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+Gomez on \"Greater America\"

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Distinctly Catholic

Tuesday, Archbishop Jose Gomez gave a talk at Loyola Marymount University to inaugurate that school's Hispanic Ministry and Theology lectures. His speech, entitled "'Greater America': The Hispanic Mission and the New Evangelization," amplified some of the themes he addressed at the Napa Institute earlier this year, which I wrote about here. Gomez, both in his talks and in his day job as Archbishop of Los Angeles, confronts the reality of the Church in the twenty-first century in this country, and if these early talks are any indication, that future is in good hands.

Archbishop Gomez began his talk by pondering the emergence of devotion to St. Joseph in the New World, why for the first thirteen or fourteen centuries of the Church's existence, there was little in the way of devotion to St. Joseph but that such devotion flourished in the Age of Discovery and especially in the New World. It is good in examining the things of the Spirit to recall first that the history of salvation is a mysterious one. He notes that this devotion to Saint Joseph had an immediate cultural expression, with an amazing outpouring of paintings, *retablos*, sculptures and statues, feast, sermons, and prayers. It is important, too, to recall times when the faith generated culture because that will be the yardstick by which we measure the success of the New Evangelization: Does it generate culture?

There are three important themes in Gomez's talk. First, the need in the U.S. to reclaim a more accurate sense of history, one that does not start at Plymouth Rock and include only English speakers, but which acknowledges too early missionary efforts in what is now the Southwest, and in Florida, and in the north along the areas explored by the French. Gomez wants the Catholic contribution to be counted but he specifically wants Catholics to familiarize themselves with the history of the early missionaries. He wants us today to reclaim some of the evangelizing zeal that those early Catholic missionaries brought. Gomez highlighted Padre Antonio Margil, the 'Flying Padre,' a missionary who came to New Spain in 1683, known to walk long distances bringing the sacraments to the people and preaching in Nicaragua, Costa

Rica, Mexico, Texas and Louisiana. Gomez recalled Father Serra. He spoke of the ancient chapel of St. Joseph of Bethlehem of the Natives, in Mexico City, one of the first places of Catholic worship on the American mainland. This history is our history and, sadly, too many American Catholics do not know it, and Gomez wants that to change.

Knowledge for its own sake is a fine thing, but Gomez links this re-acquisition of knowledge about our Catholic roots with his two other projects, re-imagining a "Greater America" and the New Evangelization. First, he believes it is important to see the Americas as a whole. This was one of the central themes of the Synod of the Americas and the subsequent papal exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*. Just as Pope John Paul II denounced the division between Eastern Europe and Western Europe as an artifice, an unnatural division premised on a lie, so, too, in *Ecclesia in America*, reflecting the views of the synod fathers, did John Paul II insist that the division between North and South America be overcome. Gomez stated, "We need to study and preach the greater America? America in light of the Christian mission to the Americas, from the top of what is now Canada to the ends of South America and across to the Caribbean."

The Church must lead the way in overcoming this false division and giving voice to a sense of hemispheric solidarity but, sadly, since *Ecclesia in America*, the Church in this country has been embroiled in other problems. But, surely, the time has come to put some flesh on the bones of *Ecclesia in America*. There are a variety of ways to begin, from pairing parishes in the north with those in the south to encouraging U.S. seminarians to study one year in Latin America as part of their formation. But, if I had a magic wand and unlimited resources, I would also inaugurate a specifically intellectual project. Why are there not four university chairs established at pontifical universities in Quebec, at Catholic University in Washington, in Brazil and in Bogota, focused on the New Evangelization. The men or women selected for these chairs should not only be first rate theologians, but individuals of high culture, capable of engaging their universities' faculties in architecture or music or politics if not with particular expertise, with at least an affinity for their specialized cultural work. Let these professors be a leaven to the entire university, encouraging law schools to consider not only legal ethics, if by that we mean the avoidance of conflicts of interest and the like, but the ethical underpinnings of the law. Let them encourage university drama departments and music departments to produce great Catholic works of art, works that bring the "Flying Padre" and Father Serra to life for our own time. Let the men and women who hold these chairs come together for a week of discussion every year, to share the fruits of their work and discuss what has flourished and what proved a dead end. Let bishops join them, to listen to the results of their work. Here is a concrete project that might yield abundant fruit. Gomez does not have a magic wand either, but as Archbishop of the largest diocese in the country, he wields a large crozier, and surely he could encourage the Knights of Columbus or a handful of wealthy donors to fund such a project.

I suggest that these four chairs be focused on the New Evangelization in part because that is the third theme of Gomez's talk that warrants attention. The New Evangelization must begin with our own work. We must, as John Cavadini said in his talk to the young theologians at the USCCB conference on the New Evangelization last month, begin the New Evangelization by evangelizing ourselves. And, certainly, this one-time student of Msgr. John Tracy Ellis would agree with Archbishop Gomez that we should begin our examination of the New Evangelization by looking to the past and its moments of evangelization. Before we figure out how to proceed, it is always a good idea to know how we got here. Additionally, because the culture we seek to evangelize will increasingly be that of "Greater America," reacquainting ourselves with the evangelization efforts during the Age of Discovery actually serves to attune our minds to a time before the artificial divisions between the rich North and the poor South came about. (I use the adjectives "rich" and "poor" only in their economic significance: the South is rich in many cultural ways that find us in the North deeply impoverished.) Examining the past of "Greater America" and reclaiming its intellectual intuitions will better prepare us to deal with the emerging sociological reality of "Greater America" in our own day.

