Confessing the Faith in Spanglish: Recovering the Centrality of the Vernacular in the Lutheran Witness to the Gospel

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Introduction

This essay seeks to honor two great Lutheran theologians from the Latiné community in the U.S., José David Rodríguez, and Javier "Jay" Alanis. Both of them were born into the Lutheran church and were heirs of the theological witness and lived testimony of their parents. Jay in the borderlands (Nepantla) that are the communities that exist in the Southwest, between México and the U.S., especially in the Austin and San Antonio areas of Texas. And José, from that archipelago in the Caribbean Sea known as Borikén by its original inhabitants and their descendants, and as Puerto Rico by the rest. For generations people in both of those places have claimed the Lutheran witness to the gospel as their own, as José has shown in his recent book: *Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Lutheran Church in Puerto Rico*.[1] We will begin this essay with José's contributions and then will turn to Jay's.

The contributions of José David Rodríguez Hernández to the Lutheran witness of the gospel are many and varied. In this essay I will focus on his insistence that the faith is not something to be held in the privacy of one's own thoughts and spirituality but that it is something that demands public witness—the faith is meant to be confessed. Furthermore, for that public witness (or public act of confessing the faith) to be effective it must be done in a language and manner that speaks to people's hearts and souls. And from Jay we will learn that we (as pastors, deacons, teachers, and leaders of the church) acquire that language, that is, the vernacular of the gospel, by accompanying the most vulnerable members of our society in their journey through that "third space" (the borderlands – a space that is at the same time physical, psychological, cultural, and spiritual) that they traverse as they journey in search of life and dignity for themselves and especially for their children. There we encounter the *deus absconditus sub contraria specie* (God hidden under its contrary), that is, in suffering, sin, and death. It is there, in that desert and "Golgotha" of sorts that so many of our siblings have to go through in their search for life, that the word of God addresses them and us, in the vernacular, revealing God, according to Jay, as "*Diosito*," our deeply affectionate parent, and that reveals us and them together as bearers of the very image of God, an inextricable source of a dignity that no person, country, law, or circumstance can strip them or us of.

[José insists] that the faith … is something that demands public witness—the faith is meant to be confessed. Furthermore, for that public witness to be effective it must be done in a language and manner that speaks to people's hearts and souls. And from Jay we will learn that we acquire that language, that is, the vernacular of the gospel, by accompanying the most vulnerable members of our society in their journey through that "third space" that they traverse as they journey in search of life and dignity for themselves and especially for their children.

José

But before exploring those important theological insights, so relevant to the church today, I want to mention another contribution of José's (Jay's teacher and mine) to the church, not just the ELCA or the Latin American and Caribbean Lutheran Church, but to the church catholic.

In my opinion one of the most important contributions of

1. José David Rodríguez, *Caribbean Lutherans: The History of the Lutheran Church in Puerto Rico* (Fortress Press, 2024).

José to the church of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, has been his own act of confessing the faith in the vernacular of his daily life, in his many interactions with colleagues, friends, and especially, students. José demands excellence from his students in a way that inspires us to rise to the occasion and perform beyond what we thought we could accomplish. But despite his demand for excellence, he makes sure that students have the resources they need to succeed, including very generous access to his office and even to his home. The best theology I learned from José was not in the classroom, although I treasure what I learned there, but it was in the refectory, over a cup of tea or coffee, in his living room, where he regularly gathered theologians of great caliber for "tertulias," table talks where we discussed everything from Isamel García's book *Dignidad: Ethics Through Hispanic Eyes*,[2] with Ismael García! while discussing the best way to cook beans and baked chicken, Puerto Rican style.

