Opinion
Spirituality
Culture
Book Reviews



A performer dances during a daylong regional encuentro Oct. 28, 2017, at Herndon Middle School in Herndon, Virginia. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



by Cecilia González-Andrieu

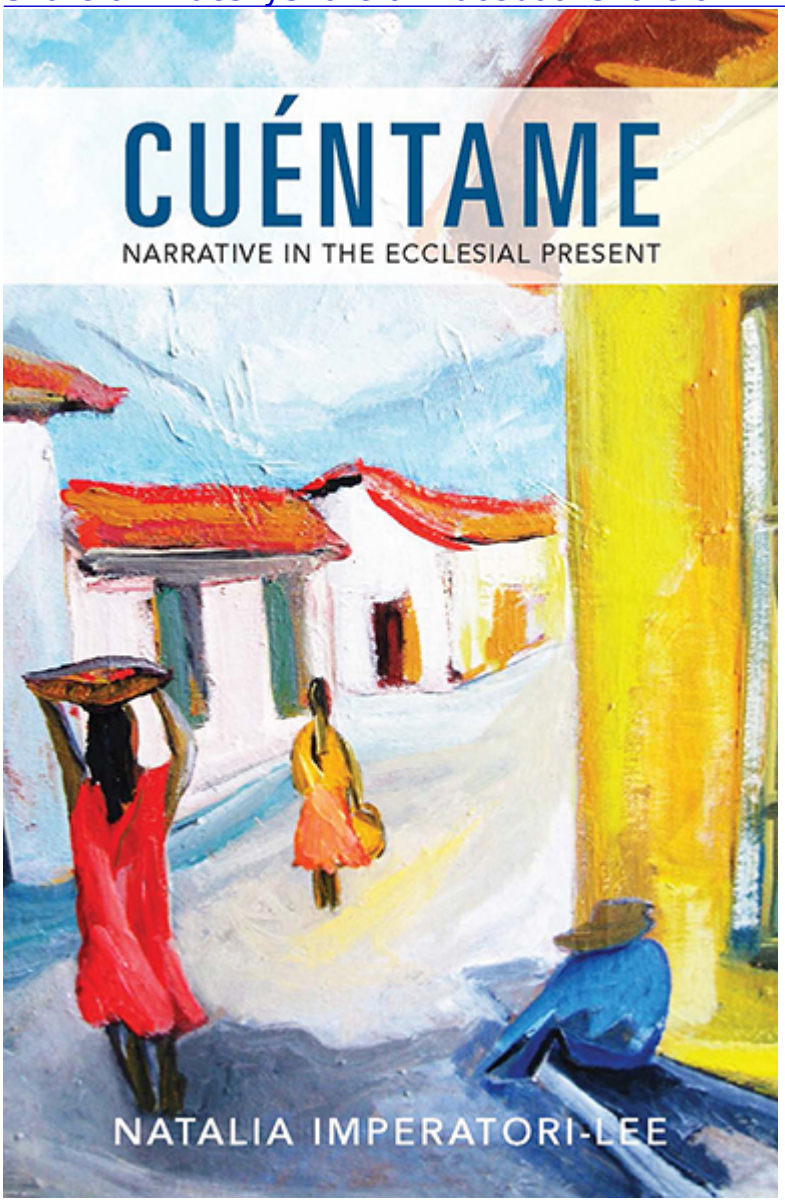
View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

October 3, 2018

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint



CUÉNTAME: NARRATIVE IN THE ECCLESIAL PRESENT
Natalia Imperatori-Lee
166 pages; Orbis Books
$35.00

At any time in the last few decades, Natalia Imperatori-Lee's *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present* would have been helpful to the task of building bridges within the pluricultural reality that is the Catholic Church in the United States. This book should be read by those outside the "Hispanic church" to get to know their fellow members and by those within the "Hispanic church" to expand awareness of our own story and engage in intentional self-reflection.

But these are not normal times. These are urgent times.

Answering the escalation of dehumanizing treatment of Latinx persons in the U.S. in the past two years, this book comes at a time when the validity of the Gospel imperative to love the neighbor has been conveniently jettisoned from the conscience of many.

The 2016 election continues to reveal considerable fractures in the U.S. Catholic Church and that split is significant. As Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese pointed out in a 2017 NCR column, "Pollsters confused about Catholic voters": "White Catholics definitely are voting Republican, and Hispanic Catholics are voting Democratic. Younger Catholics are more Democratic than their elders."

