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\"Hallelujah\"

Demetria Martinez | May. 29, 2009 NCR Today

Yes! Two Latinos, eminent intellectuals, ascend--within a matter of days of one another--to unprecedent prominence in our nation's public life. I'm speaking, of course, about Sonia Sotomayor, President Obama's nominee for the Supreme Court and theologian Miguel H. Diaz, newly appointed U.S. diplomat to the Vatican. She is Puerto Rican, he is Cuban-American, and both are Catholic.

Legal analysts and experts on church matters are churning out profiles, as they should, of the pair's contributions to their fields, and how their backgrounds might shape their approach to their new jobs. But here's the word from the 'hood': "Hallelujah" and "It's about time." Finally, history hands us an opportunity to show the world that our numbers include distinguished intellectuals--indeed, in the case of Diaz and Sotomayor, mental giants. This at a time when the face of Latinos, if you 've watched the news of late, is that of the gang-banger, the school drop out, the so-called illegal alien out to steal American jobs. These and other stereotypes are endless.

But more insidious: liberal news editors, well-meaning, will frequently trot out Latinos for commentary--primarily on "Latino issues." Rarely are we called upon for our expertise in other areas: the sciences, history, religion, foreign affairs, economics, legal theory, the arts. Latino contributions to these and other disciplines are countless. Now, with the advent of Sotomayor and Diaz, perhaps Americans will begin to take stock of the spectrum of Latino achievements.

Monday night, the day of Sotomayor's nomination, I happened to drive by the staid Monroe's restaurant, an Albuquerque institution that specializes in New Mexican/Mexican cuisine, no deviations allowed. I had to slow down to make sure I wasn't seeing things: A sign had been set out on the sidewalk with the announcement, Friday night will be Puerto Rican night! A sign, I hope, not only of a feast, but a sign of the times.

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