July 2009 witnessed a flurry of newsworthy activity, some of it capturing attention beyond C-SPAN. In an already historic presidency, Barack Obama’s commitment to a diversity reflective of the nation played out in Senate confirmation hearings of some high profile nominees. Many tuned in to the four-day confirmation process of Judge Sonia Sotomayor, a marathon covered not only by extensive network and cable television but online and by mobile phone as well thanks to text innovations like Twitter. The nomination of Sotomayor to the Supreme Court as the first Hispanic justice overshadowed her significance as the third woman to serve as justice and the sixth Catholic currently sitting on the bench.

Compared to the Sotomayor hearings, the confirmation of Miguel H. Díaz as Ambassador to the Holy See was predicted to proceed “with all the rancor of a first-communion party” (Sullivan). President Obama’s nomination of Diaz took many by surprise. Virtually unknown in political circles, Díaz is a Cuban immigrant raised in Miami who teaches theology at St. John’s University and the College of Saint Benedict in Minnesota. A married father of four children, his pedigree as a respected Latino theologian and former president of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACTUS) hardly appear to qualify him for the prominence of the appointment to represent the United States as Ambassador to the Holy See. As with the Sotomayor nomination, this one, too, thrust Latin@ Catholics into the national and international spotlight.

**Not So Unusual**

President Obama’s choice of Diaz remains consistent with his pattern of selecting administration officials. Of the positions requiring Senate confirmation, eleven percent of the first three hundred nominees were Latin@s, doubling the mark set by former President George W. Bush (Dunham). While this number still falls short of the estimated fifteen percent of the U.S. identified under the umbrella term “Hispanic,” it moves closer to a proportionate representation of the population. The selection of a scholar is also not surprising. According to a survey by the *National Journal*, thirty-seven percent of Obama’s appointees and nominees “have
worked at a think tank or in academia at some point in their careers” (Barnes).

Two features of the Díaz appointment are particularly striking: he is a Latin@ Catholic and he is a theologian. Here again there should be no surprise. Hispanics currently constitute the plurality of the U.S. Catholic Church and the majority of Catholics under the age of thirty. This is not the future of the church as some pundits insist; it is the present reality, a fact not lost on Pope Benedict XVI. During his inaugural visit to the United States, he demonstrated an ongoing awareness of the significance of the Latin@ presence. In his homily at Washington Nationals Stadium, he observed that the growth of the U.S. church is “gracias también a la vitalidad del testimonio de fe de los fieles de lengua española” (2008). This accurate reading of the signs of our times by the pope and now the president should not be lost on those in ecclesiastical authority who continue to regard this population in patronizing ways.

Díaz was not the only theological educator nominated by Obama to serve as an ambassador. In the same press release Michael A. Battle Sr., president of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, was named for the post of ambassador to the African Union. Battle brings a wealth of pastoral experience to the position as well as a body of scholarly publications on topics related to ecumenism and the Black church. Díaz’s contribution to ecumenical dialogue is best articulated in his chapter in the anthology *Building Bridges, Doing Justice: Constructing a Latino/a Ecumenical Theology* (Espín).

Furthermore, Obama’s facility with the tradition of Catholic social teaching was nurtured by years working on the south side of Chicago in a Catholic Campaign for Human Development funded project. He warmly cites the influence of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and his seamless garment/con-
sistent ethic of life position. In an in exclusive interview with the Catholic press prior to his meeting with Benedict XVI, Obama affirmed how the impact of the Catholic social tradition “has made me, a non-Catholic, reflect on how I can be a better person and has had a powerful influence on my life. And that tells me that it might be a powerful way to move a broader set of values forward in American life generally” (Connors). This openness bodes well for the intersecting strategic global concerns that the church shares with the United States, as demonstrated by the July 10 meeting between the president and the pontiff.

¿Por qué Díaz?

What will Miguel Díaz bring, as a Latino theologian, to benefit the ongoing relationship between the United States and the Holy See, a diplomatic relationship only formalized 25 years ago in the Reagan administration? For Díaz, the doctrine of the trinity is central to his understanding of human community and his interpretation of diversity. This provides a theological framework for his engagement with issues like globalization, immigration, and inter-racial relations. As a Latino theologian, Díaz is partial to a process of mutual interaction in the doing of theology jointly, within community. Known as teología de conjunto, this method encourages accountability among scholars to each other as well as to the people theologians accompany in the contexts of their daily living. This sensitivity to the perspectives of others grounds an appreciation for the necessity of interdisciplinary collaboration.

Like many of his Latin@ colleagues, relationality is a key hermeneutic in his theological anthropology. Exploring the concreteness of daily living, Díaz identifies as a great challenge the building of “inclusive community by practicing hospitality toward others and their otherness” (2009).
This theme draws upon his earlier scholarly establishment of accompaniment, a “walking with” and “being-with” others as a site of divine encounter. In this way, he reflects in his thought the influences of both Latin@ theologies and Karl Rahner, a conversation at the heart of his first book, *On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives*.

The construction of a better world and the solidarity such a venture—or vocation—entails is not ancillary to Díaz’s theological commitments. Justice and the historical denial of justice inform his critical analysis in ways that are not naive in considering socioeconomic, political, racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender factors. At the same time, Díaz maintains a prevailing hope in what is good and possible:

In becoming persons, communities, universities, churches, and nations that receive others, we take on a “border-like” existence that allows for the mutually creative possibility of relating distinct world-views, cultures, and political realities. In turn, this openness to the other enables us to live our human personhood more in the image of divine personhood. (2006)

The selection of Díaz is a promising one and, in light of Benedict’s recent social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, a propitious one as well. A thread that runs through the papal letter is the relational and public character of the love that goes beyond justice. This theme resonates with Díaz’s own work. For Benedict, it is charity that “gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbor; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)” (2).

In the words of Bishop Robert Lynch, with Miguel Díaz as the face of the United States at the Holy See, it will indeed be refreshing for our country to “be represented by someone who cannot easily be called a ‘political operative’ but a son of immigrants who loved the Church enough to make it his life up to this moment.”

**References**


