Opinion
NCR Voices



Children dressed in traditional clothing arrive in procession for a Spanish-language Mass celebrated in honor of Our Lady of Suyapa, patroness of Honduras, at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Feb. 5, 2023. (OSV News/Gregory Shemitz)



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Next month the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States will hold its 35th annual colloquium on the topic "Synodality En Conjunto: The People of God, the Bible, and Theology." The event will be held June 9-12 at Boston College's Connors Center. Focusing on synodality, to which Pope Francis has called the universal church, is critical at all levels of the church and theologians have a special role to play as we all seek to familiarize ourselves with this different path of ecclesial self-understanding.

"This is a key time to do Catholic theology with our feet on the ground, our ears attentive to the voices of God's people and the world, and with our eyes focused on Christ," said Hosffman Ospino, professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education at Boston College. "The synodal path is creating fresher spaces for theological renewal. I am enthused about the possibilities."

ACTHUS is especially well placed to advance our understanding of synodality in large part because it has paid attention to the need to connect academic theologians with pastoral agents for many years. At the group's 2021 colloquium, Ospino said, "A third of the participants in this year's colloquium are Hispanic Catholic pastoral leaders who work in ministerial organizations, dioceses and parishes. ... I think that in this new historical moment, we cannot advance a sound and relevant theological discourse that claims to be Hispanic/Latino Catholic without seriously engaging in conversation with these pastoral agents and the communities with whom they journey every day."

Hosffman Ospino is professor of Hispanic ministry and religious education at Boston College.

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That conversation is continuing this year. "The best place to address this reality is at an ACHTUS Colloquium because, unlike the dominant theological trend in the U.S.,

ACHTUS has been working en conjunto ('together,' theologians from all subdisciplines and pastoral leaders) since its beginnings, and always foregrounding the realities of our communities," said Ahida Pilarski, president-elect of ACHTUS and professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. "In the 2024 colloquium, we'll do it once again, 'walking together' now with the global church as we reflect on our call to synodality."

I asked Pilarski about connecting theologians with the lived experience of the church. "This has been part of the design," she told me. "Again, the subtitle starts with the People of God. This particular synod has conducted the largest consultative process in the history of the church. There has been great participation at all levels."

In addition to consulting the results of that consultative process, Latin American theology has long placed a focus on the people of God at the forefront of its work.

"I have been a part of a group of U.S.-based Hispanic theologians who for a few years engaged in a regular dialogue with Latin American theologians," Pilarski told me. "We have looked specifically at Medellín and Puebla and the 2018 document on synodality from the International Theological Commission. The people of God was very present in all three documents."



Ahida Pilarski is president-elect of the Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States and professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible at St. Anselm College in Manchester, N. H. (Courtesy of Ahida Pilarski)

Much of this year's conference will be structured around the five priorities set forth in the North American Final Document for the Continental Stage of the 2021-2024 Synod. They include "Integration of synodal consultation in the local Churches. This would include formation both in synodality and in the spirituality of discernment," "The challenge of welcoming those who feel excluded from participation in the life of the Church in a manner that is authentic and faithful to the Gospel and the Catholic faith weighs heavily on the hearts of our people" and "A Church that goes out to the peripheries."

The rest of the subtitle to the ACTHUS colloquium matters, too.

"The reference to Bible and Theology in the title of the colloquium aims at what is distinctive about the Catholic identity of the church," Pilarski said. "Looking at Vatican II, especially at Dei verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, it states that Scripture and tradition are one source of revelation. In our postmodern society, what does that mean?"

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The approach outlined for this forthcoming colloquium will address some of the difficulties that have emerged as theology navigates the difficult intellectual terrain of the postmodern world.

"During modernity, distinctive theological subdisciplines were established. Biblical studies generally focused on the Scriptures; the other subdisciplines focused on tradition," Pilarski explained. "Another outcome of the project of modernity was that the realities of the people, as central to the locus of theology, were lost. So, I want to bring to the table this reality, even now in the postmodern era, that theology is not only subdivided into sub-disciplines and these rarely interact here in the U.S. (continuing to work in silos), but the 'lived experiences' of the people of God have been also dismissed in the process."

"How we theologize and the purpose of our theological reflection reflects significantly our understanding of church," said Ospino. "Many U.S. Hispanic Catholic theologians continue to nurture connections to faith communities, ecclesial movements, and the work of dioceses and parishes. Without connection to the people of God at the grassroots, our theology may simply become sterile."

"Synodality gives Catholic theologians an opportunity to reclaim the pastoral dimension of our theological work, which is always communal," he added. "We enter the conversation about what it means to be church as baptized persons and as Christian disciples 'with others.' "