The words of acknowledgement offered to José by theologian Alex García-Rivera, in the preface of his book *St. Martin de Porres: The 'Little Stories' and the Semiotics of Culture*,[3] summarize the difference that José made in the journey of theological formation for many of us. García-Rivera wrote: "I also must express gratitude for the deep friendship and wise advice that Dr. José David Rodríguez shared with me. Dr. Rodríguez' friendship, coupled with his great insights into Latin American theology, made the writing of this work a sacramental experience." Yes, perhaps José's greatest contribution to the church in addition to his books, articles, lectures, and pastoral service, has been the sacramental space that he created for many of us from around the world entering the journey of formal theological formation. All of us who were formed in the welcoming shade of that sacramental space are a part of José's legacy, of the fruits born of his own act of confessing the faith in the vernacular, from the lecture hall and the pulpit to the living room and the coffee table.

Finally, on a personal note, I must acknowledge a personal bond that I share with Dr. Rodríguez. We both love the discipline of the Martial Arts, especially of Karate. In fact, when I was an M.Div. student at LSTC I opened a Karate Dojo as my teaching parish project. José had already been training at the YMCA but decided to join my dojo as well and became the first student to whom I ever awarded a black belt. It was truly an honor to be, during my seminary years, his student, his teacher, and his friend. It is with great joy, then, that I present this essay partly in honor of his retirement.

The vernacular

One of Luther's most significant contributions to the Reformation of the church was the translation of the Scriptures into the vernacular, that is, into the language of the people. In fact, it could be argued that translating the gospel into the vernacular was not a priority of the Reformation; it was the Reformation! Everything else was a function of that. Luther even quipped that while he drank beer with his friends Philip and Amsorf it was the Word that was reforming the church. "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's word; otherwise, I did nothing," said Luther in one of his sermons.[4]

How is someone to proclaim him who is the Word if they can't communicate in the language that the people understand? When people are able to receive the Word in the language of their hearts and souls, something powerful happens. Lives are changed. Wounds of the soul are healed.

The Word is God's means of bringing healing, salvation, and wholeness to a creation severely wounded by sin in its many expressions, whether rendered in the traditional lists of sins, still relevant today, or in its structural manifestations such as economic injustice, racial discrimination, sexism, xenophobia, casteism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, intolerance of other religious and secular perspectives, ecological abuse, and so on. It is through the Word that God addresses those manifestations of sin that bring so much pain and suffering to the world. Indeed, it is through the Word that God's very presence is incarnated amid that suffering, taking the world's suffering upon the divine self so that the world can take upon itself the divine glory.

However, the Word, despite being divine (even God's own personal identity according to Trinitarian theology), does not work by magic. As Paul writes to the Romans: "How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (Romans 10:14). We could add: "And how is someone to proclaim him who is the Word if they can't communicate in the language that the people understand?"

When people are able to receive the Word in the language of their hearts and souls, something powerful happens. Lives are changed. Wounds of the soul are healed. Guilt is dissipated and replaced by responsibility and by the genuine desire to repair what has been broken. Shame is changed into dignity.[5] Despair is

2. Ismael García, *Dignidad: Ethics Through Hispanic Eyes* (Abingdon Press, 1997).

3. Alex García-Rivera, *St. Martin de Porres: The 'Little Stories' and the Semiotics of Culture* (Orbis Books, 1995), ix.

4. Martin Luther, "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday after *Invocavit*," in Luther's Works, 51: 77–78.

5. See José D. Rodríguez Hernández, "La cruz que cuelga en el barrio," in José D. Rodríguez and Carmen M. Rodríguez, ed., *Martín Lutero Descalzo: Meditaciones sobre la identidad Luterana desde el contexto Latinoamericano* (Santo Domingo: editorial Centenario, 2010), 141-160.

transmuted into hope and courage. Real peace becomes possible. And the face of the earth is renewed, because with the Word and through the Word comes the Spirit that is life and resurrection.

