The Personal Is Political: Toward a Vision of Justice in Latina Theology

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Introduction

Theology arising from Latina contexts has envisioned a robustly relational account of the human constitution, derived from the integral role that social relationships play in Latina/o cultures. While justice is frequently referenced in Latina theology, this concept demands greater conceptual definition from within this particular discussion. This essay suggests a starting point for elaborating a positive account of justice in Latina theology, one that undergirds ethical references to right relationship in this particular conversation. Employing Latina anthropological insights—along with supporting evidence from feminist and Latino anthropology—and the Thomistic conceptions of justice and the common good, I will begin the process of developing a notion of justice that emphasizes intersubjectivity in the pursuit of political justice or the connection between the personal and the political dimensions of justice. These anthropological insights inspire a notion of relational justice that resonates with Latina experience.

This essay contains four movements. First, I explore the theological foundations of relationality that influence Latina theological anthropology as synthesized in the constructive anthropological work of Latina theologian Michelle González, which identifies both personal and political elements of human relationship. Next, I engage with mujerista ethicist Ada María Isasi-Díaz’s foundational insights for connecting the personal and political elements of human relationship in a comprehensive understanding of the reality of suffering and resistance in the lives of Latinas. Third, I interface this account of relationship with the conception of justice articulated by Thomas Aquinas in his Summa Theologiae. Engagement between Latina and Thomistic theologies catalyzes a new interpretive perspective on Thomistic justice, revealing the profoundly relational and communal implications of his thought. Finally, I demonstrate how the Thomistic account of general and particular justice, as connected through his common good framework, serves as a resource for elaborating the Latina insight of justice as right relationship in community that seeks survival and flourishing for all people. I argue that a vision...
of justice emanating from Latina theology asserts the integral connection between personal and political aspects of justice grounded in the fundamental anthropological assertion of human relationality.

The Personal and the Political: Relationality in Latina Anthropology

In this section, I explore the theological foundations of relationality that influence Latina theological anthropology as synthesized in the constructive anthropological work of Latina theologian Michelle González, revealing Latina contributions to developing a relational Christian theological anthropology. González’s constructive work emphasizes both the interpersonal and public facets of human relationship and thus lays the groundwork for the connection between personal and political justice in Latina theology.

U.S. Latina/o theologians, according to González, “ground their contemporary scholarship in the lives, struggles, identity, and, most importantly, faith of Latino/a people.” With this goal in mind, Latina theological anthropology aims to articulate an understanding of human identity that affirms the fundamental dignity of Latinas and other people for whom humane treatment cannot be taken for granted. Several prominent Latina theologians have made significant contributions to the field of theological anthropology, including mujerista theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Latina feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and Mexican philosopher and theologian Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz in the seventeenth century. González synthesizes the rich anthropological insights of these theologians to reveal their contribution to broader anthropological discourse. She identifies four major anthropological themes emanating from Latina theological inquiry: (1) mestizaje/mulatte (difference), (2) community and family, (3) relationship and the Trinity, and (4) grace and culture. Among these themes, González gestures to community and human relationality as the heart of Latina anthropology.

While González acknowledges the basic reality of human difference, she argues that human beings are fundamentally relational creatures by virtue of our reflection of God’s Trinitarian nature. She argues for a “justice-infused understanding of the Trinity,” which is the paradigm of right relationship: “The relational nature of humanity is grounded in God’s Trinitarian nature as relational and our reflection of this nature through the imago dei.” If the Trinity is fundamentally constituted by relationship, then human beings, as ones created in God’s image, are also fundamentally relational.

The centrality of relationality in Latina/o accounts of anthropology is evident in the prominence of family, church, and community in our theology. As González explains, “The relationship between the individual and the community is dialectical. Linked to this communal understanding of the self is an emphasis on familia as a defining dimension of who we are.” Latinas/os perceive individual identity as
being codetermined, but not subsumed, by our families and communities. Latino theologian Gary Riebe-Estrella attributes the primacy of community and family to the Latina/o social worldview:

Latino cultures, by and large, are “sociocentric organic” in nature. In other words, the fundamental unit of society is envisioned as a group, primarily the family. The identity of an individual emerges from his or her membership in the group. In this cultural perspective, human persons mature by recognizing their place within the group and by refining to some extent the mutual obligations and rights which that place entails. But who they are is always bounded by the group.8

Riebe-Estrella reemphasizes the centrality of relationality, through family and community, in Latina/o culture. The robust Latina/o conception of relationality yields a strong emphasis on interpersonal relationships through marriage, immediate and extended family, compadrazgo, neighborhood, and church. Given the prominence of interpersonal relationships, an articulation of a Latina/o vision of justice would be remiss to neglect the implications of right relationship in these contexts.

