

THE PAST OF THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE: **HERITAGE AND INDIGENOUS PROCESS**

By Wilfredo Canales

Country of Origin: Peru

Serving in: Paraguay

INTRODUCTION

To be able to give a little time to the task of retelling the pilgrimage of the Church of the Nazarene in Latin America has been a positive facet of those who have organized this first Nazarene Theological Conference. We cannot pretend to undertake an adequate theological reflection, and even less design a good strategy for mission, without taking a look back at the path that we have already walked.

Reading the historical accounts of those who have tried to give us a panoramic overview of the presence and development of the Church of the Nazarene in different parts of Latin America, USA and Canada, we can say that there is still a lot more road to cover in order to structure and systematize this journey or pilgrimage. From most of the essays it is evident that in the majority of the cases that the writers have met with serious difficulties in finding historical interpreted sources, disparity in the use of the tools of a historian (such as sources, occasional publications and eyewitness history, etc.) revealing an absence of a wider framework to inscribe the local, district and/or national histories in the totality of the church as a the body of Christ.

The most difficult and painful issue to face as a result of this first look backwards at our general pilgrimage is that we find a church which in most cases has not been listening to the voice of the past. Or perhaps, at best, they have only been listening to a one note melody, which is pragmatic, not evaluative. This has interfered with the process of the church being conscious of its own life.

Rev. Leonel López, District Superintendent of Cuba, affirmed “*the Cuban Nazarenes have been sailing in a sea of forgetfulness with respect to our own history*, which has been accompanied by a continual manifestation of the grace of God in half a century of existence... serving as an instrument for the advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth.”¹. These words of Rev. López reveal a situation which does not “belong” only to Cuban Nazarenes. This is the common situation of Latin American Nazarenes. Not to remind ourselves of our history, is equivalent to living without perspectives submerged in a “now” attitude , not permitting ourselves the necessary adjustments needed to make our ministry more relevant for the present circumstances in which we are called to serve.

Raúl Serradell, writing in the prologue of an important work about the history of the Christian church says:

¹ Leonel López, “A Historical Essay of the Church of the Nazarene in Cuba”, Unpublished paper of the 1st Ibero-American Nazarene Theological Conference (October 2004), 1, emphasis added.

Closing Paper: The Past (Wilfredo Canales)

Memory is an essential element in the formation of the collective identity. Lack or loss of memory will produce serious disturbances in identity of the community, the town or the nation. The collective memory is not only a conquest but it is also an instrument and an object of power. With his story of the memory of the people of God, the author who writes history has done a genuine exercise in the art of 'organizing the past in function of present needs' (Lucien Febvre). He has elaborated a tool which permits us to reconstruct memory on the foundations of our identity.²

We urgently need to remember. But not just as a simple chronological account or a cold academic exercise, but rather a critical reminder which allows us to evaluate our trajectory as a church without fear, but with committed passion for the purposes of God. We need to remember because we long to rediscover or rearticulate our feeling of identity, so that we can minister in the present context with hope that we can leave a better legacy for the future generations.³

The need to take a critical look at the past is not only a challenge for Nazarenes. It is a challenge for all Protestants in Latin America. José Míguez Bonino emphasizes the imperative of carrying out historical investigations of the Protestant movement in our Continent. He wrote a few years ago: "Latin American Protestantism needs desperately that letter (history), that legacy. And it is especially needed in this hour when the church is growing rapidly, with much religious fervor, new movement, in a world which appears to be 'going back' to all the old 'gods'. In this hour we need to link memory to destiny, remembrances and hopes, past and projects".⁴

This poses a challenge for us: we need to pay more attention to our history. We must do some serious historical reflection which is both balanced and committed to the cause of the Gospel which our church has chosen to serve. This conference has taken an important step, although a modest one, which will allow us to recognize that the pathway we need to take (that of articulating our histories). The road ahead is long but we need to go that way urgently.

