

## LET'S CELEBRATE WHO WE ARE!

Reflection on my pastoral journey and the “Obra Hispana” of the  
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)

My very dear brothers and sisters of this great “Obra Hispana” of the Disciples of Christ ... may the peace that only comes from Jesus of Nazareth be with each one of you today and always.

I thank our National Pastor and the Program Committee of this Assembly for the invitation to speak to you this afternoon in which we celebrate together the presence and witness of the Hispanic ministries within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). When I was preparing for this moment, I asked the National Pastor on two occasions if there was some specific theme which he wanted me to highlight in my presentation, and both times his answer was the same: "Druby, tell the Assembly whatever you want to say, especially that which comes from your heart."

So it is that, and only that, which I want to do this afternoon: to speak from deep within my heart.

Coming before you this afternoon stirs memories of the most beautiful, inspiring and transforming, moments in my ministerial journey as a servant of God by the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Thirty nine years ago on May 21, 1971, after having graduated from the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, I came to the United States, to the city of Chicago, with a well-defined plan: (1) to take post-graduate studies to specialize in church history; (2) to return to Puerto Rico within three or four years (no more than that); and (3) to spend the remainder of my life as a professor of the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, perhaps in combination with a part-time pastorate in one of the congregations located not very far from the Seminary.

That was my definitive plan upon arriving to this land on May 21, 1971 ... and it was on the basis of this plan (and only this plan) that my wife, Margie, and my son, Dabdy, also arrived in Chicago two weeks later to join me on this journey. In other words, the plan consisted of coming to this country only to study ... without getting involved or participating in other matters that could distract or deviate us from the perfect plan that we had designed. After all, the goal was to complete an academic degree and to return to Puerto Rico as soon as possible, and from there (and only from there, the universe of Puerto Rico) would we enter the ministry we had purposed in response to the call from God.

That was our plan, but we forgot to consider, or take into consideration, one single detail ... only one: that God's agenda for our lives was different from ours.

God's agenda had surprises for which we were not prepared, not even when we were studying at the seminary in Puerto Rico.

- The surprise of the realization that Puerto Rico is not the center of the universe, and that our Puerto Rican context is not the only ethnic/cultural context that counts; ...rather that we are only a fraction within a much wider Latin American world.
- The surprise of discovering that this Latin American world is a vital part of the history and development of the United States of America, as we have contributed for more than 200 years, in an extraordinary manner, to the development, the richness, and the welfare that has made this country the most powerful in the world.
- The surprise of very closely testing and verifying that Latino/Hispanic and bilingual people who are a part of this country are not only Puerto Ricans – for whom maintaining the umbilical cord to our Island is easy because of the political relation that joins us to the US – but also consists of millions of other human beings that simply have been born in this country and have resided here all their lives, ...and of so many more millions that have decided to arrive here voluntarily, or as refugees or exiled; some with official permission and others undocumented, ...but all united by the hope of a new dawn and a better day of health, economic stability and happiness.

Certainly, in God's agenda there were great surprises for my family and me:

- The surprise of the birth of our daughter, Irene, in the city of Chicago, of dedicating her to the Lord at Iglesia Hispana (Discípulos de Cristo) in that city, of seeing her grow and develop along with her brother as part of the Hispanic, Latino and bilingual people that continue to build this nation.
- And the surprise of now having a seven year old grandson – who has proven to be the most handsome in the entire world, of course – who a few days ago told his friend: “I am mixed because I am half Puerto Rican and half Indianapolis.”

Certainly, yes certainly, in God's agenda there were surprises for which we had not prepared. But among all the surprises God gave us, and continues to give us throughout this long journey, is one I wish to mention specifically this afternoon: the surprise of one day finding myself with this Obra Hispana, and of receiving from you not only the friendship, kindness and hospitality so desired by my soul, but above all the surprise of receiving from you the education (or training) that I needed to exercise with faith, confidence, and a sense of direction the ministry in which I have been engaged until now.

Thirty nine years, one month, nineteen days and some hours have passed since that rainy afternoon in which I arrived in Chicago for the first time. Today I must tell you that, in spite of the perfect plan that I had designed for my life, I did not complete my studies to become a history professor in the seminary, nor did I return to permanently live and work in my native land, ...but, I did meet you and I have had the privilege of (as Rev. Juan Rodríguez would say) “hanging out” with you, of walking and struggling together on this

journey of many eras. And that, my dear brothers and sisters, and pastoral colleagues, is one of the most beautiful gifts I have received from God in my 66 years of existence.

Although it is true that in those first years in Chicago I kicked and cried as a spoiled child when seeing that my well designed plan for my life was not becoming a reality, I now thank God this afternoon for God having overturned the agenda with which I arrived in 1971.

