There’s no theological education pipeline anymore

It’s been replaced by a thriving irrigation hose.

by Justo L. González in the December 30, 2020 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

I confess that I have two difficulties in writing about how my mind has changed. First, from early childhood I was taught that you should never speak about yourself. Indeed, if you did, people would comment, *No tiene abuela* (“He has no grandmother”), because it’s your grandmother who is supposed to talk about you, and it’s in bad taste to act as a grandmother to yourself. Second, having been shaped by a deeply Wesleyan piety, I find it hard to speak about how my mind has changed without at the same time speaking about how my heart has changed. For me, the two are entwined in such a way that they often are indistinguishable.

How, then, have my mind and heart changed? I could begin by remembering the time more than 60 years ago when I first felt called to the ministry. At that point I was convinced that I would be an evangelist, calling the thousands of people I saw in the slums in Havana to faith and salvation. Or I could begin a few years later, when I finished my seminary studies in Matanzas, Cuba, and the local Methodist church leaders sent me abroad for doctoral studies at Yale. At that point, I expected that

eventually I would be a teacher in the same institution where I had received my early theological training. Or I could begin at a later date, when political conditions in Cuba and the failed CIA invasion made it impossible for me to return there, and I went to teach at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico. But the changes to my mind and heart at each of those points are so obvious that little would be gained by my surveying them.

Perhaps a better starting point is the crisis that led me to leave Puerto Rico and come to Atlanta to teach at Candler School of Theology at Emory University, a move that would eventually lead me to an entirely different career. I had originally gone to Puerto Rico with a Methodist grant that would support me there for only one year. Other grants from the Lilly Endowment made it possible for me to remain there for a total of eight years. Toward the end of that time, in the mid-1960s, there was a radical political polarization in Puerto Rico. This polarization reached deeply into the churches—and particularly into the seminary.

Being a foreigner, I did not know how to react. On the one hand, I was convinced that the social and economic order of Puerto Rico needed a radical transformation. On the other, given my experiences in Cuba, I was not greatly enthused by the proposals for radical transformation that were being put forth. Finding myself at a loss in the midst of such polarization, I concluded that my ministry in Puerto Rico had come to an end. So I came to teach at Emory.

As I now look back at those days, what stands out is the vocational crisis that this move involved. I had never wished to teach simply in order to have an academic career. During my first years in Puerto Rico, I was convinced that my colleagues and I were doing something unique and of value for the churches there and for their leadership—and as a result for the community at large. At Emory, although I was generally well received, I was simply occupying a position that many others could fill just as well as I could, and probably even better. What then was the point of my being there?

I responded to that vocational crisis by expanding my writing and focusing it on a Latin American audience. The importance of writing as part of my self-understanding is something about which I have never changed my mind, for it has constantly been at the heart of my interests, vocation, and joy. My father was a novelist and a newspaper editor. My mother was a professor of Spanish literature. My wife, Catherine, professor emerita of church history at Columbia Theological Seminary,

says that instead of blood I have printers' ink.

My writing career owes much to some teachers who also became my mentors. The first of these was Yale professor Roland H. Bainton, who, shortly after I went to teach at the Evangelical Seminary of Puerto Rico, wrote a letter to the president of that institution, Thomas J. Liggett, telling him that he feared my many responsibilities there would prevent me from writing and that this should be avoided. Armed with that letter, Liggett went to the headquarters of the Lilly Endowment in Indianapolis and procured a grant that allowed me to devote half of my time to writing, to have a secretary to transcribe my work, and to enrich the seminary's library with whatever particular tools I needed.

I have never changed my mind about writing. My wife says I have ink in my veins.

Looking back now at what I wrote at that time, I see some points on which I have changed my mind. Perhaps the most notable change in my ideas has to do with my first book, *Revolución y encarnación*. While I would still emphasize the centrality of the doctrine of incarnation and its significance for our social engagement, as I did in that book, my understanding of eschatology and its function in the Christian life has changed radically. Today I would emphasize the importance of eschatology not just as something for which we wait but also as the future from which we live. Eschatology, precisely because it is the expectation of the reign of God, means that our engagement in the present social, political, and economic order must be shaped by our knowledge of that other coming order, out of which we live and which we seek to proclaim.