Our legacy and indigenous process

In other essays we have referred to what could be called our foundational inheritance.⁵ Normally, when we talk about the legacy that we have received, we allude to the group of ideas and convictions declared by those believers who took the initial steps to sow the church of the Nazarene in our lands. We acknowledge that between the declared ideals and convictions and what really took place there is some distance and differences. However, those ideals and convictions, as a legacy or inheritance, continue to be valid in the sense that they allow us to evaluate the work carried out and the faithfulness or lack of it to the shared ideals.

² In Juan Driver, *La fe en la periferia de la historia: Una historia del pueblo cristiano desde la perspectiva de los movimientos de restauración y reforma radical* (Guatemala: Ediciones Semilla, 1997), 17.

³ We have pointed this out on previous occasions. See Wilfredo Canales, "Transmitiendo la herencia", in *Revista Ministerio* No. 1, Vol. VI (1992). Also Wilfredo Canales, "Recibiendo un legado", Unpublished paper, Nazarene Global Theology Conference (Guatemala, 2002).

⁴ "Carta a los jóvenes historiadores del protestantismo latinoamericano", in the web magazine *Espacio de Diálogo*, (FTL-México, No. 1, September-December 2004), 1-2.

⁵ See note 3.

Closing Paper: The Past (Wilfredo Canales)

In the specific process of planting churches in Latin America, those ideals and convictions were incarnated in particular styles of action, which have contributed to the character of the denomination in the different countries where we are working at present. It is evident that this process was not carried out in a uniform way. On one hand, the background of the first missionaries was not homogeneous, not only with regards to where they came from in the USA⁶ but also the antecedents of the groups of which they had been a part, some as pioneer missionaries working before the Nazarene church had been established.⁷ On the other hand, the social political, economic, cultural and religious conditions of the Latin American countries were also not homogeneous and as a result the insertion of the church in the respective societies did not occur in the same way.

We believe that it is important to honor the memory of the pioneers (missionaries as well as nationals) who, with no other incentive than the mystique of sharing the cause of the Kingdom of God, took the first steps in these lands sowing the church of which we are now a part. I would like to mention a few of them, honoring them in this generation. We remember: Leona Gardner (1902) in Cuba; Richard S. Anderson (1904) and Mardoqueo Paz in Guatemala; Roger Winans (1914), Espiridión Julca and Baltazar Rubio in Perú; Francisco and Lula H. Ferguson, Charles and Catalina Miller (1914), and Lucía García de Costa in Argentina; Samuel M. Stafford (1908) and Vicente G. Santín in México. We would like to give a tribute to them and through them to each and every person who in name or anonymously served the Lord establishing our church on Latin American soil. Ordained ministers and lay people, men and women, young and old, working class people and highly trained professionals, all contributed to building up the young Church of the Nazarene, giving her a space among the other denominations to proclaim the Gospel in this part of the world. The first twenty years, the pioneer period, presents a challenge for the Latin American Nazarene history writers and it needs to be met with seriousness and integrity.

Because space is limited, in this opportunity I would like to explore a little more deeply what the organizers of this conference have called *the indigenous process*. We say “exploratory outline” because it can only be preliminary and because we know that in the long run it should be an interpretative task done by a team. What I am going to share is the rough draft of a work which later needs to be deepened and amplified. However, I consider that the perceptions shared by the authors of the historical essays about the Latin American countries where our church is ministering⁸ and my own perceptions and initial investigations, fruit of my ministry as a missionary and professor in three regions of our church in Latin America, give us the basic perspective to start this process.

⁶ This is important to emphasize because the Church of the Nazarene in the U.S. from the beginning faced the dilemma concerning the degree of normativity that the church would have to orient the lives of the members. The discussion depended on whether the “proposals” came from the East or the West, the North or South of the country. Of course, we must say that depending on the source of these proposals, they were labeled as “conservative” or “liberal” by the respective groups. For more details, see Timothy Smith, *Called Unto Holiness: The Formative Years* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House).

