

CHICANAS/LATINAS AND CATHOLICISM UNDER POPE BENEDICT XVI

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As a Chicana raised Catholic I was quite dismayed when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was chosen to lead the global Roman Catholic Church as Pope Benedict XVI. All I could think of was his attack on liberation theology beginning in the mid-1980s, the silencing of any dialogue about women's ordination, continuing restrictions on women's reproductive rights, privileging of Catholic Christianity over all other world religions including Protestant Christianity, diminishing the role of the laity, naming homosexuality as "an inherently moral evil," and downplaying clerical sexual abuse—all actions that had occurred under the reign of the late Pope John Paul II with Cardinal Ratzinger as his right hand man. All I could imagine was that further limitations would be placed on the mature growth of a people's faith. I found myself being compelled to explain to my daughter attending Catholic elementary school that the new leader of the church is "bad news" for women, gays and lesbians, the poor, and the future of liberation theologians or even progressively minded Catholics. As more than one cardinal involved in the conclave electing the new Pope expressed,

The election of Joseph Ratzinger was a vote for continuity with the papacy of John Paul II, but also a choice for a man who will translate the guiding lines of the Wojtyla pontificate into institutional reality.... They believe Benedict will be sure that what the church says and what it does are in better alignment. (Allen 2005, 5)

If these cardinals are right, then expect punitive actions to uphold restrictive doctrines. According to most reports, Pope Benedict XVI's main concern is fighting relativism, secularism, and post-Christian culture. Empowering the poor, women, and the marginalized have not been among his reported interests. The church is growing the fastest in Latin America and Africa, where the majority of populations are poor women and children, many of whom are victims of HIV/AIDS.

As 70 to 80 percent of Latinos in the United States continue to claim a Catholic identity, and more than 50 percent of these practicing Catholics are women, it does matter that the recently appointed head of the church did not promote dialogue about women in relationship to leadership, sexuality, poverty, and violence in his previous role as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It does matter because Chicanas/Latinas have the highest teen birth rate of all major racial/ethnic groups in the United States that some experts attribute partly to religious beliefs. It does matter because Chicanas/Latinas suffer from domestic violence at epidemic rates and they do not find the space in their churches to openly discuss familial dysfunction. If the church condones and models patriarchal power, what support exists for a woman to challenge the patriarchal power she experiences at home? It does matter as the percentage of Latina (Mexican and Puerto Rican) heads of household has been consistently rising since 1970 along with their poverty levels. The leadership roles that women are forced to take in their families do not find sustenance in a church where women are barred from primary leadership opportunities. It also matters because many Latinas who identify as religious do not adhere solely to Christianity but find support in Indigenous and other spiritual traditions. Are these spiritual roads and the women who follow them to be condemned by the highest authority of the Catholic Church? While Chicanas/Latinas forge the path of a mestiza spirituality and a mestiza consciousness, what will happen

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to their efforts to remain connected to their Catholic parents and relatives? Perhaps I am being too pessimistic. As one Latina Catholic recently stated, “He is too far away from my reality to make a difference.” But neither the speculation that Pope Benedict will bring forth a transitional papacy nor the fact that his physical presence is in another continent can diminish my fears. His authority is far-reaching and as one journalist stated, “To put it bluntly, there isn’t a transitional bone in Joseph Ratzinger’s body” (8). I also believe that if I was employed in the theology department of a Catholic institution, I would not feel at liberty to have these reflections published. Nonetheless, regardless of our spiritual practices, Latinas must be vigilant about standing up for our beliefs in the face of the most conservative and now centralized wing of the Catholic Church.

Works Cited

John L. Allen. 2005. “Not a Transitional Pope: Benedict May Surprise,” *National Catholic Reporter*, 29 April, 5+.