Catholic voters are split along racial, gender, generational and ethnic lines that witness to long-neglected open wounds and divergent priorities. In *Cuéntame*, we are exposed to some of the processes and structures shaping those fault lines. What Imperatori-Lee proposes may prove crucial by inviting *all* Catholics to defend the human rights of Latinx persons and with it the relevance of Catholic social teaching.

Imperatori-Lee provides multiple entry points into the complexity of being Latinx/Hispanic in the U.S. for communities that encompass both the oldest Catholic inhabitants of this land and its newest arrivals. As the stories of Latino/a Catholics play out against a backdrop of extraordinary political upheaval and heightened racism and xenophobia, it is Latino/a tools for engaging this reality that the author stresses will come to the aid of a church that likewise "currently traverses [a time] ill fitted to idealism."

Reminding her readers that "the earliest Catholic theology done in America was done in Spanish," Imperatori-Lee continues to advance the conditions of knowing and engagement that will act as a corrective to the "many contexts in which the participation of U.S. Hispanics is underrepresented or altogether overlooked."



Bishop R. Walker Nickless distributes Communion during Mass July 29, 2017, at the 13th Annual Hispanic Congress of the Diocese of Sioux City, Iowa. (CNS/The Catholic Globe/Jerry L. Mennenga)

Evidence shows that this silencing is the result "of false or falsifying narratives that render a contingent of the population invisible." Consequently, Imperatori-Lee uses a variety of meanings of the term *cuéntame* to crystallize her goals.

First, *cuéntame*, as heard in the voices of members of this community, is an invitation to relationship, the equivalent of "Tell me everything and leave out no details!" The request signifies trust, intimacy and commitment. Imperatori-Lee encourages her readers to make this entreaty of one another — the fractured ecclesial community of the U.S. must recover a desire to know and trust each other. Assuming her reader is open to this new intimate relationship, she deftly introduces authoritative sources to be sought and allowed to speak.

In this intentionally slim, readable volume, Imperatori-Lee's thick familiarity with the history and thinkers of U.S. Latinx Catholicism enables her to present readers with many key moments and voices to explore. As she sees it, we would do well to sit and ask *cuéntame* of scholars like Orlando Espín and Ada María-Isasi Díaz, among others.

She provides glimpses of their groundbreaking theological thought, and we are persuaded of what she stresses is the "central insight of Latino/a theology — that the lives and practices of the people of God give rise to the genuine ecclesial story."

Advertisement

Imperatori-Lee in no way thinks the Latino/a church's story exhausts the church's story; rather, she presents evidence that the Second Vatican Council's emergent ideas about the importance of experience in the world to reveal the work of the Spirit in the people of God have taken root in the way of doing theology in a Latino/a key for several generations. We of this community, knowing it a fecund method for being "attentive to the ways the church has failed to be a vehicle of truth and mercy," invite each of you to tell your particular stories and weave these into the larger story. The invitation is universally directed and valid because "grace necessarily occurs in history." Let us trust each other and listen.

Second, as *cuéntame* invites relationship, that relationship is concretely expressed through stories. Again, the richness of Spanish comes into play as a *cuento* — which can be negatively perceived as fiction — as the primary way of preserving cultural history and cohesion in most Latinx cultures. Imperatori-Lee problematizes reliance on "abstract, static or idealized notions of church," foregrounding the role of imagination and creativity in describing and shaping religious experiences.



Two teenage girls perform with other Matachines dancers during a celebration honoring Our Lady of Guadalupe, Dec. 3, 2017, in Houston. (CNS/Texas Catholic Herald/James Ramos)

Taking seriously the trove of aesthetic materials, texts, paintings, music and what is generally understood as popular religion of these communities, she invites us to "overhear" the ways that being church is experienced in concrete lives and in tangible moments, *lo cotidiano*. The narratives that follow the invitation to "tell me everything" show that reason and the reasonable are not the enemy of imagination and the mysterious. In Latinx aesthetic materials, these coexist as multiple threads leading to religious insights.

Imperatori-Lee's book sits us down for a rich conversation with compelling stories, which, trusting in grace, should flower into a widening circle of commitment in the U.S. Catholic Church with and for each other, and to count as "*presente*" those who continue to be silenced.

[Cecilia González-Andrieu teaches theology at Loyola Marymount University. A scholar-activist, she is the author of *Bridge to Wonder: Art as a Gospel of Beauty* and *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*. She is a member of the board of directors of the Ignatian Solidarity Network.]

This story appears in the **La Iglesia Hispana** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 5-18, 2018** print issue under the headline: Cuéntame can heal us.