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BETWEEN THE GATES: A HISPANIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE PERSON AND CONTRIBUTION OF ORLANDO COSTAS

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Introduction: Costas the Pastor, Teacher, Missionary and Evangelist

My earliest encounter with Orlando Costas was at a theological conference sponsored by Latin American Center for Pastoral Studies which Orlando directed, held at Alajuela, Costa Rica. My encounter with Orlando was typical of his directness and honesty. I had recently written a review of his book *A Shattering Critique of Mission* for the *Reformed Journal*. He walked up to me and introduced himself and asked if I was the same Solivan who had written the review. I said I was. He then asked what my basic criticism of the book was. After some discussion about my critique he agreed with my assessment. He then went on to emphasize the point that we must publish as often and as much as we can wherever we can. We Hispanics need to share the Gospel through the printed form and publish materials for pastoral and theological formation in English and Spanish.

At Alajuela, Orlando's many gifts were soon evident and impressive. As a missiologist he led the conferees in their examination of the critical pastoral and social issues facing them in Latin America. As a teacher his gift of clarity and critical insight accompanied by his probing questions

served to stimulate thinking and foster creative dialogue.

Above all, Orlando's passion for sharing the Good News of his savior Jesus Christ was evident in all he did and said. He was an evangelist, a bearer of the master's liberating, and transforming love. Theological education, missiological experience, sociopolitical analysis, critical reflection were all at the service of proclaiming the reign of God. Theology was at the service of the mission, evangelism and justice.

At the first Congress on Evangelism held at Wampani, Peru the quintessential Orlando was evident. Orlando presented a plenary paper on evangelism that clearly set the agenda for the conference. Later in the program he participated in the preacher's workshop and preached. He was as excellent a preacher as he was a theologian. On another evening where the musical ministry of the churches was shared, Orlando appeared as a soloist, with a beautiful tenor voice singing the praises of God. Missionary, theologian, teacher preacher and cantor, this was Orlando Costas.

Not only was Orlando capable of incorporating different modalities of engagement, he was rare in that he engaged different audiences. He was a dialogue partner with several communities, often communities of discourse that infrequently dialogued with each other. David Traverso Galarza in his study of the writings of Orlando describes Costas' theological and ethical versatility. He states "Costas' theological/ethical discourse may thus be situated within the parameters of Protestant, Roman Catholic, Latin-Anglo-Hispanic-American, conservative, and revolutionary dimensions of life."¹

It is this multifaceted, multidimensional understanding and commitment to mission in an ecumenical and evangelical setting that serves as the focus of this chapter. It is this unusual willingness and capacity to engage several boundaries, and stand outside of and between the gates of several arenas of theological discourse that marks off Orlando Costas from other missiologists and theologians. To speak as a Protestant Baptist or a North American Evangelical was not enough. To speak as a Hispanic/Latino to the mainline Euro-Americans was for Costas a narrowing of his historical contextual understanding of mission. Costas sought to engage all the principals related to fulfilling the missionary mandate of Jesus Christ. Women, African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and other ethnic and racial minorities fell under the sweep of his Evangelical-Liberationist radar. Orlando understood that the proclamation of the reign of God mandated that all peoples must come under and respond to Christ's liberating news of justice, love and hope. Orlando's writings and work invited others to come out of the safety zones of their own enclaves and gather at a

broader and more inclusive public square. His writings and work challenged the status quo not only of the North American Hispanic church, but that of Latin Americans, Euro-Americans and others. Let us look a little closer at some of the Costas theological assumptions, assumptions that lead him to this multifaceted ecumenical mode of engagement.

I. Costas View of the Mission Enterprise as a Contextual Task

Costas understood himself primarily as a missiologist, and served at Andover Newton Theological School as the Judson Professor of Missiology and academic dean from 1984 to the time of his untimely death on November 5, 1987. Prior to coming to Andover Newton he served as the Thornley B. Wood Professor of Missiology and Hispanic Studies at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. Between the years 1970-1980 Orlando served as a missionary in Latin America.