I do have a quibble with Archbishop Gomez's speech. He says at one point, "My brothers and sisters, I believe the great sign of our times is what our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has called "the eclipse of the sense of God." In part, this is the result of an aggressive project by elite groups to radically secularize and "de-Christianize" American culture "to drive God to the margins of our society and our lives." I am not naïve. I recognize that the Church has enemies. But, the reference to "elite groups" is unfortunate for several reasons. First, it sounds too much like a Roger Ailes-inspired populist talking point. Second, I think most "elite groups" are not so much hostile, still less aggressively so, to the Church. They just don't give a damn, and indifference is in many ways more difficult to overcome than active hostility. Third, it is sloppy to lump elite groups together. Hollywood has a more pernicious influence on shaping anti-Catholic attitudes than Harvard, and Hollywood is never about ideology, it is about cash. It is an industry, not an art school, and debauchery always sells well. Fourth, Archbishop Gomez, and other prelates, need to acknowledge that many elites do not exhibit any hostility to the Church. Certainly, the people who devise the programs at opera companies continue to stage "Dialogue of the Carmelites" and secular choruses continue to perform Bach's b minor Mass. Hell, PBS is even airing Father Barron's series on Catholicism. Whenever we scold, let us also praise. Finally, and most importantly, this talk of elite groups hostile to the Church, even if it is true, invites a defensive posture that is unhelpful. People who are crouched in a defensive posture almost always produce lousy art, do they not? They flee to nostalgia and you end up with EWTN. Additionally, we Catholics must acknowledge the degree to which we abandoned the field of culture to the barbarians by previously adopting a defensive stance. Pius IX and Pius X wounded Catholic intellectual life for generations. Those wounds not only marginalized us from the ambient culture, they struck deep at the Church's life too: I am not a possessive person, but I would not mind owning the pen with which Pius XII signed *Humani Generis*, confining de Lubac and others to silence for ten years, one of the greatest self-inflicted intellectual wounds of the twentieth century.

I raise this criticism in part because in his demeanor Archbishop Gomez does not actually appear defensive, still less triumphalistic or nostalgic. He comes across as gentle and caring and inviting. He is not a scold. But, when people hear talk of "elite groups" in the age of the Tea Party, their eyes glaze over. I also raise it because Gomez's talk came on the anniversary of another important speech by another significant churchman, Pope John XXIII's magnificent address to open the Second Vatican Council, in which he said: "In the daily exercise of our pastoral office, we sometimes have to listen, much to our regret, to voices of persons who, though burning with zeal, are not endowed with too much sense of discretion or measure. In these modern times they can see nothing but prevarication and ruin. They say that our era, in comparison with past eras, is getting worse, and they behave as though they had learned nothing from history, which is, none the less, the teacher of life. They behave as though at the time of former Councils everything was a full triumph for the Christian idea and life and for proper religious liberty. We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand." Like Gomez, Roncalli looks to history to provide judgment, calling it the "teacher of life" and a teacher that expels the gloom, especially that certain strain of narcissistic gloom that can frequently haunt the religious imagination.

Archbishop Gomez did not use the word "renaissance" in his talk, but I would suggest that this is what he is calling for, a Catholic cultural renaissance. In 1996, writing in the pages of the *New Republic* and reviewing a history of censorship in the movie industry, I called attention to a document recently passed by the USCCB entitled, "The Hispanic Presence in the New Evangelization in the United States." That text, too, has received insufficient attention since it was issued. What I wrote then bears repeating:

"The Bishops' document stated the problem and proposed a solution: "The New Evangelization is intended to bridge the gap between faith and culture by showing that a faith that does not generate culture is a sterile faith." Not since the first generation of Puritans set out to build their "city upon a

hill,? perhaps, has such a project as ?generating culture? been undertaken by any religion in American history. In the days of Pat Buchanan, this may sound alarming. But what the Bishops are suggesting is nothing strident. They have in mind not a culture war, but something more provocative and more profound: a renaissance of their own faith in their own cultural circumstances?.The dominant Hispanic presence in the Church of the next century will not seek to lead its members into a ghetto; it will lead them directly into American culture, acting on their rights as citizens, and hoping to illustrate to their fellow citizens the sweet truth that they profess. Sweetness, too, comes in many flavors, and someday we may have our own La Dolce Vita.?

I still like the ring of those words and still entertain the hope they expressed. And, reading the text of Archbishop Gomez? speech at Loyola Marymount they naturally came to mind. The link between the ?Greater America? Gomez presents and the New Evangelization is as obvious as it is encouraging and I am thrilled to see an important churchman making these connections. There is work, intellectual and cultural work, to be done. The stakes are as great today as they were for the first generation of missionaries to come to the Americas: There are souls to save, a Gospel to be preached, a Catholic culture to be born. As Gomez suggests, it is time that we learn about the old *retablos* of the sixteenth century so that we can better grasp the necessity, the spiritual, human, Catholic necessity, of making *retablos* for the twenty-first century.

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