The genius of the Reformation was to make the word accessible to the people in language they could understand whether they were peasants, merchants, or royalty. This was, incidentally, Jesus' own strategy. He spoke in parables, using examples from the daily lives of the people to whom he preached and taught. In the same spirit, Luther and the reformers translated the Bible into the vernacular of the people, even using illustrations that were lifted up from the daily life of the people to whom they were preaching and teaching. The now classical hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," was set to the tune of a popular drinking song from Luther's day. Furthermore, when it came to the liturgy, Luther resisted creating a unified liturgy for all the churches of the Reformation but rather called for each community to design their own liturgy using elements from their local culture that would be meaningful to them. The point was to allow the living Word of God to speak directly to people in ways that made sense to them and, similarly, for the people to be able to commune with God, to pray, praise, lament, and worship in ways that were authentic to them rather than by going through motions that meant little to them or saying and hearing words the meaning of which they had no idea.

Confessing the faith

Thus, when José calls for "confessing the faith" in Spanish, he is not bringing a Latino innovation into the Lutheran church. Instead, he is simply calling attention to what was (and continues to be) the heart of the Reformation movement and, actually, of the Christian movement from its very beginning. The point was not to translate the gospel into German, Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian language and culture ONLY. I believe that a serious difficulty faced by the churches of the Reformation today is that they were so successful in translating the Word into the languages and cultures of their communities in Europe that when the people from those communities moved to other shores, and when missionaries wanted to share the gospel in new contexts, they did so in such a way that rather than the Word being translated again into the languages and cultures of the people, instead, the peoples were expected to acquire Germanic and Nordic musical, aesthetic, and theological sensibilities in order to be able to receive the word and be able to fully participate in the life of the church. What was translated into the languages of the people was not the gospel directly but its European translations, thus rendering a translation of a translation, which, naturally, gives the impression that the newer version is but a mere copy rather than a new original. Similarly, churches from the Global South that stand in the tradition of the reformation are often viewed by their European and Euro-descendant siblings as not quite Lutheran enough and, theologically, as a diluting of the theology of the reformation.

In his essay, "Confessing the Faith in Spanish: Challenge or Promise," José explains that:

When the Word is allowed to speak in the people's vernacular (in this case Spanish), not only is the community gifted with a renewed sense of identity derived from the gospel, but the church itself is renewed because new insights are gained about the gospel when heard in this new vernacular, and from this new perspective.

> the affirmation of faith from a Hispanic perspective challenges us to recover not only those foundational elements of our sociohistorical reality that give meaning to our identity as a people, but also those basic dimensions of the church's faith that have made possible a continuous renewal of our understanding and confession of the gospel.[6]

In other words, when the Word is allowed to speak in the people's vernacular (in this case Spanish), not only is the community gifted with a renewed sense of identity derived from the gospel, but the church itself is renewed because new insights are gained about the gospel when heard in this new vernacular, and from this new perspective. As another great Lutheran theologian, a close of friend and colleague of José's, Vítor Westhelle, was fond of saying: "the divine Logos speaks dialect."[7] To confess the faith in Spanish (in the vernacular) is not just to communicate in Spanish what has already been said in German, Latin, English, or even in Greek, or Hebrew. It is to allow the divine Logos itself to speak directly to the church catholic, from this particular place and circumstance, a word that is addressed to a particular community but with relevance for the entire church. This is not unlike the New Testament epistles which were addressed to specific communities with particular issues but are considered to have relevance for the entire church. Through the local vernacular of the New Testament communities, the divine Word addresses the entire church. That seems to be the *modus operandi* of the divine verb.

A favorite example of José's about what it means to confess the faith in Spanish, comes not from his native Borikén but from Jay's world, that is, from México and the Méxican American

6. José David Rodríguez, "Confessing Our Faith in Spanish: Challenge or Promise?" in Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *Hispanic/Latino Theology: Challenge and Promise* (Fortress Press, 1996), 352.

