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Together en la Lucha

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Presidential Address, ACHTUS Colloquium 2019

I chose the title for this colloquium, “Together *en la Lucha*: Seeking Justice Through Religion and Human Rights?” mostly because of the word “together.” Really, I thought of using “*juntos*” as in “*en conjunto*,” our theological category, or a “*conjunto*” music group, but then got all tied up into the issues of identity and naming and the dominant masculine ending of “*juntos*.” So, instead of having to say *juntoXas*, as in *J-U-N-T-O-X-A-S*, for the past year and multiple times throughout this colloquium, I just went with “together.” This also allowed me to speak my first and most comfortable language, Spanglish—although I am really focusing on *pastoral y teología en y de conjunto*.¹

Tonight, I would like to take time to reflect upon what it means to be together *en la lucha*. I am directed by the question, “What have I learned in my fifteen years in ACHTUS about *conjunto*, *la lucha*, and *justicia*?” Don’t worry, I will not keep you more than two hours as I hammer out my musings around these topics. *Solo estoy jugando. Hay muchísimo postre que comer y mucho más hay que desahogar y festejar con música y baile*. Therefore, I will just hit the major points of my musings ... only one hour’s worth!

¹ Néstor Medina and Neomi De Anda, “*Teología en y de conjunto*,” *Encyclopedia of Christianity in the Global South*, ed. Mark A. Lamport. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

Truth be told, I have been thinking about this address for two years. I had great dreams of the hours I would spend crafting the perfect draft and sculpting the perfect phrases. Where within its flowing prose the address would say, “I have two main points to share. First, when it comes to *justicia, conjunto* is not optional. Second, *soñando* and *luchando* for other possible worlds, which may co-exist, must nourish us in our complicated ways of *pastoral y teología de y en conjunto*.”

I did not really sit down to write this until last Wednesday. By Thursday evening I was somewhere between fleshing out the entire paper and keeping my comedic introduction and calling the second paragraph the conclusion, then heading out to buy the last few items I had forgotten for the colloquium—decaf coffee and diet cranberry juice, to be exact. Why do I remember? Because this woman living with diabetes needs her morning hit of kidney cleaning fluid.

Then I realized that the drafting of this address had been happening for years. It was not happening through my sitting and crafting beautiful prose. It was happening in the little details every single day, *en los momentitos*. It was happening within specific contexts and framed by the contradictions of life.

It was happening in 2006 when I was acting as a stand-in for a microphone check for the videographer who would be recording Miguel Díaz’s presidential address that evening and Carmen Nanko-Fernández said she got chills thinking about me as ACHTUS president. I was a struggling doctoral student at that point just about ready to give up on my program.

It was happening as David Sánchez and I joked about my one-vote win in the ACHTUS election of 2017. It was at that same colloquium’s reception that Cristy Castillo said she could not even imagine being ACHTUS president. David and I quickly quoted Dolores Huerta and

said, “*Si se puede!*” Cristy Castillo and Alejandra Angel are now well on the road of the twenty-year plan of that dream David and I imposed upon them that night. Let us dream of another run of five or maybe even ten ACHTUS women presidents in a row. Then, let us dream into existence a time when these categories of gender no longer matter because our theological work has expanded our Catholic ecclesial structures to be fully welcoming and inviting to all.

The drafting of this address happened as the Black Catholic Theological Symposium celebrated its fortieth anniversary and ACHTUS celebrated its thirtieth anniversary. May these organizations continue to accompany one another for another seventy cumulative years!

It was happening as I listened to our younger generations speak about what they needed to make sure we continue the work of ACHTUS.

It was happening as Patrick Reyes from the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE), told Jackie Hidalgo and me that FTE would like to partner with ACHTUS to do what ACHTUS seems to do so well, mentor young Latinx Catholic scholars. Hence the birth of the new FTE/ACHTUS Mentoring Program with a cohort of four future ACHTUS leaders.

The drafting of this address was happening as the news of Marc Gonzalez’s, Luis Leon’s, and David Sánchez’s sudden deaths this past year reached us. Why do so many of our scholars of color die so young?

It was happening as Néstor Medina responded to my very incoherent thoughts and rant about our own institutions making decisions for us or forgetting our existence altogether. Those were the first actual written words of this address. Thank you, Néstor, for the many hours of lost sleep to help me work through the details, the descriptors, and the theories that inform this address.

The drafting of this presidential address was happening as I told a woman that she had unknowingly signed away her and her daughter's rights to stay in this country as a condition of being released from detention. They had left home and family for a better life for this teen as well as to be able to send money home to their parents and grandparents because complications from diabetes had made working the family farm nearly impossible for them. Why does searching for a different life with less hardship mean even more hardship for most people in the world?

The drafting was happening as people honored me and my thoughts by drafting and sharing papers for this colloquium. And as Mark Zeitzmann, Laurie Eløe, and Cheyenne Palmer, with a sprinkle of Michael Romero, took care of thousands of details which I will never know to make this colloquium happen. Laurie did send me a great quotation from the works of Teilhard de Chardin, the topic of her dissertation, which grabbed her attention as she worked on endless details for ACHTUS in the morning and wrote her dissertation in the afternoon for the entire month of May. Thank you all for your hours of work toward this thirtieth colloquium.