I thank God for witnessing the pastoral ministry of Wilfredo and Lily Del Pilar, who will receive today the Assembly award of “Somos Uno,” ...and for the exemplary testimony of so many other men and women who continue to minister with faithfulness, dignity and courage in the pastoral ministry of this Obra Hispana, some with serious health problems, ...others with old cars, below poverty salaries, and many who confront daily the demon of racial discrimination, ...but all without yielding.

I give thanks to God because I have learned from you that the immigration laws and the presence of a border will never determine (limit or condition) the proclamation of the Gospel and our pastoral ministry in this country ...in spite of the risk that this holds. I especially give thanks to God for those of you that daily risk ministering as good Samaritans along the dreadful border from San Diego and Tijuana through Brownsville and Matamoros.

I give thanks to God for the women and men who, with the sole purpose of reaffirming the unity of our people and our church, began to establish Hispanic and bilingual conventions, and women's, men's and youth fellowships over seventy years ago.

I give thanks for those who, in 1981, created the National Hispanic and Bilingual Confraternity;

I give thanks for the pastors and laity of this Obra Hispana who *went for it* at the end of 1980s the 1990s, daring to design and establish in 1992 our Central Pastoral Office for Hispanic Ministries, in spite of having to confront the tenacious criticism and opposition of many of our church's prominent leaders.

And I give thanks for those lay and ordained Hispanic leaders that today serve with devotion in congregations, regional ministries and the general units of our church.

But in the same manner, I give thanks to God for our many brothers and sisters who are not Hispanic but who have, throughout the years, given the Hispanic ministries of our church their trust and support when we needed it most.

Although many of these heroes and heroines and mentors have gone on to the presence of our Lord, ...others are still with us, and others are here in this banquet. For each of them I give thanks to God in this hour and always, not only for what they have done in the past, but also for having prepared the way and facilitated in some way the fact that today we are meeting in the comfort of the Doubletree Hotel (or resort) in Orlando, Florida.

You cannot imagine how I wish I could mention all their names this afternoon, but I do not for fear of leaving someone out.

I give thanks to God this afternoon for each of the new congregations of the Obra Hispana, especially those established within the last 15 years ...and for the new generations of Hispanic Disciples of Christ... especially for the youth and children from whom we have learned that, yes, it is possible to be Hispanic (or Latino) in English.

I give thanks to God for each of the seminarians the Obra Hispana continues to produce ...as well as for the theologians that are part of our journey, and who have not forgotten from where they came.

And, of course, I give infinite thanks to God for each of those companions who were, as was I, called one day to serve as National Pastor of this ministry, and to lead this journey of faith and hope that is the Obra Hispana of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the United States and Canada:

For Domingo Rodríguez and Lucas Torres, who are already resting in God's presence, I give thanks;

For Luis Ferrer, I give thanks;

For Pablo Jiménez, I give thanks;

And for Huberto Pimentel...

I give thanks to my God now and always.

Time on our journey as Hispanic Disciple of Christ has passed and continues to pass in the manner of a blink of an eye. This is the Fifteenth Assembly of the National Hispanic and Bilingual Confraternity, meaning that we have been in existence for 29 years. Last Thursday evening, as we began our Assembly, I remembered our First National Assembly held in Indianapolis, Indiana in the summer of 1981.

I remember that at that First Assembly I had the opportunity to preach one evening, and as part of my sermon I shared the story of a man who was determined to push and move the Empire State Building from its location in the heart Manhattan in the City of New York. Each day, for several weeks, that man would arrive very early in the morning, hang his jacket on one of the parking meters near the sidewalk, and for six or seven hours (every day) try to push the giant building; then, around two or three o'clock in the afternoon, he would take his jacket and go to rest, only to return again the next day and continue his project. One day, as he was supposedly pushing the building, and without his knowing, someone stole his jacket. When, at the end of his day, he went to look for his jacket and didn't find it, he looked surprised and immediately reacted saying: "Today I really pushed far; I can't even see my jacket."

At the end of my illustration in my sermon that evening in 1981, I recall that I asked the Assembly, a bit sarcastically perhaps, if they were sure that on the Obra Hispana's journey we had truly progressed ...or if someone had stolen our jacket and we only thought that we had moved.

This afternoon, almost 30 years later, I dare to say to this Fifteenth Assembly that, yes, we have progressed; that no one has stolen our jacket, but rather that we have advanced very much in this journey as a people and as the Hispanic church.

