The Venerable Vulnerable
A Theological Reflection on Hispanic Penitential Practices
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The author offers an appreciation of the penitential practices of the Hispanic cultures, finding in them a restoration of community effected by ongoing contact through song, art, and drama with the incarnate, suffering, and risen Lord.

“Latinos come out for Good Friday, but not for Easter Sunday: they have it backwards!”

“What’s up with all those bloody crucifixes and black-clad Virgins? No wonder they’re so fatalistic!”

These are actual quotes from well-educated and probably well-intentioned pastoral ministers who have seen Latinos’ and Latinas’ public expressions of penance but failed to understand because they did not participate. And they did not participate, in part, because there is so little theological reflection on the actual religious practices of U.S. Hispanic Catholics.

This article considers the practice of penance by Hispanic Catholics in the United States. It may be instructive to those who preach, teach, celebrate, and share the same faith, but with different cultural approaches. After noting some cultural distinctions based on linguistic differences I will offer a theological reflection based on popular penitential practices expressed through Hispanic religious music, art, and drama, influenced by the Franciscans.

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Cultural Distinctions: 
The Indicative and the Subjunctive

Justo González refers to Hispanics as a subjunctive culture. Anyone whose first language is English and who has studied Spanish has wrestled with the pervasive presence of the subjunctive mood in the Spanish language. It is not so much the memorization of conjugations that confounds, but the cultural reframing that must occur to use the subjunctive properly.

In very general terms one might describe English speakers as heirs of an indicative culture and Spanish speakers as inheritors of a subjunctive culture. These distinctions are not meant to suggest that one culture is superior or that they do not have some tendencies in common. Rather the premise is that even general distinctions are helpful precisely in order to understand better how these cultures are both similar and dissimilar. Proverbs from each culture illustrate the distinctions. In general, indicative cultures are field independent. Relationships are temporary, voluntary, and subordinate to autonomous choice expressed through individualized self-creation, self-discovery, and self-expression. Consider the cultural icons of the “self-made man” or the celebrity who “remakes herself.”

Since time serves this end, schedules are venerated (“time is money”). Spontaneity is less important than punctuality, since one cannot be autonomous if subject to contingencies. Schedules often order even rest and recreation (“work before pleasure”), as well as relaxation with friends and family. The professional and personal spheres are mutually impermeable (“don’t take it personally, it’s just business”). Work production is measured in units and often implies or encourages competition (“second place is just the first loser”). Justice is defined as sameness of means and opportunities as expressed in the metaphor of a “level playing field.”

Since short-term relationships make nonverbal cues less reliable, direct communication is necessary for the orderly operation of an indicative culture. When necessary, direct communication requires the assignment of personal blame; hence, individual guilt is a motivating force. And since guilt is also acceptably public as well as ideally consistent, the rule of law is sacrosanct and adjudication common. This presumes that guilt can be proven objectively; therefore, scientific knowledge is highly prized. Even recreational activities may demonstrate a fascination with statistics.

Knowledge is considered a commodity that can be parsed and discreetly packaged; thus there is little tolerance of ambiguity. The structure and evolution of law are based on explicitly democratic institutions within an implicitly hierarchical society (Beer). Manners, on the other hand, are suspect as they are inherited rather than personally created and universal rather than individuated; therefore, etiquette may be considered constraining or even hypocritical.
In general, **subjunctive** cultures are field dependent: individuals are contingent, created, commanded by, and, therefore, subordinate to the group ("dime con quien andas y te digo quien eres"/"tell me with whom you walk and I'll tell you who you are"). The subjunctive mood expresses these aspects of subordinate relationship. Individuals are contingent, but the group is constant. As the group exists prior to each individual member, it creates or molds each member. Therefore, whatever talent the individual commands is owed to the group and, hence, should serve it.

As time serves these ends, schedules are elastic and spontaneity as well as flexibility valued. The correct time for an activity is not dictated by a timepiece but by the presence of the relationships necessary for that activity. Professional and personal spheres are permeable when relationships are paramount. Since success is often measured by group production, cooperation and harmony are valued. Justice requires the same ends: that is, that all share equally in the fruit of group efforts or social capital.

