine how their symbols pass on worldview and ethos to its members.

The several symbols I discussed earlier in this paper pass on to its members that God cares for His people and is always there to help and guide them. The Spanish language emphasizes this, as can be seen in the example, *vaya con Dios*. This phrase shows how

this culture's members keep God in mind. Mary, the mother of Jesus, especially in the image and story of Our Lady of Guadalupe, teach this culture about the value of the mother in the family and reinforce the importance of family and each member's role in that important institution. The symbol of family itself informs people of the value of family and its high level of importance in the culture. It is reinforced by the practice of family gatherings and time spent together, providing a micro-society in which to be and learn to be people. The crucifix teaches that each member goes through difficult times and that all suffer. This allows the members of this culture to be much more accepting of pain and suffering instead of questioning its validity or meaning as it is in other American cultures such as mine. The rosary provides the lesson of dependence upon God, recognizing that He is the one who sustains all life and provides what they need. The tabernacle reminds and informs its members that there is a greater power that is due obeisance, worship and honor. Kneeling before their God is what keeps them humble and creates the welcome and warmth we have examined above. Images remind them of the continuity between those who have gone before them in the faith and themselves. This provides them with a reminder of the call to holiness, to live as God commands and evokes familial images because the images remind them that we are all one family in the faith, imaging that holy family 2000 years ago. Finally, we need to consider the sacred symbols in the New Mexican Hispanic Catholic culture.

The sacred symbols of this culture are Mary, family, crucifix, rosary, tabernacle, images, holy water, cross and Eucharist. Two of the main themes found throughout these symbols we have discussed in several places are family closeness and inclusiveness. The

family is complete by honoring God, spending time with and helping one another, bearing one another's burdens and always pointing one another to God who is the source of their strength and power. Mary, the tabernacle, the crucifix and the rosary remind and challenge them to remain humble, understanding their place in the world God made. Statues and holy cards remind them of people that lived real lives with real struggles and kept the faith, calling them to live a life consonant with the faith they proclaim with their lives. Holy water and the sign of the cross, usually used in tandem when entering the church or their homes by dipping their finger into the water and then making the sign of the cross, blessing themselves. In this blessing the people are praying to be conformed into the image of the crucified Jesus, laying down their lives for family and friends as Jesus did for us. The people are challenged to live this out in their lives. By cross, I mean making a cross with the pointer finger and thumb and kissing it. This shows again the reverence for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the embracing in a sharing of the cross in their daily lives. Finally, the Eucharist whom we receive at every Mass is a major symbol in this culture. As *Lumen Gentium* reads, "Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It." (11) This means that when they are at Mass, this cultural group is identifying with Jesus crucified and offering themselves to God as they participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice. This explains their willingness to suffer and not blame God, but accept their fate with faith God will see them through as they offer their prayers to God. It is this faith that is central to the cultural life of the New Mexican Hispanic Catholic culture and makes it possible to have such a beautiful, family orientated one. These insights will help me in relating to the New Mexican Hispanic

Catholics, ministering to them more effectively and incorporating their culture into my own. *¡Vaya con Dios!*

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¹ "Conquered" refers both to the Spanish subjugation of the native inhabitants and the American subjugation of the Spanish, including them in the formation of this country, but not always as equal members. According to Magallanes, most New Mexican Hispanics also have Indian blood.