⁷ It is interesting to note that regarding the beginning of our church in Latin America, in some countries the Nazarenes arrived before becoming Nazarenes. See references in the papers of Richard Faúndez, Ignacio Malca and Evelio Vásquez, relating to the pioneer work in Chile, Argentina and Perú, respectively.

⁸ The papers have been available for all the participants of the conference on the webpage of the Seminario Nazareno de las Américas: www.sendas.ws

We will begin by analyzing the following criteria:

Missiological criteria

It is very clear that the Church of the Nazarene did not come into being as a haphazard religious project. From the start, our church took on a role in the context of the mission of God in the midst of history. In a document which has become the key framework for our church at the beginning of the new Millennium, the Board of General Superintendents reaffirmed that: “It was founded to transform the world by spreading Scriptural holiness. *Our mission is to make Christlike disciples of all nations.*”⁹

The premises of this declaration, which are both basic and fundamental, have not always been the ground on which we have built the work of our church. Missionologically, the indigenous process of the Latin American Nazarenes appears a somewhat weak and deficient, in some places even with significant setbacks. As Evelio Vásquez correctly points out, “the first national pastors and missionaries did not talk about *holistic mission* as the church does today, but for the early days of the work of the Nazarene Church in Peru, a holistic gospel was preached.”¹⁰ Curiously this fact is true in most of the cases of the initial or pioneer period of the setting up of the church.¹¹ But it did not occur in the same way in the later experiences, and in general even less so today in the Hispanic ministries of our church.¹²

Something happened in our indigenous processes in the Latin American Nazarene context, which led us not only to not keep up this initial focus in ministry (although only embryonic in nature), but also, not to amplify this perspective in the context of our Continent, which is so deteriorated and so urgently needing testimonies of holistic transformation. Obviously, the dilution of this missiological perspective happened gradually and was not automatic. Even though in our church’s declarations and in the foundational statements and experiences of the pioneers this aspect was always mentioned, as the years passed by ministerial priorities have been focused in other directions. In this process, crucial elements of the missiological framework have been diluted and, consequently, ambiguity has tended to descend over the nature and mission of the church distorting the profiles which should have been crystal clear for everyone.

The Board of General Superintendents’ declaration reminds us that “*our mission is to make Christlike disciples of all nations*”, nothing more and nothing less. However, in the day to day activities of most of our congregations, for a long time back, making *disciples* has been replaced by making *members* in the likeness of the older members of the club. The *organization of a church* is defined basically from an administrative perspective (number of people, the

⁹ *Una fe viva: Las creencias de los Nazarenos* (Kansas City: CNP, 2001), 1, emphasis added.

¹⁰ “Heritage and Indigenous Process in Peru”, 3.

¹¹ It is not a coincidence that in the oldest works of our church in Latin America, there is mention of educational efforts (mostly primary schools), and small medical dispensaries as means to serve people in the name of Jesus Christ.

¹² Of course, we do not ignore the efforts of some congregations and districts that have developed a broad focus in their ministry. We make this comment regarding the great majority of congregations, that not only lack developed ministries in the framework of integral mission, but have not even defined a missiological framework for what they do.

Closing Paper: The Past (Wilfredo Canales)

naming of the board, etc.), whose *identity* has been linked to formal symbols such as liturgical styles, denominational language, characteristic church events (such as annual church meetings, district assembly, etc.), rather than the Biblical focus (a faith community who expresses the Lordship of Christ) and whose values are marked by the essential values of the Kingdom of God.¹³ These should be incarnated in the radical commitment to the eternal purposes of God in our specific contexts and cultures.