**For Christians, the Gospel ultimately judges all cultures.**

Subjunctive cultures employ indirect communication, which is possible due to long-term relationships and, consequently, shared nonverbal cues. Often oblique communication is preferred since it saves face. Manners are appreciated and harmless fictions ("mentiritas santas"/"holy lies") employed to maintain group harmony. Since public appearance matters, a motivating factor is shame ("no tiene verguenza"/"she or he has no shame").

Objectivity may be suspect, and subjective trust deemed necessary for real knowledge, since reliable knowledge is wisdom, gained by experience over time and in common, best communicated by narrative ("más sabe el diablo por viejo que por Diablo"/"the devil knows more because he is old than because he is the devil"). Therefore what rules is not law, but relationships. Thus there is a high tolerance of ambiguity. In this more explicitly hierarchical society many institutions are implicitly or informally democratic (McLauchlin).

Once again, these are general differences that are not meant to imply superiority or inferiority. One culture might be very supportive, but also quite constrictive. Another may allow freedom from commitment, but also offer little support for it. Even these general distinctions, however, help one appreciate that one’s home culture is not universal or the result of divine dispensation. Rather, cultural differences help us gain perspective on the relativity of every culture that is always to be judged by the norms of the Christian life. For Christians, the Gospel ultimately judges all cultures.

However, Catholic cultures—that is, those that have been historically permeated at all levels by the faith—do offer more public and corporate living documents
for theological reflection. Such is the case of the Hispanic cultures of the United States, whose practices of penance offer a rich source of theological reflection significant for other Catholics who come from different cultural experiences of the faith and who are open to appreciate the subjunctive mood in both language and culture. What follows is a theological reflection on the actual penitential practices of U.S. Hispanic Catholics.

A Theological Reflection on Hispanic Music, Art, and Drama

Music, art, and drama document the practices of penance originally influenced by Franciscan spirituality, which forms the basis of this theology (see Zarur and Lovell). Music at San Fernando cathedral in San Antonio, for instance, is an expression of a very realistic sense of human sinfulness as part of the human condition, admitting it before God and one another (see Elizondo and Matovina).

Like confession, music is cathartic. Traditional, anonymous Lenten hymns such as Perdona Tu Pueblo (“Pardon Your People”) invoke the somatic details of the Passion (flagellation, thorns, nails) as payment for the debt of a people who cause the body of Christ to suffer, a public shame that can only be amended through public expiation. Perdón, Oh Dios Mio (“Forgive, Oh My God”) is the personal cry of an anguished sinner begging indulgence, clemency, and pardon. Such beloved hymns are reminiscent of the alabados or sung prayer texts of various penitential confraternities, that is, religious mutual aid societies within this generally hierarchical culture (see Rael and Hague). Cultural belief in communal shame and mutual aid are conserved and communicated to each generation, as well as across generations, through a repertoire of traditional songs and ageless adages.

Hispanic Catholics also use art to express public penance as communal expiation of sin. As in song, people recollect or accompany Christ’s Passion and invoke its power to pardon those who share his sacrifice. Therefore images of the vulnerability of Jesus dominate. He is most often depicted as either a poor, homeless child (el Niño Jesús Con Potencias/The Powerful Child Jesus, el Santo Niño de Atocha/The Holy Child of Atocha) or the crucified innocent unjustly condemned and criminally betrayed (Jesus Nazareno/Jesus the Nazarene, el Cristo Negro/The Black Christ, el Santo Entierro/The Holy Burial). The more vulnerable, the more venerable. Even the most common depiction of Christ resurrected is El Sagrado Corazón/The Sacred Heart, whose vitals are pierced by the crown of thorns. The Virgin Mary is also often depicted with her heart pierced as La Madre Dolorosa/The Sorrowful Mother. Even the Madonna with child in la Divina
Providenica/Divine Providence poses Mother and Son in a fashion strikingly similar to the passion of the Pietà (Instituto de Liturgia Hispana).