7. Vítor Westhelle, "The Quest for Language: Engaging the Head and the Heart," in *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther's Theology* (Cascade Books, 2016), 17-39.

community in the U.S. It is the story of the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, an indigenous man from a people who had been severely oppressed and impoverished by the Spanish conquest.[8] The use of the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the liturgy by some pastors in Lutheran churches working with Mexican migrants and other Latinos in the U.S. is often frowned upon by some Lutheran theologians and pastors, sometimes including myself, because of the ways in which this practice could lead to serious misunderstandings. However, José explains that the point of the icon is to point to the story and the point of the story is that God does not remain indifferent to the suffering and injustices endured by the people but actually can be found in their midst. This is a deeply biblical truth that Mary of Nazareth herself emphasizes in her famous song, the Magnificat. She proclaims that God:

> has scattered the proud
> in the imagination of their hearts.
> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
> and lifted up the lowly;
> he has filled the hungry with good things
> and sent the rich away empty.
> (Luke 1:51-53 NRSVUE).[9]

That is the message proclaimed by the prophets throughout the centuries, and it is the message at the heart of the story of the appearance of Guadalupe to Juan Diego. The fact that there are so many similarities between the indigenous sacred figure of Tonantzin (the divine Mother in the Nahuatl language and cultures) and the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe emphasizes once again the importance of the vernacular in the communication of the good news.

Justice and justification belong together

As we saw above, the proclamation of the faith in the vernacular not only serves to translate the gospel into the language of a particular community, but also to illuminate new dimensions of the word of God relevant to the entire church. In the case of the Lutheran tradition specifically, I believe that the elements that emerge from the act of confessing the faith in the Spanish (and Nahuatl) vernacular, illustrated by José with the narrative of the Virgin of Guadalupe, can be a corrective of a common distortion of the central Lutheran tradition, namely the doctrine of justification by grace through faith apart from the works of the law.

A danger of the Lutheran emphasis on justification by grace through faith alone is that the justification of the sinner might come at the expense of the needs of the victims of the sins of the sinner (and of sinful structures and systems). For example, in the historical context of the colonial project which included genocide, the enslavement of massive numbers of human beings, and the oppression of indigenous peoples, what does the message of justification for the perpetrators, enablers, and beneficiaries of such injustices have to say to their victims? How is the gospel of the justification of the slave owner good news to his slave (unless it brings about a radical transformation of the slave owner and the institution of slavery)? If we are not careful, we might end up using the gospel to assuage the guilty conscience of those perpetrating and benefitting from injustice rather than as a call to repentance and conversion that is the fruit of the costly grace that many Lutheran prophets, like Bonhoeffer, valiantly proclaimed and gave their lives for.

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Confessing the faith in Spanish, given the socio-economic and historical realities of oppression and marginalization of the vast majority of Hispanic/Latinx Spanish (and Spanglish) speaking peoples in the United States of America, helps illuminate that aspect of the gospel that has historically been relegated to a secondary place in Lutheran theology and practice. This message of the inextricable link between justification and justice, incidentally, was strongly emphasize by Luther in his early writings, sermons, and lectures, such as the treatise on *The Freedom of a Christian*,[10] and the catechisms.[11] The option for the poor was not an invention of liberation theologians! Luther's point was that such option for the poor should not be transactional but inspired purely by love rooted in faith. Otherwise, even our acts of supposed charity and justice are merely covert means of manipulating others for our own selfish purposes, even if those purposes are of a spiritual nature, such as the desire for the salvation of my soul. Justification and justice belong together.

8. See Rodríguez, "Confessing Our Faith," 357, and José David Rodríguez Rivera, "María, la Madre del Señor: Una perspectiva evangélica," in *Martín Lutero Descalzo*, 97-104.

9. Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

10. Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther Study Edition, Mark D. Tranvik, trans. (Fortress Press, 2008 [1521]); for example, in discussing Ephesians 5:28, Luther explains: "Notice that he could have said that we should work to support ourselves. But Paul says that we work to give to those in need. This is why caring for our body is also a Christian work. If the body is healthy and fit, we are able to work and save money that can be used to help those in need. In this way, the stronger member of the body can serve the weaker" (80).