As noted by Traverso Galarza, Orlando's missiological vision and method was already evident in his pastoral work with Hispanics and other minorities in Milwaukee, Bridgeport, and Puerto Rico. Traverso Galarza notes that as early as 1971 in his book *La Iglesia y Su Misión Evangelizadora*, his prophetic pilgrimage was clearly marked. What Costas referred to as the "evangelistic mission of the Church" is foundationally a contextual, transformative and praxeological enterprise.²

Costas' work and thought is first and foremost a contextual task.³ This contextual reflection has both external and internal aspects, which correspond to the holistic nature of mission. In *Theology of the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America* he writes: "Mission takes place in the midst of the forces of history: ideologies, political and economic systems, social and religious movements. The confrontation between these forces constitute the external context of missions."⁴

The external context of ideological and sociopolitical engagement led Costas to establish and network with community organizations that would engage the social and political issues from a prophetic Christian perspective. Christian mission he noted also possessed an internal context, which he described as the:

churches' organic development, growth in the faith and suffering service in and for the world. In this sense missiology implies a critical reflection on the process of leadership formation, the indigeneity and relevance of worship, the quality of Christian stewardship, the church's self-understanding and maturity of faith and her mode of being in the world.⁵

Costas' understanding of the internal context of the church lead him to understand the church as a global body, this is its universal plane. This universal plan he connected to its particularity expressed in the context of the communities indigeneity. This was expressed in his work with Euro-Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, and indigenous tribes of the Americas, African Americans and others. This contextual specificity was applied not only to ethnic racial and gender consideration, but to theological perspectives as well, such as Evangelical, Liberal, Conservative, and schools of thought and practice. This dual contextuality of mission reflection and praxis lead Orlando to recognize that the local churches as well as the public square were the venues of missional praxis.

Costas' respect for context led him to recognize the need for multiple venues for theological reflection and multiple interlocutors. He sought to engage conversation partners from different contexts, between different sets of borders or boundaries. He sought to break open the intramural conversations that often dominate theological reflection and missional action. Often these intramural reflections served to maintain the status quo represented in the centers of power of the dominant structures and personalities in power in church bureaucracies. These could be Euro-Americans speaking with Euro-Americans, Hispanics speaking with Hispanics, African Americans speaking with African Americans. Costas sought to change these intramural reflections into true extramural dialogues. He sought to live and work between the gates yet not discarding the importance of such intramural dialogue.

Costas sought to introduce this theological-ethnic and racial diversity to Andover Newton. With the support of then President George Peck and the bully pulpit of the academic dean, Orlando sought and fought to establish a Hispanic Latin American program at Andover Newton. He also sought to increase the number of international students as well as to broaden the theological gestalt of the Andover Newton community. Costas understood that unless theological schools reflected in their composition the racial, ethnic and theological diversity of the churches they are called to serve and the world they are called to reach, they would be ill equipped to do so, and would in fact reflect the fractured divisiveness and oppression of the world they are called to evangelize and transform.

II. Mission from the Periphery

Every mission has a starting point, a place of departure. Every missionary has a locus, a context that informs his or her worldview and how to engage the world of the other. For Costas that social location was the periphery, what I have called “between the gates.”

Costas’ methodological starting point, states Traverso Galarza, is not an abstract, doctrinal, or speculative proposition to pronounce or prove. Rather his crucial point of reference is the concrete historical reality within which God and history, faith and mission, theological and ethical reflection is encountered. “Costas’ social ethic reveals a hermeneutical approach that situates the notion of ‘periphery’ at the crux of his reflection.”⁶

For Costas, Jesus is the exemplar of this periphery model, what he called the Galilean model. Jesus as a Galilean was an outsider, someone coming from the periphery in relation to the center that was Jerusalem. Nathaniel’s question to Andrew exemplifies this. “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”⁷ This periphery motif is also present in the Diaspora metaphor.

Periphery, Galilee, and Diaspora all work well in Costas’ contextual praxeological method for he embodies these realities in his own spiritual journey. As a Puerto Rican American Orlando knew *en carne* (in the flesh) what being a Galilean was all about. Though Costas was born an American citizen, as all Puerto Ricans are, he experienced in his life what it meant to be treated like a second class citizen. He knew as a Hispanic pastor in Bridgeport and Milwaukee what it was like to be looked down on because of one’s accent or skin color. A citizen yet treated as a foreigner. Could any good come from a Puerto Rican barrio? Does the periphery have anything to contribute to Jerusalem? Orlando’s liberating response was “YES!!!”

Diaspora was another metaphor that resonated with Orlando’s existential reality. Born in Ponce, Puerto Rico Orlando at the age of 12 migrated to the South Bronx, and soon after to Bridgeport, Connecticut. Orlando was part of a great migration during the late 1940’s and 1950’s to New York and the northeastern seaboard. As an island-born Puerto Rican he would become pastor to the Puerto Rican Diaspora in New York, Connecticut, Wisconsin, and Massachusetts.