These images inspire pilgrimages that often require considerable physical exertion. It is the iconography almost exclusively carried or, rather, accompanied in penitential processions. Since traditional wisdom rather than institutional authority regulates these popular productions, there is always some negotiation and ambiguity. Such is the nature of multivalent symbols rather than precise doctrine. Without the prescriptions and proscriptions imposed by ecclesial law and adjudicated by formal institutions, arbitration by etiquette and face-saving negotiation by innocuous fiction is required. The graphic faith of the people is so strong, however, that when one is physically unable to accompany these common symbols, an individual’s longing to be in solidarity flickers in votive candles, lingers in the religious folk art of retablos, and clings in the pinned hopes of the milagritos.

Penance as accompanying the vulnerable Christ in solidarity with the body of Christ is also dramatized. Passion plays and seasonal sermons such as Las Siete Palabras/The Seven Last Words are the catechetical classes for the masses. As in traditional art and music, the dramatization of this cultural catechism is broadcast indirectly and anonymously, but no less powerfully than the universal catechism.

These penitential dramas exert a centripetal force even non-Hispanic Catholics find attractive. As the Santo Via Crucis/Way of the Cross weaves, stumbles, and bleeds through public streets and squares, non-Hispanic Catholics and other Christians are often drawn to the shared scriptural axis of the ritual even when the words are unintelligible. Something similar happened in the recent movie, The Passion of the Christ; without understanding the dialogue, millions felt a powerful desire to share with or accompany Jesus during his last days, an emotion apparently intensified through the solidarity of shared cinema.

As non-Hispanics are drawn by the centripetal force of popular Hispanic penitential practices, so, too, Hispanics are attracted most powerfully to those rites of official liturgy that reinforce their appreciation of penance. “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return” simply verbalizes the contingent, created, commanded reality of the human etched in ash. The fragility of this world is literally rubbed in one’s face. The veiling of sacred images parallels the way sin masks that same stark reality. Sin separates and isolates members of a community, and as such obscures knowledge as communal wisdom shared over time. What is masked or veiled is precisely the truth of human contingency, slashed in ash that is not the brand of a herd, but the mark of pride. Autonomy is a destructive illusion in a society that, like a healthy ecosystem, only thrives through interdependence.

Similarly, the Tenebrae service during Holy Week, commemorating the suffering and death of Christ, uses visual contrasts and discordant sounds to toll the four
last things: death, judgment, heaven, and hell. The reality of sin, the fragility of life, and the inevitability of judgment are forces of nature accepted by the community and recalled as rhythmically as the changes of the seasons. Like the natural pull of gravity, the centripetal force of Hispanic penitential practices unites the community in singing, celebrating, and symbolizing salvation. Such solidarity is only encountered through accompanying Him who overcame these last things.

Forces of nature create the individual, command him or her throughout life, and will eventually reclaim what was created. Like the incessant tide, these rites rhythmically beat Christian truths upon the hard rock of the human heart. A theological reflection on this repeated ritualization of the venerable vulnerable, through horizontal accompaniment with the community as well as vertical solidarity with the Passion, might assert: (1) autonomy, like sovereignty, is an attribute of divinity, not humanity, and (2) with the Incarnation no human exists in isolation.

Music, art, and drama all directly claim public space to proclaim obliquely this theology through a cultural idiom members of the same community appreciate. Public and private spheres overlap. The hierarchies of class, race, generation, gender, and education are leveled to the extent that everyone participates together at the same time and in the same place as their ancestors in rituals that have created and sustain the community, which, in turn, created and sustains each member. Accompanying the community in anonymity (the horizontal level) is the antidote to autonomy; solidarity with the Incarnation (the vertical level), signified through somatic expressions of penance, cures isolation.

Music, art, and drama promote cooperation, which is valued over competition, form participants into the tradition of shared wisdom, and, while subordinating the individual through anonymity, also support personal comfort through intimate familiarity. The challenge to popular religion in the midst of a dominant, indicative culture is to remain flexible enough to adapt to change, but constant enough to maintain group cohesion through a common cultural idiom.

