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Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit

Ree Taylor

Introduction:

This paper is based on a praxis project done for a course on U.S. Latino/Latina Theology taught by Dr. Cecilia González-Andrieu. For the purpose of this paper, Latin@ will be used. This term is used to combine the masculine and feminine forms of Latino and Latina into one word and is pronounced Lat-**een**-oh-ah. There will also be many terms used to identify a small faith community. These terms include Basic Christian Community, or BCC, and Small Christian Community, or SCC.

This study is based on an *acompañamiento* project in which a Spanish-speaking cohort and I walked with the Latin@ parents in the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange Deaf Community for six consecutive Sundays. The assignment was to accompany a Latin@ Catholic group, but we learned in the first week that the Latin@ parents in the Catholic Deaf Community did not form a group and were actually disconnected not only from each other, but also from their “home” parishes. We adapted our project to interview individual parents, listening to their stories of faith and isolation. Although we did not ask specific demographic questions about legal status, income, age, etc., we formed some conclusions based on our primary research. With multiple jobs and dual-income families, we concluded that the parents struggle to meet basic living requirements. Besides being possibly materially poor, we observed that the Latin@ parents are spiritually poor as well. In their sincere attempt to give their special-needs children a religious education, the parents find themselves dislocated from a familiar parish community, neglecting their own spiritual needs. This project presents a framework for a Small Christian Community (SCC) for the Latin@ parents of deaf children which would be an opportunity for them to share something similar to a parish life. This paper presents research in four parts: foundations, observations, design, and a personal reflection.

Foundations:

The first SCCs were, of course, the house churches found in the New Testament. Passages in Acts and St. Paul’s letters describe the original small communities of Christians as meetings that took place in homes centered around table fellowship, reading Scriptures, the apostles’ letters, and often followed by preaching and/or discussion. The emphasis was on being together to nurture their faith in Christ Jesus, and to support each other as they walked in the Holy Spirit.

From this biblical beginning, the SCC has taken new forms through the ages. The most recent development is the wave of Basic Christian Communities

(BCC) that grew up alongside liberation theology in Latin America in the late 20th century.¹ Both liberation theology and BCCs share roots in Catholic social teaching and centuries of oppression born of colonialism and imperialism, resulting in a preferential option for the poor. In response to the outcomes of Vatican II that accentuated the Church as the people of God and emphasized the involvement of the laity, liberation theology looked at the poverty and social injustice in Latin American countries. At the same time, small communities were organizing to bring the hierarchical church closer to the people. With a firm belief in the “already and not-yet” Reign of God, BCCs became the people’s solution to connecting with their Church when physical or political distance kept them away. Through the BCCs in Latin America, people on the margins built connections with the larger parish, the diocese and the Universal Church.

Other developing countries fostered forms of BCCs, often out of necessity when a parish was out of reach. Although BCCs have different names in different parts of the world, their elements are the same as the New Testament house churches: small groups of people who meet on a regular basis to pray together, read the Bible, and share their faith, leading to a natural outcome of action. One SCC researcher, Fr. James O’Halloran, explains that in a Small Christian Community, members experience the relationality of the “Trinity, a community where there is intimate loving and sharing, full participation of the members, absolute equality of persons, and outreach to the other.”²

One of the criticisms of BCCs is that they might become autonomous from the local parish and/or diocese. The vertical hierarchy of the Catholic Church has struggled with cell units and movements within the church, with some bishops and popes speaking out against them because of their close relationship with liberation theology. As the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1983, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s statements against liberation theology apply specifically to BCCs: “The theses of the ‘theologies of liberation’ are widely popularized under a simplified form, in formation sessions or in what are called ‘base groups’ which lack the necessary catechetical and theological preparation as well as the capacity for discernment.”³ Yet other magisterial teachings recognize

¹ Joseph G. Healey and Jeanne Hinton, Ed., *Small Christian Communities Today, Capturing the New Moment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 9.

José Marins, Section on Latin America, from Chapter 10, “A Historical Profile of Small Christian Communities,” in *Living Cells: Vision and Practicalities of Small Christian Communities and Groups* by James O’Halloran (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), 195.