But I also feel I should say this afternoon that on the journey we have been on for so many years we have also faced serious challenges and trials that have shaken the Obra Hispana's journey on many occasions. It is precisely thinking of those challenges and trials, and using the permission granted me by the National Pastor, that I wish to conclude this reflection by giving four unsolicited pieces of advice. These four recommendations come from the depths of my heart, as someone who loves this Obra with all my strength, who has been a part of this journey for almost four decades, and who is rapidly approaching the moment of handing over the baton to a new generation of leaders.

Here are my four pieces of unsolicited advice:

- 1- My dear Obra Hispana, **never submit to the idea that our people are inferior to other racial, ethnic or cultural groups.**

When arriving at that terrible moment of temptation, remember that our people have been created by the same God that is the author of the entire universe ...and that, as creatures of that God, we possess the same talents, virtues, wisdom and potential of other peoples.

Do not allow or facilitate that our Obra Hispana be infested with the germ that causes inferiority complexes. We are not an appendix of the church, nor are we a special ministry. We are as much Disciples of Christ as any other expression within our denomination. Our dreams and hopes are valid. Our concerns are genuine and of utmost importance. Our Hispanic vision is not a nightmare (or a deviation from normality), but rather the assurance that God has also revealed to us the manner in which you build a church and you witness as Disciples of Christ.

This is my second piece of advice.

- 2- **Let us learn, once and for all, to celebrate with gratitude and with a spirit of celebration who we are and what we have accomplished in the 111 years of the Hispanic Disciples of Christ journey within this country.**

Let us know well and feel proud of the contributions we as Hispanics have made to the development of our denomination, without which the church would be incomplete. It is time to recognize and celebrate that there are Hispanic congregations that are among the largest in membership in the regions where they are located, and that there are projects

for humanitarian aid, established by our leaders, that have grown into a diaconal witness of major importance within our church.

It is time to celebrate joyfully. It is time!

Not only should we give thanks to God for the continuous growth of this Obra Hispana, but let us be sure to celebrate with festivities and receive with hospitality each one of our new congregations, in such a way that these will also feel proud and blessed to be a part of this journey and this history.

¡Let us learn to celebrate!

Not only should be grateful to God that the Obra Hispana now has, among its membership, theologians, but also celebrate joyfully the contributions that these make as they train our candidates for ministry at the various seminaries where our people study. Although there are many other examples to share this afternoon, I think it is important that this Assembly recognizes and celebrates that a daughter of this Obra Hispana, and past moderator of this Confraternity, is currently the Dean of Union Theological Seminary in New York, this being one of the most prestigious theological institutions in the world. Who would have imagined 30 years ago that this would have been possible?

Obra Hispana, “you’ve come a long way, baby!”

For God’s sake, let us learn to celebrate!

Not only do we give thanks to God for our young Hispanics – the sons, daughters, grandchildren of this Obra Hispana – that have answered God’s call to ordained ministry, and who with great sacrifices have entered seminary and have graduated to serve in this Obra Hispana, ... but also (and perhaps more importantly yet) let us celebrate this great blessing by inviting these recent graduates from seminary to be our pastors, our teachers, our counselors and spiritual leaders ... instead of continuing to treat them as “kids” that are still in formation. If we are not going to call them to be pastors of our congregations and ministries, then why did we send them to study? Why study? Why?

We need to learn to celebrate, but we need to do so with all the implications such a celebration entails.

My third piece of advice, Obra Hispana, is...

3- **Do not become divided, and especially, do not allow anyone to divide us.**

This Obra Hispana was born of the need to congregate and worship together, as one people, shaped by the same hope. “Somos Uno” is not just a *slogan* for repetition or as part of a political propaganda. If we have to discuss and find solutions for our differences, let us do so behind closed doors and intentionally, but never allow separation or division among ourselves be an alternative.

My fourth and final piece of advice for now is...

4- **Do not waste energy speaking unnecessarily of what we will not do or of what we do not like and we will not support in the life of the church.**

Let us take advantage of our strengths, our time and our talents to build (or if necessary, reinvent) the church using and offering our Hispanic and bilingual experience and witness as a gift from God, and understanding that our Hispanic and bilingual presence in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is not a coincidence or a transitory status, but rather a critical presence that is an integral and essential part of God's mission amidst a broken world, as ours is.

My dear Obra Hispana, at this time of feasting and of Assembly I leave with you these four pieces of advice, ...which, I repeat, I am well aware were completely unsolicited. I leave them before you, not only because they come from my heart and because the National Pastor gave me freedom to share them, but also because, like my dear grandson K.J., and by the grace of God, I too am mixed: half Puerto Rican and half Obra Hispana.

To God, and only to God, be the glory forever and ever!

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