

Bishop Ricardo Ramírez, CSB. *Power from the Margins: The Emergence of the Latino in the Church and in Society*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016. 202 pp. \$24.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9781626981935.

Reviewed by Carmen M. Nanko-Fernández
Catholic Theological Union

In the age of Pope Francis, it is easy to forget that there were “Francis bishops” before Jorge Bergoglio became Bishop of Rome, and that the United States of America was home for some of these post-Vatican II pioneers. In *Power from the Margins*, Ricardo Ramírez, the first bishop of the diocese of Las Cruces, New Mexico, established in 1982, reaches back and looks forward to address “the foundation and legacy of Latino faith, the challenges we face, and to celebrate the next generation with hope” (xix). Toward this end, he focuses attention on a range of topics including the transitioning of family, social issues, pastoral concerns, catechesis, expressions of popular devotion, and worship. He frames them from the perspective of his lived experience as Mexican American and in light of the mercy and outreach to the peripheries that mark the papacy of Francis. He draws on his rich pastoral experience of accompanying people historically disenfranchised, particularly in the southwestern borderlands of the United States and México.

Each of the eleven chapters begins with a personal story that functions to situate Ramírez in relation to the topic at hand and positions his own life as part of the greater complexity of Latin@ life and identity in the U.S.A. Each narrative manifests the ethical responsibility to self-locate, a characteristic familiar in works of Latin@ theology. These stories are sometimes obvious in their demarcation via the use of italics while at other times they appear like hidden treasures within the text. These *cuentos* give the book a sense of an abuelo traditioning his grandchildren into their family and faith by sharing the wisdom learned from struggles, missteps, successes, and joys. They serve too as a powerful testimony reminding the comfortable of the obstacles of discrimination, poverty, and violence faced by those who struggle on the margins of church and society. These stories challenge stereotypes of Latin@s yet resonate with the complexities of *la vida latina* in the U.S.A., from his parents’ broken marriage, to the mocking of his native Tejano Spanglish during his time of seminary studies in Mexico, to his pastoral encounters accompanying marginalized communities.

Throughout his priestly ministry, first as a missionary in Mexico and later as a pastoral leader in the U.S.A., Ramírez has exercised a preferential option for the poor, for youth, and for the vulnerable. This commitment is evident in the topics he tackles, among them immigration, incarceration, and domestic violence. These are not new areas of concern for Ramírez, who, especially as a bishop, was long a vocal advocate for those disenfranchised by poverty, migration, xenophobia, and racism. In a certain sense this book may have been even more prophetic if Ramírez’s numerous public addresses, publications, pastoral letters, and testimonies had been collected and allowed to speak across the years as a reminder to the present that the tasks of justice are not new and that they take ongoing resolve and response in each generation. Instead of Ramírez updating the state of these concerns with new statistics, it might have been bolder to have structured the book as a conversation between the bishop’s prophetic

stances and those contemporary Latin@ pastoral leaders and theologians who continue communicating truth to power through their words and deeds.

Ramírez draws strength from what Latin@ theologian Orlando Espín has called “the faith of the people,” popular devotions and religious expressions practiced by ordinary people in the spaces of their daily lives. Several chapters address this form of traditioning and catechizing with profound respect for the insights of such domestic wisdom and spirituality. At the same time he calls for a spirit of fiesta to permeate worship in ways that are life giving and transformative. Ramírez avoids naïveté and romanticization, recognizing that “we have not yet begun to fill the enormous gaps that exist in the world of theological academia with regard to the enculturation of liturgy, and in particular of the enculturation of Latino liturgy into the life of the church” (169).

The book would have benefitted from a bibliography of Ramírez’s works, any number of which are still available on the Internet. At the very least, these sources should have been cited in footnotes to provide researchers and students with links to the original content in their respective contexts. These matters, as well as other inconsistent citation patterns with references, should have been handled at the editorial level.

The charge to church and society goes beyond an awareness of the complexity and giftedness of Latin@ communities. Ramírez asserts that until Latin@ teachers of theology are prevalent in the “great theological centers of North America and Europe, including the great universities in Rome...our efforts will be seen as unprofessional, and we will be seen as ethno-centrists...we will not be taken seriously” (169-170). The prophetic work of dragging the center to the edges and resituating relationships of power is a responsibility of those institutions that prepare people for ministry. The fact that this remains Ramírez’s “dream” after nearly five decades of active ministry indicates how far we have yet to go.