Looking back at my writing from those days, I also see the emergence of a dual interest whose poles were difficult to bring together. My first book and my later books of similar size were written for a wider public, and they sought to employ Christian history as a source of inspiration and guidance for present-day Christians, particularly in Latin America. At the same time, I was beginning work on the three volumes of *A History of Christian Thought*, a work directed mostly at scholars and advanced students.

My vocational crisis was resolved by three important developments in the 1970s. One was the sudden upsurge of Hispanic churches in every denomination in the United States and the consequent interest of denominational leaders in Hispanic ministries. I suddenly became very popular. I'd find myself speaking to a group of

Catholic bishops in the morning, rushing across the city to address Southern Baptist leaders in the afternoon, and flying across the country the next day to address a Pentecostal convention. A second factor shaping my thought was the emergence of Latin American, African American, and feminist liberation theologies. Through them, I found myself looking in a new way at the history I had learned and taught for so many years.

The third important development was that Catherine came into my life. Because she does not have the passion for writing that drives me, she has published little. But all that I've published since I met her bears her imprint. I've had the opportunity to learn from Karl Barth in Basel and from Roland H. Bainton, H. Richard Niebuhr, and other luminaries at Yale. Yet none of them compares with Catherine when it comes to viewing all of life from a theological perspective. It is Catherine who has helped me most in the task of bringing together my concern for the Latino church in the United States and Latin America, my passion for writing, and the issues raised by various liberation theologies.

In 1977, I left Candler and embarked on a new ministry in which I have found my true vocation. My first major venture in writing at this point was a collection of ten small volumes about church history addressed primarily to the thousands of pastors all over Latin America and in Latino churches in the US who have little or no formal theological education, who have even less knowledge of the history of Christianity, and who would not even look at a voluminous book on the subject. The success of those small volumes was proof that I had read the situation correctly.

What I did not expect, and what still surprises me, is that when those ten small books were joined into one under the title of *Historia del Cristianismo*, and then translated into English as *The Story of Christianity*, they began to be used as a textbook in colleges, seminaries, and schools of theology throughout the English-speaking world. I was even more surprised to see the book translated into a variety of languages.

As I now look back at those years, it is clear that the writing of those original small books was a turning point in my ministry. Up to that point, I had given priority to my more scholarly pursuits. After that point, without abandoning scholarly interests, I focused my attention on communicating to the Latino church at large. As an added and unexpected benefit, I have rejoiced in discovering that much of what I wrote with the Latino church in view seems to be of interest to other Christians throughout

the world.

Seeking not only to promote theological knowledge among Latina and Latino pastors and church leaders but also to encourage them to reinterpret the Bible, the basic doctrines of Christian faith, and the entire history of the church from a Hispanic or Latinx perspective, I initiated a number of projects. The first was a theological journal that is now in its 40th year of circulation. The name of this journal, *Apuntes*, is an ambiguous Spanish word that suggests jottings regarding theological and pastoral issues—but also aimings, shots at traditional views.

In 1987 I was commissioned to conduct a study on the theological education of Hispanics, which was published in 1988. This led to the founding of three programs. The first was a scholarship and mentoring program to increase the presence of Latino and Latina scholars in the field of religion, which has evolved into a consortium involving 24 institutions that grant doctorates in religion. The second was a summer program for Latinx seminary students, which is now supported by another consortium of 35 seminaries and schools of theology. The third was an association of people involved in theological education at all levels and in all denominations, which has also evolved far beyond the most optimistic dreams of its founders.

These three programs—the Hispanic Theological Initiative Consortium, the Hispanic Summer Program, and the Association for Hispanic Theological Education—were born as sister organizations supported by Pew funding. They now subsist on their own, each drawing support from various sources and seeking ways of continued collaboration.

Inspired by the many gatherings resulting from these projects, I continued writing and publishing. Catherine insisted that a subject on which I had been lecturing for years be organized and published in the shape of a book. *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology* (1989) sought to break down the polarity between fundamentalist and liberal thinking by pointing to a third option widely represented in the earliest Christian theology. In this third option, the focus is not on obedience to the will of God (as in the tradition leading to fundamentalism), nor is it on discerning eternal and universal truths (as in the tradition leading to liberalism). It focuses, rather, on history: what God has done, what God is doing, and what God has promised to do.

