

Receiving a Legacy

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(translated from the Spanish by Newell Morgan)

Remembering the presence of the Church of the Nazarene in Latin America confronts us with two very important challenges: First, despite the profusion of testimonials that there are about the work of the Church in most of the Latin American countries,¹ we lack an ample and integral historical perspective. This in itself has not allowed us to relate and evaluate all the factors that have marked the existence and task of our Church on the continent. The absence of an integral historical perspective (retrospective vision), conspires against the forging of a church project that, having set itself in a certain context, needs to take root and be pertinent to the same perspective (prospective vision). The importance of this historical view, that is task of the historian, is emphasized by Rubem Alves, when he states:

The historian, then, is someone who recovers lost memories and distributes them as if they were a sacrament lost to the memory. Indeed, what better communitarian sacrament exists than the memories of a common past, marked by the existence of pain, sacrifice, and hope? To gather in order to distribute. He is not only an archaeologist of memories. *He is a sower of visions and hopes.*²

Second, those of us that comprise the new generation of Nazarenes on this continent are in urgent need of responding to a crucial question: *What does it mean to be a Nazarene in Latin American today?* It is a secret to no one that, in the middle of the "religious renaissance"³ that global society is experiencing, we confront the challenge of a great number of new religious movements whose beliefs and practices have been spread widely, affecting to Christian churches in many ways, creating subtle syncretisms and relativizing the presence of so-called institutionalized religion (read this as "denominational," in the evangelical context). John Mackay has said, "There are moments in the history of individuals and peoples, particularly in days of crisis, when the memory of yesterday opens the toward the morning, *when the awaking of a sense of inheritance becomes a powerful determinant of a destiny.*"⁴

In light of these challenges we would do well to ask ourselves: What legacy have we received from the pioneer Nazarenes, national and foreign, who with their tenacious effort carried forward a work that has had impact on several generations of Latin Americans? Without a doubt, as we affirmed some time ago: "There is an inheritance that we are in urgent need of preserving. Surely with the passage of time, there are aspects of our ministry as a Church that have to be revised and adapted to new challenges and circumstances. But, in the middle of it all, there is a nucleus of elements constituting our inheritance as a Church that we are responsible to preserve."⁵ We propose to review some key elements of the legacy that we have received. *We Latin American Nazarenes are conscious that we are part of a Church:*

1. With a defined Evangelical legacy. This important declaration registered in our Manual,⁶ describes a church that is rooted in a rich Christian history. Therefore, we consider

ourselves heirs of an evangelical legacy that is connected with the preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. There is the gospel to share, the good news of Jesus Christ. The Articles of Faith of our Constitution⁷ give the best testimony of what our “deposit of the faith,” according to the Pauline expression, is. Further, these do not constitute simple doctrinal declarations without their corresponding existential roots. Rather, they are the constant reminder of the frame of life within which we must move toward the fulfillment of our mission. The evangelical identity that characterizes our Church sprouts from a serious commitment to the Scriptures, as our highest norm of faith and conduct.

Within this evangelical legacy, we assume with integrity the Biblical message of a holy life as the norm for a Christian faith that honors God and seeks to be useful in its intentions. In this vein, it belongs to us as Latin American Nazarenes to continue in exegetical and cultural exploration so that this Biblical truth can be caught, lived, and transmitted with integrity in our cultural contexts. We need to relate this teaching to the problematic one within which the Church ministers. There should be no area of human endeavor which is excluded from the proclamation and influence of the message of full salvation from God through Christ Jesus.