In my historical narrative, I am counting the two colloquia that happened the first year as two parts of the same: therefore, ACHTUS Colloquium 1 a and 1 b. Ah! The power of being the storyteller!

The drafting of this address was also happening as Michael Anthony De Anda and so many other "foreign" names of scholars were mispronounced during their Ph.D. hooding ceremony. Why do some names carry more importance than others?

It was happening as many of our ACHTUS members lost loved ones and dealt with chronic illness over the last few months and weeks.

It was happening last week as Martin Rosenau and I bottled beer for our days together at this colloquium. At the exact same time we bottled, our systems allowed for that triple-lettered organization to hold a public demonstration in the City of Dayton. Yes. More people arrived to protest this demonstration,² but let us dream into existence a world where our systems do not allow for such legal public demonstrations and where these groups and their agendas do not dominate.

The drafting of this address has been happening as the Micah Theotokos Marianist Lay Community, my local church, keeps open arms as I fly in and out repeatedly.

It has been happening as the Michael Means Marianist PULSE community dares to live the dreams and challenges of intentional community and full-time service.

It has been happening as the still untended thousands of details for the colloquium faded, beginning Tuesday of last week, while questions of people's well-being, stories of devastation, and mixed emotions demanded the spotlight because of Monday night's storm.³ I did not expect to be able to give such strong physical proof for Dr. Hidalgo's presidential address on the environmental apocalypse just one year after she gave it. I wish that were not the case.

The drafting of this address happened when I forgot to send Laurie the cover image for tonight's program and quickly snapped a picture of the stack of beverages sitting in the living room with the beautiful image of María de la Leche given to me by Jackie. I took this picture because the details of beverages became far more important as water became unavailable in

² Kevin Williams, "Hate Comes to Dayton, and Dayton Unites Against It," *The New York Times*, May 26, 2019, A24.

³ Daniel Victor and Sarah Mervosh, "Tornados Rip Through Ohio, Killing at Least 1," *The New York Times*, May 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/28/us/ohio-tornadoes-dayton.html>.

Dayton. Laurie very quickly named this new image *Nuestra Señora de los Refrescos*. That tower of *bebidas* nourish, sustain, and heal us these days together and provide the vehicle over which to gather and *compartir* with each other, even in our broken and sometimes hurtful ways. This week, these *bebidas* became closely tied to the disaster-stricken areas highly related to global climate change and to the forced migrations of peoples because of our created systems, which unjustly displace people from their homes and into violent systems of mistrust and hatred. These *bebidas* became closely tied to the *bebidas* mothers give their children on this migratory path, including *leche de pecho*, and to the baby bottles and cups which young children are carrying as they suffer through the many times and multiple days in the *hieleras* and into long hours of unknown futures. This is like the exchanges between Mary and Jesus during the flight into Egypt, fleeing for their lives.

The drafting of this presidential address happens this was because “together en la *lucha*” is not about enormous theories of what will shape the world. To write this address is the privileged perspective I have of experiencing the living of life and being trained to write about it. To do *teología* from this perspective means watching carefully over others (*lo pastoral*). But all of you in this room and so many more are the ones who make the actual stuff of “together en la *lucha*.” *Pastoral y teología de y en conjunto* are about tending to the tiniest of details for the living of life, the fragility of life, and the care for life. It is about living the *momentitos* to attend to the furthering of life. The social and legal systems that include the fraught notion of rights and the upholding of those rights are but one small part of this life.

It is within the tiny and mundane details that people find God and express their faith. Within these details, we are able to hold in tension that which liberates and that which oppresses, as was noted by *las Doctoras* and *Doctoras-in-training* in their papers at this colloquium. Large

theories have such difficulty holding those two in tension, in the same way as do *los momentitos* of life. It is within those tiniest of details that we not only begin to dream but also move in our messy and bumbling human ways inSpired (the “S” is capitalized here) toward co-creating a world in which many worlds coexist. *Conjunto*. Together.

Conjunto is not optional because the majority of those who spend the most time in our world attending to the tiniest details of life just to make ends meet do not have an option not to attend to all of those details. Attending to these tiny details not only keeps life moving but also creates new life within the unjust and sinful social systems we create.

I propose then that *pastoral y teología de y en conjunto* are not optional for us in this academy because we have made an option for those cultures which systems of domination have deemed for death. Therefore, we have committed ourselves to the option for the lives of the peoples, lives that systems of oppression wish to annihilate. In ACHTUS, we have made this commitment because we see ourselves among these peoples. We are not *the only*, but we are *among*. And because we are among the people who have been unjustly predetermined for death, our scholarly methodologies focus on *conjunto* within the smallest of *momentitos* and while attending to the millions of details of life first and the actual writing of this work second. It is not the writing that brings about better relationship or what some within Christian traditions call justice. It is the attention and time within the *momentos* we spend with and for one another, in which we build, sustain, nurture, hurt, break, mend, and grow these relationships with the never fully attained utopian vision de *otros mundos*.

Gracias.