Almost simultaneously with that book, I published a very brief rereading of all the basic tenets of Christian theology: *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*. And shortly thereafter, I published *Faith and Wealth*, a more scholarly discussion of early Christian views on wealth and its legitimate use. In my mind, although I never said so explicitly, these three were part of a trilogy. *Mañana* proposed a different way of looking at Christian faith and doctrine. *Christian Thought Revisited* tried to show that this theology was deeply rooted in the earliest Christian tradition. *Faith and Wealth* focused on the particular issue of the economic order, showing that some of the basic tenets of liberation theology are amply supported by early Christian theology and practice.

Much of my thought and work since the publication of that trilogy has been expansion of the same subjects, or employing the same lenses to look at various issues.

Perhaps the most significant change of my mind and heart in recent years has to do with how we define and talk about theological education. I've long been interested in the subject, but a few years ago I began thinking about it more carefully as I prepared a brief book, *The History of Theological Education*. Research for that book, and conversations with friends and colleagues engaged in various aspects of theological education, have made me change my mind drastically as to how theological education should be understood.

Too often we have used this phrase to refer almost exclusively to the work that takes place in the sort of school associated with the Association of Theological Schools. In more recent years, it has become necessary to acknowledge that the vast majority of Protestant pastors in the United States today are not graduates of such schools. Many have been educated in Bible institutes and similar institutions. These institutions are also agents of theological education.

But this is still too narrow a definition. Theological education is not limited to the preparation of pastors and other leaders for the church. It is a continuum that begins in catechism class and Sunday school and continues throughout the life of every believer, supported and reinforced in worship. This continuum includes—but is not restricted to—particular forms of training for those who are called to lead the church in pastoral and other functions.

This widening of scope has led me to reconsider the entire enterprise of theological education in many ways, two of which stand out at present. The first is a radical shift in the metaphors I employ. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, when we were seeking ways to promote the presence of Latinos and Latinas in the higher echelons of theological education, we used to speak of “developing a pipeline.” This pipeline was intended to carry prospective scholars in religion from high school through college, through seminary, and eventually through a doctoral program and a teaching position.

I am still convinced that there is much to be done to promote the presence and impact of Hispanics in the higher echelons of theological education. However, I am also convinced that we need a better metaphor.

The purpose of a pipeline is to carry its contents to their final destination, and every single drop that does not reach that destination is considered a loss that must be prevented. In contrast, the purpose of an irrigation hose is not to make certain that every drop reaches the end of the line, but rather to see that every drop that runs through it finds its proper function irrigating the land around it. Obviously, some water must reach the end of the hose, for the land there must also be irrigated. But a drop that reaches that end is no better nor more valuable than any other drop.

The image of the irrigation hose makes it clear that the primary purpose of theological education is not to create outstanding scholars in the field of religion, although we do need such scholars. The primary purpose of theological education is to help each believer irrigate the land where she or he happens to be. Those who do not go beyond Sunday school, if they irrigate the land around them, are just as valuable as those who teach in a seminary or school of theology. And those who teach in such institutions are to be valued on the basis of how well they irrigate the land in which they have been placed. This shift in metaphors has drastic consequences for the way we organize theological education, from local church to graduate school.

The second element in theological education that is currently drawing my attention is its relationship to worship. As I study the life of the early church, it is clear that much theological education took place in the context of worship. It is also clear that worship in those days was conceived very differently from the manner in which most Christians today understand it.

Worship in the early church was not primarily an opportunity for the individual believer to approach the divine and praise God. It was an experience through which the believer was shaped into a member of the people of God, the church, the body of Christ. It was a way of forming proud and faithful heirs to the legacy of what God has done throughout history, siblings in the common calling to be an announcement of God's purposes for the entire creation.

A further exploration of this matter is the next task that Catherine and I have set for ourselves. How this work will change my mind and heart in the future, I cannot tell.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Irrigating the land."