

The power of *somos más* in Puerto Rico

## A new song of liberation is born.

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Protesters on July 25, 2019, celebrate in San Juan following the resignation of Puerto Rican governor Ricardo Rosselló.

I was in Puerto Rico when the FBI arrested six officials from then-governor Ricardo Rosselló's government on corruption charges. It was the beginning of a storm. The arrests were followed by the leak of an 889-page chat, which shook the island to its core. For 12 days, roughly one million people—about 30 percent of the population—took to the streets to demand Rosselló's resignation.

He resigned in defeat, paralyzed by the power of the people. They proclaimed, *Somos más, y no tenemos miedo*. We are more, and we are not afraid.

This cry of *somos más* was more than a protest against Rosselló and his party. It was the convergence of *un pueblo*—a people who stood up against injustice, united by the conviction that there was inherent value in their lives. This transcended political party, religion, economic background, education, sexual orientation, and gender expression; it brought together the children of God. Under the banner of *somos más* a new movement was born, one that sought to bring the world a new Puerto Rico.

Back on the mainland, I watched on social media as the protests unfolded. For four nights I barely slept. I wondered how these protests were possible. There were no permits, no scheduled start or end times. I saw that there was a lot of graffiti on the walls; then I learned that after each day's protests, young people went back out at night to clean the streets. Often we look at the world through a frame prescribed by the empire. What *somos más* brought forward is that when people seek liberation, this cannot be defined by the rules of those who hold the power.

Since Hurricane Maria, I have been in Puerto Rico doing recovery work more than a dozen times. I have seen firsthand the suffering of the people of Puerto Rico, including that of my own family.

On this particular trip, I spoke with *viudas*—widows who had survived the hurricane and were looking for ways to move forward. In her kitchen, Juana recounted her experiences on the day of the storm. Juana lives in Humacao, a town on the east of the island that was in the hurricane's path. She recalled the terror she experienced when water kept coming into the house, her concern for her life and her family. She has a daughter, Carmen, who has developmental disabilities; they spent ten months without electricity or water. In my conversations with women like Juana, I impart the wisdom of *mujerista* theology, drawn from Ada María Isasi-Díaz: *identificate con nosotras* (identify with us women), seek *Dios mio* (our God), honor *familia* (family), acknowledge *esperanza* (hope), and find *reino* (the kin-dom).

My conversation with Juana was abruptly interrupted by the breaking news of the arrest of education secretary Julia Keleher. I had been outraged when Keleher, an American from the mainland, ordered the closing of hundreds of schools on the island. From where I was sitting, I saw her working from the same playbook that the US used in New Orleans after Katrina.

Among those schools was a particularly important one to me. S.U. Ana Dalila Burgos Ortiz, in the mountains of Orocovis, served a community with the highest number of

hearing-impaired individuals per capita in Puerto Rico. The school had accessible classrooms and speech therapists. The church I serve in New York had committed to work with the school; we had begun sending solar lights and other donations. Then the school was abruptly closed—with little notice to the principal, and without any evaluation. The impact of the school's closure is still felt in the Orocovis mountains.

"Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever," said Martin Luther King Jr. "The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself." When almost a million Puerto Ricans protested for 12 days, ultimately they left the governor no alternative but to resign. *Somos más* is a call for liberation that acknowledges the power of the oppressed. It puts the oppressor on notice.

*Somos más* has also put the church on notice. The people are no longer looking for the church to take them into revolution. In Puerto Rico, where religion runs deep and the fundamentalist right might find a level of comfort, the people said *somos más!* and dismantled all that was divisive; walls were brought down to unite *un pueblo* around one cause. This meant that the Puerto Rican flag led the march alongside the rainbow flag. In this revolution, God's children came together in all of their expressions—without the church's leadership—to call for justice and peace.

A new song of liberation is born. *Somos más, y no tenemos miedo. Un pueblo* that has been unseen and unheard—whose own president called local Puerto Rican leaders incompetent—could not and would not be silent any more. Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us that however the empire sees a people, "we definitely will not have an authentic theology of liberation until the oppressed themselves can freely and creatively express themselves in society and among the People of God, until they are artisans of their own liberation."

*Somos más*, as a theology of liberation, was not created in a vacuum. It emerged from political, economic, and religious forces.

It confronts political corruption and takes action to dismantle it. It acknowledges that the economic situation in Puerto Rico was created by the federal government, which then created a fiscal control board, PROMESA, to oversee the restructuring of debt—and to protect its own interests over those of the people.

*Somos más* demands that religious leaders pay attention to the needs of those sitting in the pews. It takes the microphone away from those leaders who flatter politicians, with their narcissistic needs for photo ops; it shines a light on their

silence and empty prayers.

It insists that *un pueblo* is more than a hurricane, more than a colony, more than a government, and more than a church that excludes them. *Somos más y no tenemos miedo*: we are more, and we are not afraid—business as usual will be no longer.

I have organized many protests and rallies. It's clear to me that no strategy could have organized the creativity the Puerto Rican people employed. They showed up for 12 days and nights. They protested on foot, on kayaks and boats, and on horseback; they protested through yoga, song, and art. I watched it unfold, and I continue to reflect in amazement. How did this happen? I suppose that, when the goal is liberation, getting there is just a matter of *corazones*: of hearts.