11. Luther's Small and Large Catechisms can be found in Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Fortress Press, 2000), 345-480.

Jay

That is an aspect of the Lutheran tradition that has also been emphasized by Jay Alanis, whom we are honoring with this festschrift as well. I met Jay in the summer of 1998 at the Hispanic Summer Program. He was already a Ph.D. student, and I was beginning my Master of Divinity journey. He was my roommate! That gave me the opportunity early on to gain an appreciation for his gentle spirit and profound theological mind. Jay's *locus theologicus*, both in the sense of the theological theme that is the focus of his attention and also in the sense of the physical, social, and spiritual space that is the place where his theological thinking takes place, is the borderlands.[12] That is where he grew up and where he labored as a lawyer, a pastor, and a theologian. It was in the borderlands that opened a *third space* ("Nepantla" in Nahualt)[13] in between México and the U.S. that Jay learned the Lutheran vernacular.

Meeting God in the borderlands

In obedience to his vocation[14] as pastor and theologian but also, and most fundamentally, simply as a human being, Jay has been taking students and colleagues with him to see and hear for themselves the faces and voices of our siblings from the south who risk their lives crossing those borderlands in a desperate attempt to escape violence, poverty, and more recently, the disastrous consequences of climate change. It has been from within that space, where desperation and hope, fear and courage, faith and doubt, life and death coexist, that Jay has labored in articulating a Lutheran theological anthropology in the vernacular. Within that third space, an eschatological space, he has learned that "God as experienced by the Hispanic/Latino/a community is not an exclusive metaphysical, but a personal and communal God who journeys with the people in daily life."[15]

In a Bible study offered to the voting members of the sixteenth churchwide assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in 2022, Jay explored this theme further using Luke's text on the disciples on the way to Emmaus.[16] Listening to that story from the border and in the Spanish/English [Spanglish] language of the people, the story acquires new meanings. "I hear differently in the border," he says. What he has heard and witnessed in the border is how a space of epiphany opens up in that liminal third space of the U.S./México Border.[17] In that space, God is incarnated in the stranger. Walking with the stranger, welcoming the stranger, offering a drink and a piece of bread to the stranger, turns into an opening for the divine to reveal its presence. Jay relates how when we accompany the strangers in their journey, when we break bread together, and drink together, and listen to their stories and testimonies, "in that *encuentro* [encounter], the sacred encounter, they speak of the One that joined them in the desert."

Jay relates how when we accompany the strangers in their journey, when we break bread together, and drink together, and listen to their stories and testimonies, "in that *encuentro* [encounter], the sacred encounter, they speak of the One that joined them in the desert."

Diosito

Jay's theological anthropology is rooted in that revelatory experience that takes place in the epiphanic third space of the people journeying through the valley of shadows of death, daring to believe that the Lord is their Shepherd and will guide them to green pastures next to still waters, even on the other side of death. The word that summarizes the theology and theological anthropology born from these experiences, for Jay, is the untranslatable Spanish word *Diosito*. This word carries within itself a deep sense of reciprocal affection, similar to that embedded in Jesus' use of the word "Abbá" (daddy, papa; or, today we could say, momma, mommy) to refer to the mystery of the divine. What is revealed in this third space is not a being but a relationship of deep affection and love from the creator to the most vulnerable and forgotten of our siblings (which, of course, does not mean that God does not love all of us as well). God, says Jay, reveals the divine self in that epiphanic space as One who loves us and gives us love and is love itself.