Sociality is not a static element of human existence; it demands active engagement in relationship across human difference. Latino theologian Roberto Goizueta explains the energetic demands of this relational existential: “The human person is defined, above all, by his or her character as a relational being. Yet this relationality is not merely some static ‘essence’ of the person, but an active relating in and through which the person defines him or herself, in interaction with others.”9 In other words, “Relationship is an action. We recognize each other as individuals only when we encounter another.”10 If relationship calls for action, then right relationship requires participation also. As theologians have emphasized throughout Christian history, right relationship is achieved through God’s grace alone. Still, as those created in God’s image, humankind is called to participate in creating a more just reality, pursuing right relationship in cooperation with God’s will.

The active demands of human relationality have important implications for justice in both public and interpersonal contexts. Feminist theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert emphasizes the political implications of Trinitarian theology: “If the Trinitarian model offers the ideal paradigm for social and political relations, then unity-in-diversity and radical equality become ethical and political mandates.”11 God calls humanity to seek reconciliation with all of creation, including the racial, sexual, religious, and political other, especially “the least of these” (Matt. 25:45) or those who have suffered most severely from wrong relationship. González elaborates Hilkert’s point:

In a world marked by the systematic degradation of other human beings, the image of God is found in the crucified people who image the crucified Christ. Only through our protest and action against that which violates
Nichole Flores

the image of God in all of humanity is the image as “compassionate love in solidarity” revealed. The image of Christ is a vocation we are called to fulfill. Hilkert’s dynamic notion of *imago Dei* presents the image as something we embody through our ethical actions, a challenge we must meet in order to truly reflect our intended nature. We are called to image God through our actions and relationships with one another.12

González and Hilkert reveal a foundational aspect of justice emerging from both Latina and feminist theological insights: if relationship is central to our anthropology via an understanding of the *imago Dei* and Trinitarian theology, then the public pursuit of justice, or right relationship as revealed in the Trinity, is an integral aspect of Christian discipleship.

Relationality is central to an understanding of justice. A theological vision of human relationship as analogous to the Trinity is foundational for both interpersonal and political justice. This insight is helpful for identifying a vision of justice arising from Latina theological inquiry. It is necessary, however, to investigate the relationship between these elements and the implications of this relationship for the pursuit of right relationship in communities. This is the task of the next section.

The Personal Is Political:
Struggle and Resistance

Here, I develop González’s and Hilkert’s insights into the interpersonal and political implications of human relationality, engaging them with Isasi-Díaz’s *mujerista* conception of relational anthropology. I will employ Isasi-Díaz’s articulation of *la lucha* (the struggle) to illustrate how the interpersonal and political aspects of justice are connected in Latina theology.

Isasi-Díaz’s *mujerista* theology emerges from engagement with a specific group of women, a context that allows her to attend to the everyday struggles of these particular “grassroots Latinas.”13 Isasi-Díaz identifies three phrases, frequently employed by the women with whom she works, which constitute *mujerista* theological anthropology: (1) *la lucha*, (2) *permítanme hablar* (allow me to speak), and (3) *la comunidad/la familia* (the community/the family).14 These phrases, she claims, arise from Latina’s descriptions of their everyday life, or *lo cotidiano*, emphasizing their daily struggle for survival, their unique contributive voices, and their relational understanding of the self. These phrases serve as “both a source and a framework for *mujerista* theology.”15 While each of the three phrases gestures to an integral theme in Latina theology, I will focus on *la lucha* as a source for revealing the integral connection between the personal and the political in Latina and *mujerista* theology as this theme lends insight into the vital connection between personal and political justice in Latina theology.

