

# Listening

Journal of Religion and Culture

The Spring, 1992 issue of *Listening* will focus on the theme:  
CRISIS OF FAITH IN THE WESTERN WORLD

It will explore:

*The Politics of Spirituality and the Spirituality of Politics*

*Women in the Religious Society of Friends*

*The Loss of the Numinous Image*

*Sustainable Crisis: a Biblical Ethic of Ambiguity*

*Faith and Knowledge in Crisis: Toward an Epistemology of the Cross*

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## INTRODUCTION

It is a pleasure for me to serve as guest editor of this Winter issue of *Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture* on the general topic of "Hispanic Americans in Theology and the Church." This is a very important and pressing topic in the contemporary ecclesiastical and theological scene in the United States, and the opportunity to address it by way of a full issue of a journal such as this one is most welcome and deeply appreciated.

The Hispanic American population of the United States is a growing population. The census figures of 1990 are clear in this regard: the group has experienced phenomenal growth in the last two decades—a fifty-three percent increase from 1980 to 1990 alone—as a result of continuing immigration and a higher than average birthrate. Thus, whereas the projected figures for the 1990 census extended from a lowest estimate of 19.15 million to a highest estimate of 22.05 million, the preliminary figures recently released by the census bureau show a count of 22.4 million, well beyond the highest estimate, and even this figure probably represents a serious undercounting as well. As a group, therefore, Hispanic Americans presently account for 9 to 10 percent of the total population of the country, with figures surpassing the twenty-five percent mark in a number of states (New Mexico; California; Texas). Its presence in the country is clearly significant and increasing; in fact, it is estimated that by the end of the century, Hispanic Americans will have become the largest minority group in the country.

However, contrary to the general perception of the group, Hispanic Americans do not form a monolithic entity. Its members hail from many different quarters and many different cultures. While some are citizens of the United States by birth, oth-

ers are naturalized citizens, legal aliens, or illegal aliens. Those who are citizens by birth include the children and descendants of earlier immigrants to the country, as well as those who did not immigrate into the country at all but rather were taken over during an earlier period of expansionism and annexation (Southwest territories and Puerto Rico). The rest, first-generation immigrants, are here for a wide variety of political and/or economic reasons. Further, although Roman Catholics still constitute the majority of the group, Hispanic Americans attend churches and worship across the entire ecclesiastical spectrum of the country, ranging from pentecostals and evangelicals to Lutherans and Presbyterians. The Hispanic American reality and experience are thus very rich and complex. There are many similarities, to be sure, but there are also many differences.

It should be noted in this regard that the terms usually employed to distinguish the group as a whole in the country—"Hispanic Americans"; "Hispanics"; "Latinos"—are not terms that the group uses of itself, but rather terms that have been bestowed on the group by the dominant culture of the country. Members of the group always identify themselves in terms of their country of origin, whether immediate or remote. In fact, the issue of proper nomenclature for the group as a whole is quite problematic, and remains subject to much discussion within the group itself. I myself opt for the term "Hispanic Americans."

I use this term, as I do in this issue, with the following definition in mind: individuals of Hispanic descent, associated in one way or another with the Americas (South, Central, North, and the Caribbean), who now live, for whatever reason, on a permanent basis in the United States. The question of ethnic background is paramount in the designation. First, to be "of Hispanic descent" means to have, at least in part, a biological and/or cultural Spanish heritage, with language as a very important unifying force. Second, to be "associated with the Americas in one way or another" means to have a direct or indirect connection with the former colonies of Spain, rather than with the European colonial power as such. The question of sociopolitical status is also essential to the designation "Hispanic." First, to live "on a permanent basis in the United States" means to do so—as pointed out above—as either citizens, born or naturalized, or residents, legal or illegal. Second, the phrase "for whatever reason" means that the basis for such permanent residence in the United States may be, once again, political, economic, territorial, or a combination thereof.

Despite their divergent backgrounds and natural tendency to define themselves in terms of their country of origin, Hispanic Americans have more recently begun to see themselves as a distinctive group with common needs and goals, and a specific and urgent agenda within the American political and cultural scene. To be sure, their social situation of marginalization, as well as the general tenor of outside reaction toward the group—marked by widespread and sustained discrimination—have played a key role in this regard, as has the growing interaction and exchange among the different components of the group throughout the country, especially in large urban areas.

This very same mixture of growing numbers and developing unity may be observed as well in ecclesiastical and theological circles. It is a presence that can no longer be ignored or bypassed; it is a presence that will no longer allow itself to be ignored or bypassed.

Given their steadily increasing numbers, the presence of Hispanic Americans in the churches—in all the churches—has become quite marked in the last few years. Nowhere is this more the case than in the Roman Catholic church, where Hispanic Americans constitute approximately forty percent of the church, and where a full majority is now clearly in view by the end of this century or the beginning of the next. The presence of the group in other churches, while by no means as prominent, has also begun to be noted. In all cases, specific programs designed for Hispanic Americans are being introduced and developed, especially in the areas of pastoral ministry and ministerial formation.

At the same time, the very same process of conscientization and consolidation observed with regard to the group in the society at large is also at work in the religious sphere. The theological voice of Hispanic Americans has begun to make itself heard, in both church and academy, from many different quarters, but with many fundamental themes in common. For example, two major theological organizations have already been formed, and are at work on a wide variety of projects. The first, the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians in the United States, is predominantly Catholic in orientation; the second, La Comunidad of Hispanic American Scholars and Teachers of Religion, is ecumenical. Similarly, last fall, a first major conference on Hispanic American theology took place at Auburn Seminary in New York City, under the title of "Faith Seeking Justice: An Ecumenical Conference on Hispanic Theology"; this conference, ecumenical in character, was attended by members of both theological or-

ganizations, as well as by a wide variety of ministers and lay people. Furthermore, the body of literature in the area is expanding at an incredible pace, with more and more works emerging each year.

At present, this theological voice is still in its initial and formative stages, though it has enjoyed a very strong and promising beginning indeed; its future is bright and open-ended. Hispanic American theology will be a vibrant and unavoidable force to be reckoned with in the years to come. The present collection of articles—dealing with a variety of topics central to Hispanic American theology and by a variety of authors, both Catholic and Protestant—represents yet another step in this direction. For this, on behalf of the whole group, I wish to thank the editorial staff of *Listening* and, above all, Dr. Mark McVann, for his kind invitation to edit this issue on “Hispanic Americans in Theology and the Church.”

Fernando F. Segovia  
Guest Editor

## HISPANICS IN THE UNITED STATES

*Justo L. González*

### HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Shortly after the census of 1980, the Bureau of the Census issued a series of projections of Hispanic population growth. That series included a low, a middle, and a high projection. According to the high projection, Hispanics would be 8.7% of the total population in 1990 (22.05 million), and 27.9% in 2080 (140.74 million).

By 1990, the next census made it clear that even that “high” projection was too low, for the census counted 22.35 million Hispanics, or 9% of the total population. At that rate, by the year 2080, more than a third of the total population of the United States will be Hispanic. All this, without taking into account the millions whom the census failed to count, or the 3 million already living in Puerto Rico, who are not part of these statistics.

Even leaving aside such projections, the United States is *already* the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world—after Spain, Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia—and rapidly becoming the fourth.

Although in recent years there has been much discussion of immigration and of “protecting our borders,” the fact is that immigration is only one of several factors contributing to the growing Hispanic presence in the United States. This is true both historically and demographically.

Historically, the ancestors of many present-day Hispanics were in these lands long before they became part of the United States. Since many Hispanics also have Native American ancestry, we