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Natalia Imperatori-Lee, Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present

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Natalia Imperatori-Lee. *Cuéntame: Narrative in the Ecclesial Present*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. 158 pp. \$35.00 Paper. ISBN: 9781626982673.

Natalie Imperatori-Lee admirably delves into the task of developing an ecclesiology using the particularity of narratives that emerge from a U.S. Latino/a Catholic context. She does so in order to reveal the variegated experiences and expressions of the universal character of Catholicism. In this ground-breaking book comprised of an Introduction and five chapters, she dedicates herself to considering literary narrative as a *locus theologicus* for ecclesiology.

Imperatori-Lee situates her starting point at the heart of U.S. Latinx theological anthropology, which acknowledges human beings to be inherently communal and social. This means that “[human beings] are already woven into preexistent, unchosen communities that constitute identity” (ix). Imperatori-Lee demonstrates this by acknowledging the people and groups that helped her formulate her task as an ecclesiologist. She credits the work of Flannery O’Connor, who suggests that in our stories we make ourselves known. She directs our attention to the type of story that emerges from an open-ended conversation in which the interlocutors recount an event or events that have captured their interest and begins in a Spanish-speaking setting with the imperative “*cuéntame*” – “tell me about it!” In this type of storytelling, comments, judgments and questions circulate as tangents, leave the conversation, and draw spoken and unspoken conclusions. Interlocutors make sense of the event even if it is contingent and, in the process, formulate their identity through this narrative even if at the unconscious level.

Imperatori-Lee demonstrates that by entering into this type of narrative, with a particular topic to begin the conversation and a desire to name overtly the identity being formulated in this process, we uncover how people who are not necessarily in the power structure of the institutional Church shape an operational ecclesiology; this ecclesiology

reveals the work of the Spirit and the *sensus fidei* of believers (22-24). Thus, Imperatori-Lee advocates an inductive rather than the usual deductive approach to ecclesiology. This dovetails very nicely with Pope Francis's affirmation of the theology of the people, a theological method that starts at the bottom and moves to the top.

The author's task in this book is the deployment of the double-sided definition of story as accounting and recounting, in order to focus "on the power of stories to properly account for the experience of the people of God" (xiv). The stories to which she attends are both explicitly and implicitly about ecclesiology. Imperatori-Lee also notes that the root of the word "*cuéntame*" includes the imperative meaning of "count me in" – in other words, "don't leave me out of consideration" (xiii-xiv). This is particularly vital for Hispanics in the U.S., whose contribution to the creation of what it means to be Church is often invisible, ignored, or dismissed. In her effort to lay the foundations of an ecclesiology from the U.S. Hispanic perspective, Imperatori-Lee includes emblematic Latinx voices from a variety of disciplines as well as non-Latino/a voices who take our contribution seriously.

In this original and fertile work, Imperatori-Lee attends mostly to written forms of narrative reflecting a Latinx perspective, texts from history, literature, and demographics. In Chapter 4, she briefly taps into oral narrative through interviews of a well-established group of committed Hispanic Catholics (129). It is understandable that she focuses on written texts, since they are accessible and can be reanalyzed as other information is considered. Even so, the gathering of oral narratives could serve to effectively capture the operative ecclesiology among those for whom oral storytelling is a valued and primary form of literacy.

Narrative as a method—the telling and recording of one's story to another and in group settings, in order to reach a broader understanding of the topic at hand—is currently employed by a variety of disciplines. This method emerged in anthropological fieldwork and has become a key element in ethnography, sociology, and psychology. It is also widely used

by Hispanic theologians. Attention to textual narrative has its advantages because text documents the current view and understandings of those who tell their story; however, oral narrative permits multiple voices to be heard in the present. With both types of narrative, each person speaks their truth as they understand it. This allows them to articulate into words ideas and thoughts that were previously nebulous or only partially formulated in their minds. When this narrative takes place in a group, a greater truth emerges as the stories are heard and reflected upon by the participants and the interviewer. This method can make a significant contribution toward a much-needed renewal of ecclesiology in our times.

Nonetheless, limitations exist. As Imperatori-Lee notes, amassing this data from oral narrative requires dedication to the time-consuming task of gathering more voices and documenting more conversations. Using the image of a palimpsest to define this method's complex reality (72), she also notes that the truth spoken is only at the individual level: we all have part of the truth, but not the whole truth. (cf. 147). Additionally, she asserts that in accessing narratives, one enters into the messy, ambiguous, subversive nature of reinterpreting what the Church proclaims. This allows ecclesiologists "a glimpse of the faith-filled intuitions of the people of God" (61). Imperatori-Lee advocates the use of intercultural and intersectional methods that privilege human experience (147).

An overall question that remains is related to what kind of ecclesiology is presented through the patterns or themes that emerge from this method and how that ecclesiology fits with the officially promoted ecclesiology of the Catholic Church. In Chapter 5, the author moves toward identifying specifically the promise of further contributions to ecclesiology. Imperatori-Lee deserves congratulations for breaking new ecclesiological ground and encouragement to move forward with this work.

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