Ada María Isasi-Díaz encountered God in the messiness of life

by Michelle Gonzalez Maldonado

NCR Today
Take and Read

Editor's note: "Take and Read" is a weekly blog that features a different contributor's reflections on a specific book that changed their lives. Good books, as blog co-editors Congregation of St. Agnes Sr. Dianne Bergant and Michael Daley say, "can inspire, affirm, challenge, change, even disturb."
In 1989, a brief autobiographical essay by Ada María Isasi-Díaz changed my life. I was a senior at Georgetown University, taking a class on feminist theology. I loved the subject. However, as a 20-year-old Latina, I had never read a theological word written by a Hispanic or been taught by a Hispanic professor in any subject. Before discovering this essay, I did not even know that a thing called Latino/a theology existed.

I knew I wanted to write theology, but I thought to accomplish this meant sacrificing my culture, my identity and my feminism — something I was not very willing to do. And then I read Ada María’s brilliant reflection on her Cuban heritage, the women’s ordination movement, and the ambiguity and tensions of their intersection within her life.

"Hispanic Garden in a Foreign Land" reappeared in my life when it was reprinted in Ada María’s collection of essays, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century*. At the time of its publication, I was completing my master’s at Union Theological Seminary.

This text not only initiated a theological movement that would bear the book’s title, it explores themes that continue to be central in theological discourse even today. It has set the stage for many of the questions that Latino/a and feminist theologians continue to explore in their scholarship. My reflection on this book will highlight some of the major essays within it that have had a lasting impact on my theological worldview.

Ada María’s text offered an introduction to Latina feminist theology that explored key themes within theology. The book is deeply informed by her Cuban roots and weaves autobiographical anecdotes with theological reflection. The particularity of her experience opens up a world where the reader connects with her, and consequently her insights, in ways that traditional academic theology is incapable of doing.

The book not only argues that action is fundamental to academic theology, but also that without it theology is ultimately not authentic. Ada María defines herself as an "activist-theologian" who understands the theological task as ultimately liberative.

A clear intent of this book was to make the experiences and struggles of Latinas conversation partners within the larger discourse of liberation and feminist theologies. Latino/a experience is often rendered invisible within the black/white paradigm of racial discourse in the United States or is sidelined as the inferior stepchild of Latin American scholarship.

The book was published at a time when womanist (African-American feminist) theology was becoming more widely read. The term *mujerista* was a way to bring the struggles of Latinas to the table.

In her introduction, Ada María is very clear about the intent of her *mujerista* theology: to provide a venue for the voices of grassroots Latinas, take seriously their experiences as a theological resource, and challenge those theological teachings that oppress Latinas. This last point is significant, for it becomes a theological norm in her work, one that embraces a preferential option for the oppressed as normative.
Her opening essay emerges from the pain of leaving her homeland and her struggles to find a home, first in a convent, then later in the women's ordination movement. There, she is shocked to discover racism and ethnic prejudice. She then turns to her mother's legacy, acknowledging both its positive and negative aspects. From Ada María, I learned that I was able to be critical of my Cuban heritage while at the same time embracing it, and that this was not a betrayal.

The next essay is the writing by Ada María that I have assigned most often in my classes, "To Struggle for Justice is to Pray." Autobiography also opens this chapter, and here we encounter her time as a missionary in Lima, Peru. Two profound insights are found in this brief essay. The first is the lived experience of the poor as the foundation for her theology. This insight, which resonates with the writings of Latin American liberation theologians, reads more powerfully within her personal narrative than it does in the jargon of traditional academic theology. The second is her realization that spirituality is not reserved for the elite and does not have to be nourished by disembodied prayer. Instead, it is in the midst of concrete, embodied social justice that she becomes closer to the sacred. One does not have to take refuge from this world to be spiritual; one can encounter God in the messiness of life.