From his *locus perifericus*, Orlando raised his prophetic voice and spoke to those at the center of the mission enterprise as well as to other on the periphery. Costas recognized and trusted the insight that the disenfranchised, the unattended possessed and expressed. Costas was moved

by the vocative voice of the biblical text and sought a transforming message of hope, justice and love. The revelation of the reign of God revealed God's love and compassion to those on the periphery and invited them to become apostles, bearers of Good News to all people of the world. His experience as an American-Galilean, an alien in his own land fired the passion in his hearth and mind. Orlando Costas had what we Latinos call *ganas*, what some call guts or heart, for the Gospel. Costas' conversion to Christ had filled him with the Holy Spirit and empowered him to speak to and on behalf of the voiceless what he called the *absentee persons* of our churches and communities.

This place on the margins, the periphery, a place of powerlessness became for Orlando a place for the manifestation of the power of powerlessness made possible by the Holy Spirit. From the periphery Costas engaged others from the centers of theological orthodoxy and modernity, challenging them with a fresh and insightful missiological perspective. As academic dean at Andover Newton, Costas hoped to introduce this view and vital insight to the Andover Newton community. He hoped to create a new space for an ecumenical dialogue that went beyond the traditional ecumenical conversations that mainly spoke to people very much like themselves. He sought to introduce new voices, perspectives, languages and cultures that would serve to express the complexity of Christian missions as well as the beauty of its diversity. Costas sought to change Andover Newton from a predominately white middle class Anglo-European monolingual English-speaking institution to a multiethnic, multiracial, multilingual community much more representative of the Christian churches it is called to serve.

IV. The Multi-boundary Character of Costas' Missiology

Some years ago Paul Tillich wrote a little autobiographical book entitled *On the Boundary*.⁸ He shared how the different aspects of his family upbringing and professional growth placed him between different sets of boundaries. Each new set of boundaries raised different sets of issues and perspectives.

Orlando's last name *Costas* in Spanish means many coasts or shores. Like the ocean and seas come into contact with many shores, so it was with our beloved and respected Orlando. His vision and work touched many shores and impacted many people. Often Orlando landed on new shores as did his Spanish ancestors, full of vigor and hope. Yet very differ-

ent than his Spanish ancestors in that he landed on the shore with what the Cuban American historian Justo Gonzalez called a “non innocent reading of history,”⁹ Orlando recognized and respected contexts and perspectives he engaged. He arrived with a message of hope and liberation for the oppressed and the oppressors. The reign of God he proclaimed spoke to all people in all conditions and stations of life. Yet Costas also knew that Christ spoke to them differently, with different expectations and tasks.

Let us examine some of the gates he entered and lived between.

A. His pastoral ministry in the United States and Puerto Rico

Orlando was a Ponce born Puerto Rican with New Yorican street smarts. Early in his youth Orlando learned what it meant to live in a multilingual world. He experienced what it was like to be a citizen of the First World, yet live and be treated as one of the Third World. This experience of being both a migrant and an alien made him sensitive to the biblical paradigms of exile and sojourner.

Costas’ pastoral experience in Puerto Rico, Milwaukee and Bridgeport were the early testing ground for his contextual, praxeological theology from the periphery. The insight gleaned from his pastoral ministry with the Latino poor, and the networking and organizing with African Americans in Bridgeport and New York equipped him to work in multiracial and multilingual settings.

His exposure to the theologically and politically conservative world of Anglo-Americans during his studies at Bob Jones University provided the context for his conversion to his Hispanic / Latino culture. No longer would he understand the Gospel to be culturally neutral in its content and culturally indifferent in its proclamation. Cultural sensitivity and relevance was fundamental to an affective proclamation of the Gospel.

As is the case with a majority of Puerto Rican Americans, Orlando was bilingual. He spoke and wrote Spanish and English fluently.¹⁰ This ability which he cultivated during his ministry in the United States and Puerto Rico and later in Latin America was another means of engaging in multi-contextual dialogue and mission. Costas understood what it meant to be spoken to in one’s own language. He also understood the difficulty of trying to express one’s most important and often complex theological insight in a language other than one’s own.

As a Puerto Rican American his experience as a minority sensitized him to the importance that political options make. Orlando’s missiological method critically addressed the geo-political concerns and

relations in the context of the missionary enterprise. The missionary was not a neutral party, they were called upon to make political decisions and take political action in light of the mandates of the reign of God incarnated in the person and work of Jesus Christ. James Cone's insight that God had taken sides in favor of the poor and the oppressed and Gustavo Gutierrez' option for the poor had a marked influence in Costas' theo-political options and praxis.