*Mujerista* theology, according to Isasi-Díaz, is concerned with the everyday struggles of Latinas. She writes, “The daily ordinary struggle of Hispanic Women
to survive and live fully has been the central element of mujerista theology from the very start because it is, I believe, the main experience in the lives of the majority of Latinas.\textsuperscript{16} La lucha Latina describes the reality of economic, political, and social suffering endured by grassroots Latinas. While unjust suffering is a part of Latina experience, la lucha is concerned with resisting suffering rather than romanticizing it.\textsuperscript{17}

Resisting suffering, for Latinas, is a social activity. The fiesta, or celebration, then, is a central event in Latina/o communities. Goizueta argues that the fiesta is a central concept in Latina/o theological anthropology, suggesting that “the fiesta, as a thanksgiving for having received life, reflects and expresses a profound sense of the human in relationship to the sacred.”\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, Isasi-Díaz identifies the fiesta as a site of social resistance for grassroots Latinas:

I have gotten the best clues for understanding how Latinas understand and deal with suffering by looking at Latinas’ capacity to celebrate, at our ability to organize a fiesta in the midst of the most difficult circumstances and in spite of deep pain. The fiestas are, of course, not celebrations of suffering but of the struggle against suffering. The fiestas are, very often, a way of encouraging one another to not let the difficulties that are part of Hispanic Women’s daily life overcome us.\textsuperscript{19}

During fiestas, Latinas come to realize that they are not alone in their daily struggles. These gatherings present opportunities to name suffering in community, and further, to develop creative strategies for responding to this suffering. It is in this relational venue that Latinas start to make the concrete connection between the personal problems they face in everyday life—poverty, violence, exploitation, marginalization—and the broader social implications of these problems.

Isasi-Díaz thus surfaces the connection between the personal and the political in Latina theology and ethics. Both interpersonal and public relationships are integral to the development of a Latina approach to justice. She asserts, “Mujeristas denounce the split between the personal and the political as a false dichotomy used often to oppress Hispanic Women.”\textsuperscript{20} The false bifurcation of these spheres does harm to Hispanic women by reinforcing oppressive conditions that perpetuate suffering. The private and public spheres mutually condition one another. This insight is foundational for an understanding of justice that acknowledges and responds to Latina experiences of injustice.

One can observe the connection between interpersonal and political justice in the lives of many Latinas and other people for whom survival is a daily struggle. The economic and social problems of the family bear on the common good; war and governmental politics profoundly affect the family, especially families on the economic, political, and social margins of society. The connection between personal and political issues of justice is illustrated by a recent public policy decision in Massachusetts. In April 2011, state lawmakers proposed a 20 percent cut to
funding for the Women, Children, and Infants (WIC) program, which provides basic nutrition for low-income mothers and their children, including healthy food and formula. Despite serious concerns expressed by program administrators and poverty advocates about the detrimental effects of these cuts on the most vulnerable members of society, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health claims that the cuts are necessary to sustain the state budget: "Massachusetts, like all states, continues to feel the impact of the global economic crisis . . . no agency wants to have to make these decisions, but sound fiscal management has required tough choices." In response to the cuts, poverty advocates emphasize the adverse effect of budget cuts on the poorest of the poor, "This would just make it harder for poor families . . . it would undermine our efforts to make sure low-income families have access to healthy food." In addition to the short-term struggles of the particular women and children affected by this decision, this policy negatively affects broader society, hindering the healthy development of future generations of citizens who can contribute to the flourishing of society as a whole. Here we can see plainly the effect of national and global political and economic problems on the life and flourishing of Massachusetts’s poor mothers and their children. For this reason, a vision of justice emanating from Latina theology aims to reaffirm the feminist claim that “the personal is political,” revealing the connection between personal struggle of marginalized people with politics and public policy.

For Isasi-Díaz, theology begins, but does not end, with the particular experiences of Latinas in the United States. She couples *mujerista* theology’s concern for particular, everyday experience with a firm commitment to social activism. Thus, Isasi-Díaz does not simply propose a panacea for the daily struggles of Latinas; she argues that these struggles are the source of social and political activism that seeks justice for marginalized people, starting with Latinas. In this way, she contributes to developing a conception of justice that responds to Latina experience.