Ibid., 196.

Ibid., 200.

² James O. O’Halloran., *Living Cells: Vision and Practicalities of Small Christian Communities and Groups* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), 14.

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation,” August 6, 1984, XI:15.

the importance of BCCs.⁴ The overall message from these popes recognizes and commends the relationality of the BCCs, but emphasizes that they remain connected to the larger Church through a parish.

The important outcome from the maturity and praxis of liberation theology and the BCCs is the ecclesiology of *communio* – that the church is about community of the people of God, in particular the poor and oppressed, the same people to whom Jesus ministered. The community of the people of God lives out life together promoting the values of the Reign of God: love, justice, mercy, and peace. Clodovis Boff wrote that, “The theology of liberation seeks to demonstrate that the kingdom of God is to be established not only in the *soul* – this is the individual personal dimension of the kingdom – and not only in *heaven* – this is its transhistorical dimension – but in relationships among human beings, as well.”⁵

Observations:

Both Scripture and the magisterium emphasize that the BCC or SCC is not to be a separate entity from the Church, but to consider itself a unit within the larger unit, a smaller group within a parish, or as the Latin American bishops called it in the Medellin document, “a cell within a cell.”⁶ An SCC of Latin@ parents within the Catholic Deaf Community would fit this description. Although not a parish, the Catholic Deaf Community is already an established community within the Diocese of Orange, offering an outstanding program for hearing-impaired Catholics and their families. The community meets every Sunday morning at Mater Dei High School in Santa Ana, utilizing two classrooms for religious education from 8:30 to 10:30, with Mass in the Chapel at 11:00. The Catholic Deaf Center offers an excellent faith formation program for hearing-impaired children and their siblings, preparing them for the Sacraments of Reconciliation, First Communion and Confirmation in two-year programs. The hearing and non-hearing children learn together under the leadership of English-speaking adults trained in American Sign Language (ASL). Many of the older

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html. Accessed November 24, 2017.

⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, December 8, 1975, 58. http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html. Accessed November 24, 2017; Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, January 22, 1999, 41.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.pdf. Accessed November 22, 2017

⁵ Clodovis Boff, “A Faith Reflection on the Praxis of Liberation,” in *Liberation Theology: from Dialogue to Confrontation* by Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 13-14. Author’s emphasis.

⁶ *Pastoral de Conjunto*, the document resulting from the general assembly of the Latin American bishops in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968.

hearing siblings who are fluent in ASL and have already completed their Sacraments help the younger children with the weekly lessons.

The children and teenagers are joined by their parents for the 11:00 AM Mass: one of the agreements the parents make with the program is to attend the Mass regularly as a family. The Masses are conducted in English by visiting priests, a different one every week, with no music other than a drum which a student beats during the gospel acclamation. The adult ASL speakers sign the Mass and perform the roles of lector, leader (cantor), and Eucharistic Minister. The non-hearing and hearing teenagers in the Confirmation program are altar servers, while some of the younger deaf children serve as ushers for the offering and Communion lines. Many other hearing-impaired Catholics throughout the region attend the Mass. It is an inclusive community – except for the Latin@ parents. Not being fluent in either English or ASL, they are silent throughout Mass, occasionally practicing the ASL version of the communal prayers. Although they accompany their children in the communion line, most of them do not receive the Eucharist. The music, devotions and prayers they learned in their home country are not a part of this Mass. They are on the margins of the society within their own church.

A recent study of Latin@ immigrant parents in the *Journal of Family Strengths* identified several needs of immigrants in the premigration stage, the settlement process, and the postmigration phase,⁷ needs which are easily recognized in the Latin@ parents in the Catholic Deaf Community. Almost all of the parents in the study named family and/or children as an initial response to what motivated them to come to the U.S. Many parents also named better access to health care resources, especially for children with special needs. For the Latin@ parents of deaf children, not only are they finding better care for their hearing-impaired children (including cochlear implants for one of the religious education students), but Church resources as well. One mother said she was “open-mouthed”⁸ (using the ASL sign) at the resources available for their children.