As Academic Dean of Andover Newton Theological School, Orlando brought with him this commitment to the disenfranchised and unattended. He sought to foster dialogue between African Americans and Latinos, between Liberals and Evangelicals. He sought to speak and write critically about social political issues that affected minorities here, Latin America, and the Two Thirds World.¹¹ As Academic Dean, Costas sponsored *jornadas teológicas* and brought to our campus theologians and missiologists from the Third World. He sought to stretch and diversify the world view and contacts of the Andover Newton community.

B. His ministry in Latin America: CELEP, INDEF, Seminario Biblico Latinoamericano, Fraternidad Teologica

Costas' work in Latin America is also indicative of his multivalent perspective and understanding of missions. During his ten years (1970-80) in Latin America he served in various capacities. He was enthusiastically involved with the renowned missiologist Dr. Straken in Evangelismo al Fondo where he helped develop and implement strategies for global evangelism. He also served as Dean of the Latin American Biblical Seminary in Costa Rica where he participated in and critically challenged the early development of the theology of liberation. While in Costa Rica he worked to create a space for dialogue between Roman Catholic, Liberationist, Evangelical and Pentecostal theologians.

His commitment to theological education for Latin America led him to join a group of other Latin American theologians in founding *La Fraternidad Teológica*. La Fraternidad continues today as the most respected evangelical theological fraternity in Latin America. While in Costa Rica Costas developed theological and evangelistic links. *El Centro Evangélico Latinoamericano para Estudios Pastorales* (CELEP) emerged from these efforts as well as connections with the World Council of Churches.

His Latin American experience further sharpened his theo-political

insight and commitment. His work with the leading Liberation theologians such as Gutierrez, Segundo, Boff and Dussel as well as Evangelical theologians such as Bonino, Straken, Padilla, and Samuel Escobar served to broaden his dialogue partners. Orlando was quickly becoming more than a Latino Evangelical Baptist. His theology was rapidly evolving into an eclectic globally sensitive charismatic-evangelical-liberation-missiology. It was no longer viable for Orlando to define the theological world on the basis of Liberal and Evangelical theology. Other partners were present at the table, other gates opened and new boundaries uncovered.

C. His ministry to mainline evangelicals

While still in Costa Rica Orlando published *The Church and Its Mission: A Shattering Critique From The Third World*. His Latin American experience in mission and evangelism as well as his experience with Hispanic churches in Puerto Rico and the United States served as the context for analyzing and critiquing the new and quickly emerging evangelical church growth movement.

Orlando's insightful critique was sharp and to the point. Even though Orlando considered himself an Evangelical, with a Liberation twist, he did not suspend his judgment of their theology and its implications for missions. In his book *The Church and Its Mission*,¹² Costas described the church growth movement as hermeneutically shallow, possessing a questionable locus with a truncated concept of missions, and an ambiguous concept of sin and humanity. This critique did not endear him to his church growth evangelicals, especially at Fuller Seminary. He was later invited to the Fuller School of World Missions (Nov. 1977) to deliver a series of lectures and a course on total evangelism in context. The syllabus described the purpose of the course in the following manner: "To give a global vision of evangelism as a comprehensive and contextual enterprise, and to engage in the search for an inclusive methodology capable of releasing the energies of the whole church for a total impact in the six continents of the earth."

In March of 1982 Orlando co-chaired the first conference of Evangelical Missions, Theologians of the Two Thirds World, in Bangkok, Thailand. He delivered the keynote address entitled "Proclaiming Christ in the Two-Thirds World." The editors of the book, which was the product of the conference, described the purpose of the conference

as a creative workshop to facilitate and promote reflection in community. It was a meeting and a fellowship of persons, testing and affirming insights

gained from diverse cultural and theological backgrounds to deepen their understanding of Christ . . . It was the creation, experience, and development of community . . . The papers and discussion reflect a unity of commitment to Christ and his mission rather than a uniformity of outlook.¹³

D. The United States as a new Macedonia

Orlando Costas was an Evangelical that main stream Evangelicals were uncomfortable with, a liberationist that made liberals and other liberationists uncomfortable. He was a charismatic that made other charismatics and Pentecostals uncomfortable. As a Baptist evangelical Orlando's social location (on the periphery), his ethnic identity (Puerto Rican) and his charismatic passion (too emotional) often put him at odds with traditional Baptist agendas, which neglected Baptist diversity.

On the other hand his more liberal supporters of his sociopolitical concerns were often turned off by Orlando's evangelistic, Christological missional commitment. Orlando Costas was unembarrassed as an evangelist of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who he was and what he stood for often placed him between the gates of those in power and the gates of the unattended.