**Thomas Aquinas: Justice and the Common Good**

I now consider the conception of justice in the works of Thomas Aquinas. His account provides resources for further elaborating a positive articulation of justice in Latina theology. Upon examination of Aquinas’s understanding of justice in light of Latina contributions to theological anthropology, one sees parallels, and even affinity, between the two discourses. The Latina theological concerns with personal and public relationality illuminate the relational implications of Aquinas’s conception of justice. The Thomistic contribution can help shape, define, and support Latina articulations of justice by providing a framework for our relational anthropology as an integral facet of building and sustaining right relationship in community.

Aquinas’s discussion of justice occupies sixty-five of 148 articles in the *secunda secundae* of his *Summa Theologiae*. In the first question, he defines justice as, “the constant and perpetual will to render to each one his right.” In the subsequent
questions, he addresses matters of both political and interpersonal justice, including just rule (government), war, usury (money lending), and backbiting (gossiping). His most noteworthy question for our inquiry, however, is his treatment of the relationship between general justice, which refers both to the comprehensive virtue of justice and legal justice, and to particular justice. Here, Aquinas explains the distinction between general/legal justice and particular justice:

Legal justice is not essentially the same as every virtue, and beside legal justice which directs man immediately to the common good, there is a need for other virtues to direct him immediately in matters relating to particular goods: and these virtues may be relative to himself or to another individual person. Accordingly, just as in addition to legal justice there is need for particular virtues to direct man in relation to himself, such as temperance and fortitude, so too besides legal justice there is need for particular justice to direct man in relation to other individuals.25

Aquinas thus distinguishes between matters of public justice, pertaining immediately to the common good, and matters of private, interpersonal justice, pertaining immediately to other particular goods. Aquinas asserts that there is a fundamental difference between these two types of justice:

The common good of the realm and the particular good of the individual differ not only in respect of the many and the few, but also under formal aspect. For the aspect of the common good differs from the aspect of the individual good, even as the aspect of the whole differs from that of part. Wherefore the Philosopher [Aristotle] says that they are wrong who maintain that the State and the home and the like differ only as many and few and not specifically.26

General/legal and particular justice differ in their primary object and thus are not explicitly connected. Aquinas’s distinction between general and particular justice thus appears to run counter to the claims of Latina and feminist theologians that the personal and political spheres are integrally connected.

Yet, if we read Aquinas’s understanding justice through the lens of his approach to the common good, we see a stronger connection between general/legal and particular justice. This relationship is revealed in his understanding of the relationship between the whole and the part: “we call those legal matters just which are adapted to produce and preserve happiness and its parts for the body politic.”27 The parts of the body politic, or the members of society, are not an afterthought in his conception of justice. The parts do not eclipse the whole, but the whole is nothing without its parts. While legal justice concerns the social body in general and particular justice concerns the members, neither part could function without the other. Examining Aquinas’s understanding of justice through the lens
Nichole Flores

of the common good, we can see that the interpersonal interactions that constitute particular justice have a significant effect on the good of society as a whole. The connection between general/legal justice and particular justice supports the argument that public and interpersonal actions mutually condition each other. In other words, our interpersonal actions affect the common good, and it is therefore appropriate to consider the implications of daily practices and experiences, lo cotidiano, on the development of the common good. This interpretation of Aquinas’s treatment of justice surfaces a useful structure for relating the personal and public aspects of justice through concern for the common good of society. Societal justice demands justice at the level of interpersonal relationships. I develop this claim in the next section.

Toward a Vision of Justice in Latina Theology

Aquinas’s understandings of the relationship between general/legal and particular justice is fertile ground for enhancing the conception of justice that arises from Latina relational anthropology. Like Aquinas, the aforementioned Latina theologians observe an integral connection between interpersonal and public, particular and general, justice. Interpersonal relationships are codetermined by our public relationships, and vice versa. To be in right relationship, then, means that human life, dignity, and flourishing are promoted in both spheres. Indeed, flourishing in one sphere is made quite difficult without support from the other. Returning to the situation of WIC funding in Massachusetts, cutting funding is a public and political choice that affects the physical and mental development of particular poor children who do not have access to proper nutrition during their formative years. We see that justice cannot truly be served for the whole without serving justice for the constitutive parts. Thus, a vision of justice emanating from Latina theology asserts the integral connection between personal and political aspects of justice grounded in the fundamental anthropological assertion of human relationality.