In the settlement and post-migration process of immigration, the emphasis is on a “kinship network,” a reliance on family or friends that are already settled in the U.S. This network can help the immigrant with functions such as shelter, transportation, and housing, but also with cultural practices of faith. Unfortunately for the Latin@ parents in the Catholic Deaf Community, this supportive faith

⁷ Dr. Angel L. Gullón-Rivera, “The Strengths of Recent Latino Immigrant Parents Raising Young Children: An Application of the Concepts of Human Agency,” *Journal of Family Strengths*, 16 (1), Article 4 (2016). <http://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol16/iss1/4/>. Accessed November 21, 2017.

⁸ Interview by author with Mercedes, September 17, 2017, Santa Ana CA. (First names only are used in this study).

network is not readily available. Despite the emphasis on group culture as a core value among Hispanics,⁹ the parents observed do not seem to be part of any faith group. Although many of them are members of local Hispanic-centric churches, their involvement in the Catholic Deaf Community keeps them away from the spiritual and social services of the home parish. Their immigration experience is one of isolation that could lead to disconnection from the Church. Even if they were not very active in their “home” parish before having a special-needs child, they at least attended a Mass in their native language and recognized the vibrant colors, music, cultural icons and rituals of Latin@ worship. This is a stark contrast from the quiet, serene, monochromatic Mass they attend with their children.

The focus on the family is emphasized in the *Journal of Family Strengths* study, where parents gave multiple examples that the perception of doing well is based on family togetherness.¹⁰ This is also true in the Orange Catholic Deaf Community. Like parents everywhere, the Latin@ parents in the Orange Catholic Deaf Community focus on what is best for their children, sacrificing their own needs in putting their children’s needs first. In this case, these parents seem to give up any personal spiritual needs for familiar Latin@ religiosity in their commitment to give their children a Catholic religious education. Developing a small faith community with these parents would not only nurture their Latin@ spirituality, but would also connect them to each other in the *communio* of the Church, forming a sense of family togetherness.

When asked if they would be interested in an SCC with the other parents, all of them gave a positive response. But one mother offered a revealing insight. As a Mexican native with a long bilingual, bicultural teaching career in Orange County, she observed: “the ones who are most in need are the ones who won’t ask.”¹¹ Many Latin@ families in the U.S. feel that they are foreigners and stay in the background, or their documentation status keeps them from drawing attention to themselves.

Design:

A SCC for Latin@ parents of the Catholic Deaf Community may not start on its own initiative, but the group already exists, with the common denominator

⁹ Bernard J. Lee, S.M. *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities*. (Mahweh, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000, 110-111. “Latinos are sociocentric and organic in nature. This means that the fundamental unit of society is the group, or more specifically, the family. The identity of the individual is anchored in membership in his/her groups...The familial relationship is the fundamental model of all relationships. This relational model then extends through religious self-understanding and religious ritual. Being part of one’s primary group and its interrelationships is not a matter of choice for Latinos; it is a given.”

¹⁰ Gullón-Rivera, 16.

¹¹ Interview by author with Mercedes, September 17, 2017, Santa Ana, CA.

of a special-needs child, and a commitment to religious education for their children. Week after week, these parents take their children to faith formation classes and return for Mass, often bringing other family members. The parents are shy with each other, but some conversations have begun among parents whose children are already friends. With some organization and enthusiasm, an SCC kick-off meeting could be introduced with the intention of empowering the parents to continue it on their own.