In her essay defining _mujerista_ theology, she focuses on the preferential option for Latinas, the significance of liberative praxis, and the importance of daily life. In Ada María's work, daily life ( _lo cotidiano_ ) is not only material, but also cultural. It is something that is conscious, not merely repeated mechanically. It does not refer exclusively to the private or domestic sphere. Epistemologically, it is linked to what is known as "common sense." Due to its material and epistemological value, for Ada María _lo cotidiano_ exemplifies the unity of action and reflection. She partially blames the failures of liberationist movements to transform structures of oppression on the neglect of _lo cotidiano_.

_Lo cotidiano_ is a central characteristic of _mujerista_ theology. Since its inception, _mujerista_ theology has emphasized the concrete lived experiences of Latinas as the starting point for theology. For Ada María, this is the site of struggle, resistance and transformation. It is the space of popular religion, inhabited by the saints and _virgenes_ of Latino/a devotions.

The category of _lo cotidiano_ is not only descriptive, but also hermeneutic and epistemological. In the essay titled "Mujerista Theology: A Challenge to Traditional Theology," she states: "_Lo cotidiano_ also includes the way we Latinas consider actions, discourses, norms, established social roles, and our own selves. ... _Lo cotidiano_ is a way of referring to Latinas' efforts to understand and express how and why their lives are the way they are, how and why they function as they do."

This emphasis on _lo cotidiano_ protects _mujerista_ theology from essentialist claims. The centrality of daily life is not, however, uncritical, only that which contributes to the liberation of Latinas is salvific. It also does not reduce theology to pure relativism. The liberative principle remains the norm within her theology. However, daily life reminds us of the partial and fragmentary nature of all our knowledge.

"Elements of a _Mujerista_ Anthropology" is the essay I have cited most frequently in my own scholarship. In _mujerista_ theology, three phrases are critical to anthropology: _la lucha_, _permítame hablar_ and _la comunidad/la familia_. These are not the only sources, nor are they necessarily exclusive to Latinas. However, they are starting points for reflections on theological anthropology that takes as its starting point Latinas lives.

To speak of these three phrases is to offer an arena for Latinas' theological contributions: Latinas' daily lives, their contributive voices, and their relational conception of selfhood. Family and community are fundamental dimensions of human nature. This essay captures the maturity of Ada María's scholarship, where she is beginning to make theological claims based on the insights gathered from the Latinas who
inform her work.

I remember years ago sitting at a conference watching Ada María being criticized for her use of ethnography and her refusal to make essentialist claims about all Latinas. I think back at this moment with a smile on my face because her critics could not have been more wrong. Today, we see more and more the ethnographic turn within the study of religion and the insider/outsider voice of the academic who does not remain radically distanced from their subjects of study. Today, we see discourses such as Latino/a, Black and Latin American theologies being criticized for their essentialist claims about the populations they claim to represent.

We cannot make those critiques of Ada's work. She seemed to have known long before many of us how to say something about a particular population yet have it impact a much broader readership.

The autobiographical voice Ada María embraces within many of her writings is an example of the significance of daily life in her work. I must confess that these are my favorite moments in her writings. For Ada María has a way of telling a story while educating us about sophisticated theological concepts all at the same time. While today we exist in an academy that constantly reminds us of the importance of context and culture, there is still hesitancy amongst academics to reveal themselves entirely. Thus, a certain detachment remains the norm in theological discourse. This is not the case in Ada María's voice. She is not afraid to show us that she is passionate about a topic and why.

I must conclude with a note on Ada María. As I have written in reflections on her after her death, Ada María was a mentor, an inspiration, and a friend. She was just as warm, brilliant and passionate in person as she is in her writing. She was an inspiration for many young Latino/a theologians. And she always went out of her way to read and comment on our work.

Her commitment to the everyday Latinas whose insights informed her work was unmatched. These "organic theologians," as she described them, both supported and informed her scholarship. They are part of this broader legacy Ada María has left us. She concludes Mujerista Theology with the words "la vida es la lucha," (to struggle is to live). We continue the struggle in her memory and she lives on in that struggle.

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