This ecclesiastic slant was accentuated by a *strategic* option (whether voluntary or circumstantial, will need to be discussed later) which gave certain stability to the model. Our church in Latin America has put down roots, mostly, in the peripheral areas. That is to say, at the national level, the mission chose to work in the interior of the countries rather than the capital cities; the church grew more easily among the rural population than the urban situation. When the church did start to work in urban areas, it sought out the rural Nazarenes who had migrated to the cities. Many of them lived in peripheral sectors of the cities and maintained the rural way of “doing church”. Our indigenous process has not been able to turn this around, with a very few exceptions.¹⁴ We have still not developed significant plans for a more holistic ministry, for the different urban contexts where we are present in a rather modest way. This influences too the *pastoral* aspects of our church which, in the majority of the cases and during a long time, have become defensive and protective, keeping to a minimal any contact and/or cooperation with other evangelical churches. Even worse, on occasions, in certain circumstances, this pastoral attitude has been competitive, measuring our “results” in comparison to other the successes or failures of other churches.

The changes that have been produced in the different stages of the life of our church here, have not been profound changes; they have been rather adjustments to methodology (practical questions), without changing the basic missiological perspective which has always remained in place.

In an atmosphere of missionary fragility described above, we can understand why it is that today we have so many difficulties in trying to preserve our “Nazarene identity” in the face of the influences of diversity if movements which are present in contemporary religious context¹⁵ and which, in one way or another, have reached our congregations.

Organizational Criteria

From the organizational point of view, we declare that, as a denomination, when we were founded and in the first stages of consolidation, we opted for a paradigm somewhere between the Episcopal Church and congregationalism. This implies that every instance of decision making in the church should be involve genuine representative participation, not just decoratively but with equality, with both lay people and ordained ministers taking part in the process. This, because it was understood that both groups form the church, and it is through the church, in the processes

¹³ For Zachariah, the father of John the Baptist, these essential values are “holiness and justice” (Luke 1:74-75). For the Lord Jesus, “holiness, justice and love” (Matt. 5—7).

¹⁴ Such as the Central Church of the Nazarene in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil. Even in this case, it is a medium sized city near an urban center.

¹⁵ It is interesting to note the diverse perspectives of general analysis that we find in the authors of the papers on the Church of the Nazarene in the different countries. We recommend a detailed reading of each of them.

Closing Paper: The Past (Wilfredo Canales)

of consensus and disagreement, that the Lord would manifest His will and guide the people in the specific purposes and lines of action.

The most elemental observation tells us that in practice, our indigenous processes assumed and reproduced the *procedures* of an organizational structure,¹⁶ but this is not the case with the *principles* which they were based on. The *programs* have been taken on board with enthusiasm (schemes have been defended ardently in themselves), but we have not been able to develop the *ministries* which these programs were designed to serve.¹⁷

To make the panorama even more complicated, we need to point out another key aspect. The organizational design of our church was taken from the social context marked by political and democratic modern values (expressed in representative roles). The Latin American Church was formed in another context, that of a political structure where the values of the “cacique” or tribal leader, were still prevalent. The Latin American political environment was still led by strong autocratic leaders, charismatic figures who moved the masses. The values of those schemes minimized or camouflaged formal proceedings of representative democracy, which in essence permitted the privileged to remain in power. This legacy, in the context of our church, an organized structure, in spite of having the declared values, was accompanied by its own style of “doing things”.¹⁸ In the majority of the cases, the indigenous process followed the pragmatic paradigm instead of maintaining the declared paradigm in the organizational values of the church. For the majority of the leaders (district superintendents) who had to assume the period of transition from missionary to national leadership, their role was defined in terms of perpetuating the forms rather than the organizational values.¹⁹

As time has progressed, instead of remedying this situation, it has got more complicated to the point that in many places, several levels of our ecclesiastical organization can be perceived to be traveling on a very autocratic pathway. To give an example: In the first stage, at the local level, the guidelines for leadership were given to district functionaries; in the second stage, the local churches started to show some resistance to district leadership, which obviously had not taken them into account in the moment of making decisions. Today, it is possible to note a marked tendency on the part of the local churches to ignore the relevancy or ascendancy of the district leadership in various aspects of the church activities.