To design the initial meeting, I relied on the results of a wide-ranging study of American SCCs performed by a team of researchers led by Marianist priest Dr. Bernard Lee, who at the time was a professor at Loyola University in New Orleans. His findings identify common elements of the SCC, but the most important element is that the SCCs are, according to Fr. Lee, “centers of meaning for Catholics seeking to live their faith—to live their lives—meaningfully... People gather together in community to tell their stories, bring their experience into dialogue with their faith, and leave with some sense of meaning.”¹²

An important beginning and ending in all SCC gatherings is **prayer**. “Having people who can pray with me” was one of the reasons people gave for seeking out an SCC in Fr. Lee’s study. He observed that, “SCC prayer is primarily verbal. SCCs pray about their lives, their communities and the world.”¹³ For the Latin@ parents who struggle with communal prayers in English and/or ASL, praying in their own native language is always welcome. In the Catholic Deaf Community, all parents are invited to join their students in a prayer circle before religious education classes each Sunday. A teacher or student leads the group in an Our Father or Hail Mary, always in English and ASL. The Latin@ parents attempt the ASL, but are otherwise silent except for one Sunday, when the Director led a Hail Mary in Spanish. All the Hispanic parents participated with enthusiasm and a sense of unity in the familiarity of the prayer. As a common and beloved popular devotion for Latin@s, the Rosary prayed in Spanish would be a good practice for starting each SCC gathering.

Dr. Lee’s study on SCC’s in the U.S. identified a Hispanic/Latino SCC as one where the reading and discussion of scripture were especially important: “participants are engaged in a conversation, sometimes self-consciously and sometimes not, between their lived experience, including their larger world, and the scriptures.”¹⁴ A practice of reading and discussing the Sunday Gospel in Spanish would be particularly useful to the Latin@ parents because the group would meet during the children’s religious education classes, before the 11:00 Sunday Mass, where the Gospel is proclaimed in English and ASL. The parents

¹² Bernard J. Lee, S.M. *The Catholic Experience of Small Christian Communities*. (NY: Paulist Press, 2000), 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

would connect their lives to the Gospel proclaimed at Mass, and also have a springboard for discussion with their children once they get home.

As a weekly experience in 80 percent or more of the SCCs surveyed in Fr. Lee's study,¹⁵ faith sharing focuses on members telling each other how God is working in their lives.¹⁶ Although this experience may seem strange to the Latin@ parents in the Catholic Deaf Community, it is already present in subtle ways. All of the parents in the interviews were eager to share their stories. Having someone listen to them validated them and their experiences, giving them the dignity they deserve as children of God. The exchange of sharing and listening becomes an example of *acompañamiento*, transforming both the story-teller and receiver into members of the family of God, and bonding them together within the Reign of God.

Historically, BCC's emphasized action based on Catholic social teaching, especially activities focusing on assisting the poor and promoting justice. While these activities are important on a large scale, they need to develop organically as the group bonds as a community of faith in action. In the depth of their need for a fellowship of spirituality, the Latin@ parents may initially express **social action** internally, helping each other with babysitting, preparing meals for each other, and sharing transportation. This internal social action would be an important practice for the Latin@ parents who are isolated from their parishes as they establish a firmer connection within the Catholic Deaf Community and the Diocese. External social action may develop from there, especially for immigrant rights, health care and education for special-needs children, etc. But first, the SCC would nourish the parents, giving them the spiritual community they lack.

SCC researchers measure the success of a SCC by its continuity and longevity.¹⁷ The permanency of the Latin@ parents' group and their eagerness to meet for prayer, study and sharing would validate that they had developed for themselves a safe space for spiritual growth.

Personal Reflection:

Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts that, "Spiritual childhood is one of the most important concepts in the gospel, for it describes the outlook of the person who accepts the gift of divine filiation and responds to it by building fellowship... Only by becoming a child can one enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3)."¹⁸ The double *acompañamiento* of observing both the Hispanic deaf children and their parents opened my eyes to their unique situation of an immigrant community trying

¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷ Groody, 52.

¹⁸ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells, The Spiritual Journey of a People*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), 127.

to provide for a child with special needs. They truly are citizens in the Reign of God, reminding me of Matthew 5:3 and 5:5: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land.”

Developing an SCC for this group would mean more than these Latin@ immigrants becoming objects of a pastoral mission of my design. Most importantly, they are subjects of God’s mission, because they evangelize to me as well as to their families and community, teaching us that we are all children of a loving God who finds the beauty in each of us.

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