Dignidad and the *Imago Dei*

Furthermore, the witness of the Scriptures adds to that experience of God, of *Diosito*, the declaration that *all* humans are bearers of the divine image, and that that image is indelible. This insight from Jay was brought home to me many years ago when I had the opportunity to meet with a group of women who were experiencing homelessness in the Washington, D.C. area. They were part of a collective, sponsored by *Lutherplace Memorial Church*, that collected broken jewelry and used it to make art which then they could sell as a form of income. I will never forget the testimony of one of these women, who happened to be black. She shared two

12. Javier Alanís, "La *Imago Dei* encarnada en Neplanta desde la perspectiva de un latino," in Rodríguez and Rodríguez, *Martín Lutero Descalzo*, 161-184

13. Alanís, "La *Imago Dei*, 163.

14. For an exploration of the concept of vocation from a Lutheran Latinx perspective see José D. Rodríguez, *La Vocación* (Abingdon Press, 2009).

15. Javier Alanís, "God," in Edwin David Aponte and Miguel de la Torre, eds., *Handbook of Latina/o Theologies* (Chalice Press, 2006), 11.

16. The Bible Study is available online here: https://www.elca.org/cwa-2022/PreEvents/Bible-Study-Sessions.

17. See also Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Third Edition (Aunt Lute Books, 2007 [1987]).

Jay explains that when people receive that message in their hearts, the image of God begins to shine in them, and not only is their sense of dignity and self-love restored but also their capacity to love others in a healthy way. This "being-for-others" is part of the *imago dei* that we bear.

stories. One was that on one occasion she had been badly injured and was laying down on the sidewalk next to the church. When the service was over people came out of the church building, and one of the parishioners, a white woman dressed very elegantly (she said) and wearing white gloves saw her and immediately went to help her. The fact that this "church lady" (as she called her), with her fancy clothes, hat, and white gloves knelt down before her, held her head in her arms and stayed with her until help arrived, communicated to her that despite what the rest of the world was trying to tell her she was not disposable, she mattered to someone. "Then," she said, "I realized that we (people experiencing poverty and homelessness) are like these shards of jewels that we collect. Many people throw them away as trash, but they are not trash, just as society throws us away. But just like in our hands these fragments of jewelry are used to create something new and beautiful, they receive new life. Similarly, in the hands of God those of us who have been tossed away by society as if we were trash, are reminded that we are like broken jewelry, precious nonetheless, and capable of being part of something new and beautiful." That day those women preached to us preachers the gospel in the vernacular.

For Jay, following in the tradition of Hispanic ethicists such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz[18] and, Isamel García, the doctrine of the *imago dei* is an inalienable source of dignity for a people whom society insists on tossing out and demonizing. As people are met by God in the borderlands they are reminded that they are profoundly loved by God, that God journeys with them and that despite the ways in which society humiliates them and excludes them, they are bearers of the beautiful image of God, and that grants them a dignity and value that no person, no society, no circumstance can take away from them. Jay explains that when people receive that message in their hearts, the image of God begins to shine in them, and not only is their sense of dignity and self-love restored but also their capacity to love others in a healthy way. This "being-for-others" is part of the *imago dei* that we bear. Jay explains that "As love, God's nature is being-for-others, and to be fully human is to be for others in a praxis of love and care."[19] Thus, the borderlands, that third space of epiphanic revelations, becomes a place where we all can rediscover together the image of *Diosito* that is our true nature, as we join the stranger and allow the stranger to join us on our journeys.

Thank you for confessing the faith

José and Jay help us recover an important aspect of the Lutheran witness to the gospel, the importance of confessing the faith in the vernacular. In the case of the Latino, Latinx, Latine, Hispanic, or however else the community is called, this means confessing the faith in the rich mixtures of Spanish, English, Spanglish, and other native languages that have been part of this community of communities for centuries. In this act of confessing the faith in the vernacular, as we have seen in this essay, it is the divine logos itself that speaks to us, and the word thus spoken is a word of transformation capable of healing our individual selves as well as our communities.

Thank you, Jay and José, for your indefatigable commitment to confessing the faith in the vernacular.

18. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Orbis Books, 1996).

19. Alanís, "God," 14.