¹⁶ These procedures are faithfully reflected in what we call the *Manual* of the Church.

¹⁷ On many occasions in many places, the church’s “cause” has been the “defense of the Manual” (as a cold procedure), when it is fundamental to defend and protect the principles that are behind those procedures. It has not been in vain that every four years our General Assembly has approved adjustments, modifications, and clarifications to these procedures so they better reflect the principles that we have assumed as authoritative.

¹⁸ We must remember that in many places the missionaries that had administrative leadership responsibilities, instead of incarnating new values, assumed the role of “chief” or “boss” which made more difficult the formation of models which would be closer to the values that our church has always upheld.

¹⁹ Even when these national leaders did not have the same resources that corresponded to the role of missionary (especially economic resources, status symbols, etc.). There is a valuable testimony in regard to the experiences of this stage, that was written by a well-known and beloved colleague, now in the Lord’s presence: Joaquin Lima, “El rol del Superintendente de Distrito Nacional” [The role of the national district superintendent], 1st Regional Leadership Conference of the Church of the Nazarene (Lima, 1983), unpublished paper.

Theological criteria

The *theological criteria* allude to the reflexive dimension of the church. That is to say, that capacity which the church has or should have to think about her role in the context in which she moves. We need to assimilate and rearticulate the message that we need to proclaim, taking into account what we have received, and our own Biblical position and particularly the special pilgrimage in the midst of the world's highways which plants new challenges to those which the mother church had to meet.

The document of the Board of General Superintendents that I have referred to before declares that: "The Church of the Nazarene was born in the dawn of the 20th century! P.F. Bresee and other leaders were deeply convinced that God had called them for the well defined purpose of proclaiming to church and to the world, the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the *Wesleyan tradition of holiness*."²⁰ This particular character of the gospel is defined in this document under the title "We are a Holiness people".²¹

The pioneers of our church fulfilled very well the role of transmitting to us, in the light of their knowledge and experience, what this message implied for them. Our first pastors and lay leaders accepted readily this message, with passion, taking it everywhere. However, the indigenous process, once again, was curtailed, with the passing of the years, instead of producing a process of *theological maturation*, which would have allowed all the church (both ordained ministers and well as lay people) to discover the implications of this message in the light of the new circumstances. Instead what took place was a process of *doctrinal fixation* which did not facilitate the process of understanding the biblical message of holiness and its demands on the Latin American context.

Theologically, a *repetitive* rather than a *reflexive* attitude was adopted. In this sense, for example, with regard to the biblical challenge of a holy life, the teaching and preaching of Nazarene systematic theology was reproduced,²² rather using than a Biblical theology approach which would have reflected better the character of our Wesleyan theology. On the other hand, this repetitive attitude, resulted in defining *theological faithfulness*, in terms of repeating exactly what our official text books of systematic theology state, instead of evaluating that faithfulness in connection with the truth of the Word of God, interpreted within the framework of our own circumstances and ministry.

This criteria of evaluation is included within Nazarene Theological Education, especially that which has been provided through the seminaries and institutes. Independently of the times and of the pragmatic designs²³, our theological education in its basic forms has been more

²⁰ Op. cit., 16, emphasis added.

²¹ Ibid., 5.

²² In using this phrase, we are not suggesting that the systematic theology of our church (in the English-speaking context) has always been homogeneous. We recognize that the understanding of our cardinal doctrines in our denomination is dynamic, and within it there are currents of interpretation that in perspective allow us to actualize our message to challenge the world in which we minister. For a wider historical vision of these interpretive tensions, we recommend Mark R. Quanstrom, *A Century of Holiness Theology: The Doctrine of Entire Sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene 1905 to 2004* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2004).