Yet the popular religion of subjunctive cultures also needs penitential rites of passage that provide for recovery from shame. Such rites are necessarily both personal and public, as is the experience of shame itself. Penance is meant to restore those bonds of shared faith fractured by sin via a communal accompaniment, that is, through cooperation with salvation by way of reconciliation or restored solidarity.
Such penitential rites parallel the ancient Order of Penance revived by the Franciscans who pioneered the first evangelization of the Americas. Although we cannot document a direct historical connection, there is a case for a seamless spiritual tradition of penitential rites of passage from the friars to the New World. This tradition found fertile ground in the existing myth, symbol, and rituals the friars found among the rich indigenous spirituality, which made possible an “approximation” of concepts between them (see Espín). For the friars, penance is much more than a juridical declaration of either penalty or absolution. Like John the Baptist, the Franciscans leave the cloister and sanctuary to accompany people in order to preach penance as a preparation for a re-encounter or restored solidarity with the Savior. Such preaching is accomplished through public witness and ceremony, which calls the people created and contingent upon God back to the command of God.

Hence the friars emphasize accompaniment of the people as well as solidarity with the people. Penance promotes solidarity with the Savior through the common, anonymous accompaniment of Christ’s Passion. Just as marks of distinction among class or caste were discarded when the wealthy and educated practiced voluntary poverty, so the genius of the popular penitential practices inspired by the Franciscans promotes common music, public art, shared actions and gestures, that level hierarchies and unite everyone “from emperor to leper.” Penitents and pilgrims, like migrants and immigrants, need to travel light and in company, so they surrender anything that smacks of dissimilarity rather than solidarity.

This accompaniment and solidarity imitates the Incarnation. God, who by definition is infinitely dissimilar from the human, in Christ enters into solidarity with the human condition. God in Christ pawned divinity to redeem humanity. Jesus accompanies the created creature through his birth in Bethlehem and stands in solidarity with the contingent human through his death at Calvary, all at the command of the Father. The friars witness, ritualize, and preach penance as the necessary accompaniment of the One who sacrificed all that all people might be one. This spiritual tradition is stitched seamlessly into the ancient chords of Perdona Tu Pueblo, the bloodied robes of Jesús Nazareno, and the participatory drama of the Santo Via Crucis. By shared sacrifice in imitation and at the command of Christ, penitents restore community by leveling hierarchies and promoting harmony as all together and at the same time, as well as in the same place along with their ancestors and descendents sing, celebrate, and symbolize a common faith incarnated in a shared culture.

Of course, these actual penitential practices presume a Christian ontology, that is, a belief that the social order must conform to the end created for it by the God who created it. Hence penance requires the sacrifices necessary to restore justice, reconcile enemies, and practice charity. Like the penitential practices themselves, these sacrifices are incumbent upon all believers in the command of God.
Christ and service of the community. As such, they should have the same democratizing or leveling effect of more public aspects of penance. In fact, the cost associated with public art and communal drama was traditionally borne by the wealthier members of the community, which helped to redistribute wealth or level economic disparities.

Besides a presumed ontology, these penitential practices are also declamatory. A shared cultural idiom has the same centripetal force as the sense of smell. Just as a forgotten childhood fragrance can emotionally transport an adult back to preconscious memories, so the very witness of one’s brothers and sisters publicly struggling to follow the bloody footprints of Christ’s Passion often evokes cultural virtues long suppressed. Echoes of songs learned from Grandmother, memories of beloved sacred art, and rituals recalled from childhood expound upon Jesus the exposed and reawaken the veneration of Christ the vulnerable.

These are not memories of the macabre or morose, but an emotional re-encounter with the values inculcated when one was enculturated. And if those values of communal harmony, appreciation of tradition, subordination of selfishness, cooperation for the common good, and tolerance of ambiguity are revived, then grievances are forgiven, resentments released, and relationships restored. That is the good news preached nonverbally and communally through public penance.

**Conclusion**

To those who shout: “Why do Latinos come out for Good Friday, but not for Easter Sunday?” the answer is always already silently symbolized: Resurrection is restoration. Theological reflection on the actual practices of U.S. Hispanic Catholics appreciates asceticism as voluntary vulnerability, a willingness to accompany the Passion of Christ through public sacrifice as a means of restoring the bonds of communal solidarity frayed by sin. Thus the restoration of communal solidarity is not only inspired and commanded by Christ, it is also possible solely through the power of Christ, a power only available to a community that accompanies the crib and ultimately the cross (see Wroth). Like the first Christians, Hispanics find Jesus restored to life only at the end of the *Via Crucis* (Way of the Cross) and on the threshold of the *Santo Entierro* (the Holy Burial).

**References**