2. *Committed to world-wide evangelization.* Moreover, we ourselves are the fruit of the pioneering efforts of our church in that endeavor of reaching the world with the message of the gospel. The commitment to world-wide evangelization, which has always characterized our Church, is not something added with the passing of time, but rather, it constituted a characteristic of its identity at the time of its founding as a denomination.⁸ Tied to this, we Latin American Nazarenes perceive that our participation in the Church ought to be given in terms of greater co-responsibility to the commitment of evangelizing the world. Also, when we speak of worldwide evangelization, we are alluding to a task that is for all the Church and presupposes an integral approach to the human problem of looking for total transformation. Because of these, our church has developed, in addition to basic the evangelistic ministries, ministries of service (compassion), programs of education on several levels, and an intense use of resources such as literature, radio, etc., even though our financial resources have always been limited. In this vein, what has been fulfilled in our countries is what Sergio Franco remembers about the first Nazarenes in the U.S.A.: "As soon as the Church was organized it sent a missionary, founded a school, and began a newspaper, although it did not have the money for any of the three."⁹

The ministry of our church has occurred in a Latin American context that is not homogenous. This has outlined a rich diversity in the expression of our Church, within its own contexts. There is a wealth to share, among Latin American Nazarenes, with respect to the expressions of worship and the joy of praise. Also we share in sensitivity and solidarity in face of pain and hopelessness, as well as in the effort, as part of evangelicals everywhere, to chart new courses for our beloved nations. We have the challenge to transform, in the name of Jesus Christ, all of human reality in which we are placed.

3. *Committed to full a discipleship* — personal and congregational. We arose as a simple church, with neither abundant nor sophisticated resources. We arrived in Latin America in almost imperceptible ways. Our pioneers, missionaries and nationals, had to face many unexpected changes in order to sow the message of the gospel in these lands. They worked with no other resource than their faith in Jesus Christ, with no other conviction that that

they were doing the will of God, and with no other goal than to forge disciples committed to a life honoring the name of the Lord. In this effort, the cultivation and development of spiritual disciplines (study and meditation on the Word, prayer, worship, service, fasting, etc.), constituted the norm of our pioneers in living and proclaiming the faith.

We Latin American Nazarenes must rescue this part of the heritage of our predecessors because the present context demands of us, for the fulfillment of the mission, the development and exercise of a faith that can stand in the midst of limitation and scarcity. We need to persevere as a church of deep and reverent prayer, of eager study of the Word, of committed service to the Lord, etc. This will give clear meaning to our ministerial action and will not allow our energies to be spent on secondary or incidental things that have no connection with the kingdom of God.

We assume the challenge of preserving the legacy and to making our Church an appropriate place where the glory of God may be shown.

¹Especially through what we call "missionary books." For example: see Spangenberg. *South America –Territories of the Eucalyptus: An Analysis of a Nazarene Mission in South America* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1967). J. Fred Parker. *Continental Mission: The Church of the Nazarene from Mexico to Argentina* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1984).

² "Theological Ideas and Their Ways through the Institutional Furrows of Brazilian Protestantism", Pablo Richard, ed. . ., *Materials for a History of Theology in Latin America* (San Jose ': DEL, 1981), p.363-364. Italics ours.

³Cf. John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene. *Megatrends 2000: Ten New Directions for the '90s* (Bogota: Publishing Norm, 1990).

⁴ Mentioned by Wilfredo Canales . "Wesleyan Thought in Latin America: Currents and Challenges for the Holiness Movements. " Unpublished communication for the Seminary in Latin American Theology 1994, School of Theology. Nazarene University, Costa Rica. Emphasis added.

⁵Wilfredo Canales. "Trasmitting the Inheritance." *Ministry Magazine* (Kansas City) 1, 1 (SAW, 1992): 20. This work has served as a basis for the preparation of the present article.

⁶"*Historical Christianity and the Wesleyan Heritage of Holiness: A Holy Faith.* " Manual 1997-2001 – Church of the Nazarene: History, Constitution, Government, Ritual. (Kansas City: NP, 1997), p. 14.

⁷Ibid., pp. 26-33.

⁸Idem., p. 22.

⁹ Appendix "Nazarenes in Latin American". In M.E. Redford and Gene Van Note. *The Rise of the Church of the Nazarene* (Kansas City: NP, 1988), p. 133.