

"Popular Catholicism, *sensus fidelium*, and the Faith of the Church" Dr. Orlando O. Espín

### Abstract

The most basic of all ecclesiological affirmations is that "the Church" ("ekklesia") is the People of God. All other specifications or clarifications added to this affirmation-- regardless of their importance-- do not detract from or limit its centrality and clarity. Consequently, if the Church is the People of God, then the People of God are the Church. Which then requires us make two obvious subsequent and equally necessary affirmations: The faith of the Church is the faith of the People of God, and the faith of the People of God is the faith of the Church. None of this is a play on words-- these are extraordinarily crucial Christian claims that cannot be dismissed in the name of derived doctrines, of ecclesiastical law, or in the name of a quasi-gnostic understanding of doctrinal claims.

Nevertheless, it seems evident that these basic ecclesiological claims require specification if they would mean something concretely in the real world. An inescapable question (grounded in and demanded by reality) is: "Who are the People of God?" This question is to be answered through and with cultural, social, economic, historical, gender, racial, ethnic (etcetera) realities. Because the People of God are and have always been a gathering of human peoples, and humans have never and can never exist aculturally, ahistorically, asocially, agendered, etc.

Furthermore, the moment we "name" (acknowledge) the real People of God in their real, daily, shared and distinct contexts and realities, we have reopened much that was regarded as "settled" in ecclesiology, and, especially, we have raised the "*sensus fidelium*" to a preeminent level of doctrinal discernment and authority, as we would also have opened the door to the inescapable need for a very serious doctrinal study of the fact, realities and contents of "popular Catholicism" as witness to and traditioner of the faith of the People of God (i.e., of the faith of the Church).

U.S. Latinoa theologians have been at the forefront of the doctrinal, theological study of "popular Catholicism" as the faith of the People of God, and as hermeneut of the "*sensus fidelium*" in the People's daily reality.

### Bio

Orlando Espín is professor of theology and religious studies at the University of San Diego. He earned a dual doctorate in systematic and practical theology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Espín has specialized in the study of popular religion, as well as in study of culture, interculturality and traditioning. He is author or editor of nine books and also co-edited an award-winning dictionary of theology and religious studies. He has published over 450 articles in U.S., European and Latin American theological journals, and more than 25 book chapters. He has received several national and international awards, including an honorary doctorate and an honorary professorship.