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Spanish-speaking pope an inspiring look at things to come

April Gutierrez | Mar. 21, 2013 Young Voices
Pope Francis

A few years back, my husband and I hosted a party with our friends in our loft in downtown Los Angeles. One friend asked, "What might be the next language of high culture? French was once the international language of diplomacy; English is now the language of commerce. What will be the next language the entire civilized world 'must' learn?"

My husband replied, "Spanish, for sure." Not a surprising choice for a Latin jazz musician, but he explained his assertion with a number of valid points that were met with a scoff and, ultimately, dismissal.

Many are calling Pope Francis "the pope for the poor," and I experience great power in a pope raised in the Latin American church. Hope is found in knowing the pope prays in Spanish, a language currently and historically ridiculed and eliminated in schools across the United States (a country with no official language) primarily because of its association with the poor. Spanish, a language that has not been taught to children of my generation because of the pain experienced by my elders who suffered taunting for having an accent or even physical abuse for speaking Spanish. Hearing the pope speak empowers and brings hope.

My first trip to El Salvador was incredibly impactful, as it is for most who go on an alternative break trip during college. But the most impactful facet was having the first experience of being surrounded by people who looked more similar to me than ever before. In high school, I have memories of directors telling me I was chosen for a part because of how exotic I look, or comments on my big curly hair. El Salvador gave me a sense of sameness as well as an additional window into the complexity and diversity of those who identify as Latino/a.

Recently, I was in a pastoral care meeting with a theology graduate student and offered a prayer resource in English. She replied, "Thank you, this looks lovely, but I pray in Spanish." We all have a prayer language, and for many, there is a language for study and there is a language for prayer. Our prayer language speaks our deepest desires and pain; it is the whispering voice of our mother and the language of our first Communion. Knowing that the prayer language of the pope might include a devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe offers grace.

When I was in graduate school studying with James Nickoloff and Gustavo Gutierrez, they required anyone who spoke Spanish to read our texts in Spanish. They also required all in the class to learn keywords in Spanish to illustrate Spanish as a language of study as well as conversation. For some of us, there is hope in a Pope who prays in Spanish; for others of us, there might be challenge to hear Spanish as a language of high culture and study.

In some of the photos I have seen of Pope Francis, I have been able to see Archbishop Oscar Romero's image, and I wonder what a conversation between the two might look like. Archbishop Romero and Pope Francis are two Spanish-speaking intellectuals and men of great faith who are known for their commitment to the poor through listening and accompaniment. Romero's leadership gave voice to the people, which transformed his nation and the church in unforeseeable ways.

Might Pope Francis' fidelity to God and the poor bring transformation, turning the power pyramid completely upside-down as Romero did? Romero was expected to stay at the top with authority and influence solely his, letting his grace and charity trickle down. What he did was walk with people, elevating the poor to a place of empowerment, placing himself at the bottom of the pyramid as a servant. There is a lot of hope in Pope Francis, including his choices in dress and transportation and his meeting with non-Catholic leaders in his first days as pope. Are these symbols of a man committed to the poor, or is he preparing us for something greater to come?

Many see Pope Francis as a sign of unity: how quickly the decision was made, the Jesuit's choice of a Franciscan name, his commitment to ecumenism, his ability to excite Catholics across conservative and liberal divides. Might Pope Francis have the ability to unify our church and Christians across many denominations to truly share something that is Good News?

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