An example of this *in betweenness*, the zone of the *both and* was Costas' vision of the United States being the new Macedonia.¹⁴ For Costas the United States fulfilled the requirements for being a fertile mission field. Could you imagine the reaction of his American Baptist and United Church of Christ colleagues in hearing that the nation that has sent more missionaries out to evangelize others was now being looked upon as a heathen nation needing to be saved? The United States qualified to be a new mission field not because it had not heard the Gospel. It was not because they did not know the implications of the Gospel but because much of the North American community that called itself Christian lived their lives embarrassed about being Christian, and unwilling to live out the implications of the Liberating Gospel. Costas states his case succinctly: "The United States qualifies as a mission field because many of its people are alienated from God and neighbor . . . The dominant symptoms of this situation of alienation are fear, anxiety, and distrust at the personal level, and racism, classicism and sexism at the social level." The evangelization of North America suggested by Costas was what J. Verkuyl called *missio politica ecumenica*, the political ecumenical dimension, "a vocation to work together in world-wide cooperation toward development and . . . liberation from economic exploitation and political and racial oppression."¹⁵ Costas understood that the proclaimers of the Gospel lived under the mandate and expectation to incarnate the

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word of liberation, justice and peace. Praxis is required--critical reflection on that which has been done as well as that which remains to be done. The Costas' legacy for Andover Newton was a call to live out the promise of its missionary beginnings and the convictions of its ecumenical vision. Orlando calls us all out of our comfortable intramural ecumenical tables to a place outside the gate, a place at the crossroads of many gates. A place where none of us has control over the other, a place where the Holy Spirit convicts and calls all to conversion.

Costas issued a call to fashion a new community of the Spirit, where the dispossessed, the unattended, where women and men, Black, Latino, Asian, and Native Americans can fellowship with Anglo-Americans and other Euro-Americans as true brothers and sisters, members of the body of Christ. Costas dared to believe that we could and would take seriously the fact that as Christians we were members of the body of Christ and as such members of one another.

Orlando Costas dared to walk and live and work between the gates of Evangelical Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. He walked between the gates of Liberalism and Conservative Protestantism. He walked between the gates of American abundance and third world misery. He walked between the gates of the imperialism of the English language and the world of the second language immigrants. He lived in the First World of power and affluence, but sat outside the camp where he meet and worked with those of the Two Thirds world who often lived with the negative consequences of our abundance.

Let us consider the challenges he sets before us.

V. Conclusions: Challenges of Costas' Legacy

The challenges of Orlando Costas' legacy pose a number of questions for any theological school:

- a. What is our mission as a theological school? Are we called only reach out to and for "our kind of people," white-middleclass suburbanites? Or must we open the gate to others that at first may make us uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as you make us?
- b. There is the question of mission: are we truly committed to sharing the Gospel of Jesus the Christ? Or are we embarrassed of our Christian mandate to make disciples of all nations? We must ask ourselves the question Jesus posed to his disciples: "Who do you say I am?"
- c. Are we willing to move beyond our comfort zones and tokenism to a place where diversity is the gestalt that that informs our common life and empow-

ers our common task?

d. Are we willing to broaden our ecumenical vision , to go outside the gate of our ideological commitments that betray our common life as Christians?

e. Are we willing to bring our praxis into conformity with our rhetoric of diversity and inclusion?

How and where we employ our human and financial resources as a theological institution of the Christian Church, in these difficult financial times, will ultimately tell the world whether or not we are willing to pay the price for standing in the gap--becoming a community of the Spirit that is willing to risk living between the gates as a community on the periphery.

End Notes

¹ Traverzo Galarza, David. *The Emergence of A Latino Radical Evangelical Social Ethic in The Work And Thought of Orlando E. Costas: An Ethico-Theological discourse* UMI Dissertation Services, 1993, 41-42.

² Ibid., 35.

³ Ibid., 200.

⁴ Costas, *Theology At The Croosroads in Contemporary Latin America* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1976) 9.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Traverzo Galarza, 202.

⁷ John 1:46.

⁸ Paul Tillich, *On The Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (London: Collins, 1967).

⁹ Justo Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology From A Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

¹⁰ 87% of Hispanic Americans are bilingual.

¹¹ See Vinay Samuel & Christ Sugden, eds. *Sharing Jesus In The Two Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) chapter 1.

¹² Costas, Orlando. *The Church And Its Mission: Shattering Critique From The Third World* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1974) Chapter 7.

¹³ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds. *Sharing Jesus In The Two Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), viii.

¹⁴ Costas, Christ *Outside the Gate* (New York: Orbis Books, 19982), Chapter 5.

¹⁵ J. Verkuyl, "The Mission of God and the Mission of the Churches," *Occasional Essays* 4, nos. 1-2 (January 1977): 39.