²³ When the history of our Latin American Nazarene theological education is written, surely it will emphasize the fact that our educational strategy has been very inconsistent and we have made constant changes without doing

Closing Paper: The Past (Wilfredo Canales)

repetitive than transformational. The few modest attempts to introduce innovations and more in-depth theological education programs have been met with pragmatism which, in the long run, has drowned the desire to create spaces for responsible reflection, which would permit the church to minister in more depth in a world which every day presents bigger challenges.

It ought to be mentioned as part of the indigenous process in Latin America that the lack of theological reflection was partly due to lack of resources for the Hispanic Nazarenes. In spite of being one of the most important language groups after English, the amount of Nazarene literature in Spanish which would have stimulated serious reflection has been very deficient. We identify ourselves as a holiness church, heirs of Wesley's teachings. However, what we have in Spanish of the writings of Wesley has been very little.²⁴ On the other hand, Hispanics who are committed to serious theological reflection, but do not read English, have not been able to follow the rate of the theological proposals which are being made in the Anglo world of our church.²⁵ We are confident that, with new resources being produced, our reflection can be enriched and this could be reflected in the ministry of the church.

Conclusion

The panorama of our indigenous process, which has been briefly explored, presents some clear challenges for Latin American Nazarenes.

1. We need to recover a *missiological perspective* for our church which will be more faithful to the mandate of Jesus Christ (Mateo 28). As a church, we do not exist to put people on a pedestal; we exist to serve Jesus Christ. And, according to his mandate, we must make disciples who are like him. In the light of all of this, discipleship should not be a "task" alongside of "evangelism", as is normally understood; it must become the objective task of the life and mission of the church. How would it be if in our annual sessions and district assemblies instead of reporting how many "new members we have gained", we celebrate that we have become better disciples with a stronger testimony. And that as the people of God, we are being used by Him to "add to the number those who are being saved". This change in perspective would mean that evangelism was being carried out, completely, by the local church and would be evaluated in the light of obedience to Jesus Christ.
2. We need to rediscover and value anew the *principles* which should support our organizational structure. At the same time, we need to revise the consistency and consequence of our style of how we do things as a church, at all levels. It is of no use to us to keep up organizational appearances when the decision making processes do not reflect our values. Our organizational culture needs also to reflect that we are a holiness church or at least that we are trying to be so. This implies a process of retraining of our leadership at all

serious studies about what was implemented in the past, its level of implementation, its results and limitations, etc., in order to build on the basis of this analysis, programs that would be better and progressive instead of only cancelling previous programs.

²⁴ Until very recently, we had [in Spanish] only three volumes of Wesley: Two volumes of *Sermons* and *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. These were published by the Casa Nazarena de Publicaciones. We celebrate the fact that a few years ago we have begun to have access to the 14 volumes of the Works of Wesley, in a joint effort of several publishers.

²⁵ We recommend, especially, the works of Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, H. Ray Dunning and William M. Greathouse.

Closing Paper: The Past (Wilfredo Canales)

levels in order to recover those values which formed a part of the original project of our denomination.

3. The Church of the Nazarene needs urgently to illuminate actions with more reflection and at the same time, feed the reflection with challenges that come from action. From the Scriptures we learn that *theology* is not just an ornament or a hobby in church life. The truth is that *theology* is the daughter of *mission*. Before we reflect, we obey; fruit of our reflection should be our commitment to the Lord and his kingdom. As we study the Bible, under the guidance of the Spirit, not only in our Institutions of Theological education but also in the day to day life of the church, at all levels, we will be led to a more profound renewal which will compel us to continue in the task of conquering our world. Our church needs, as the disciples did on the road to Emmaus, to have an experience of reflecting on the word of God guided by the hand of the Risen One, which will make our hearts burn and will transform our Jerusalems full of shame and failure into the transformational message of hope and full restoration which is only possible through the power of the living God. So our reflection should not be prisoner to pragmatism nor inactivity. Neither of these prisons honors our church. The Lord has called us to do something greater than that (1 P. 2:9).