The encounter between Thomistic justice theory and Latina theology reveals three important facets of a Latina vision of justice. These implications are a continuation of an on-going conversation on justice, as well as a starting point for a more focused and intentional pursuit of this question in Latina theological ethics. First, interpersonal relationships are foundational for all types of justice. Right relationship is cultivated at the “grassroots” level. We learn the virtue of right relationship through interpersonal contexts—marriage, parenthood, siblinghood, friendship, church, community organization, etc. Forged from the lessons we learn in our lives together, often through offense, error, and misunderstanding, our interpersonal relationships teach us how to recognize and pursue justice on a particular level.

The second implication is that our interpersonal relationships serve as the foundation for public justice. Through our pursuit of right relationship on the level of particular justice, we learn the importance of justice in the general/legal sphere. Further, through public engagement we learn that our own struggles are
not isolated from the struggles of other people. We learn that the pursuit of right relationship is a pervasive human characteristic, yet another aspect of our reflection of the *imago Dei*. While the public square is often the site of seemingly intractable conflict and disagreement, it might also serve as a pathway toward concern for the social, economic, and political other. Revealing the breadth and depth of human suffering, the public sphere demonstrates the necessity for righting relationships the level of general/legal justice.

Finally, through analysis of interpersonal and public justice, we can discern the mutual conditioning of these spheres in the pursuit of right relationship. Drawing on the insights of Latina approaches to theological anthropology, we observe that justice (or injustice) in one sphere has an immense effect on the other through the relationship of private justice to the common good. The codetermination of the public and interpersonal spheres ought to influence our concrete ethical practices, moving us to advocate for policies, programs, public officials, and laws that recognize the relationship between *lo cotidiano* and the common good. The “justice-infused” Latina approach to relational anthropology, therefore, forms a strong basis for creating a community characterized by equality, respect for difference, and the perpetual pursuit of right relationships that are the true source of human dignity.

In light of these three implications, how can we begin working toward justice? Drawing on the connection between the personal and the political, Isasi-Díaz suggests that justice is best understood as a reconciliatory process, where conflicting groups move toward right relationship by building and strengthening relationship across difference. The telos of this process is not a particular product or outcome; the relationship itself is the goal:

The work of reconciliation has to recognize that those who have been apart and opposed to each other need to move together, one step at a time, willing to accept that risk, ambiguity, and uncertainty are part of the process. The work of reconciliation asks above all for a commitment to mutuality, to opening possibilities together even if one might never see them become a reality—this over and above a desire for tangible changes.

Here, Isasi-Díaz emphasizes the necessity of relationship in the work of justice. If the Latina emphasis on rich interpersonal relationships has anything to contribute to justice discourse, it is that transformation and reconciliation are possible through building interpersonal bridges. Personal encounter initiates relational transformation with family and community, with nation and world.

**Conclusion**

Employing Latina anthropological insights and Thomistic conceptions of justice and the common good, I identify a starting point for a positive vision of justice in Latina theology. I outline key contributions to justice from a Latina theological
Nichole Flores

perspective, including the centrality of relational anthropology and the association between personal and political justice. I argue that a vision of justice in Latina theology asserts the integral connection between personal and political aspects of justice grounded in the fundamental anthropological assertion of human relationality. This vision of justice emphasizes intersubjectivity in the pursuit of political justice. I invite Latina theologians, ethicists, activists, and allies to join me in the pursuit of the deep justice insights contained in this particular theological conversation, bringing them to bear on a global pursuit of justice in the twenty-first century.

Notes

3. Ibid., 71–78.
4. Ibid., 75.
5. Ibid., 76.
13. Cf. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, En La Lucha: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 23. As defined by Isasi-Díaz, “a mujerista is a Hispanic Woman who struggles to liberate herself not as an individual but as a member of the Hispanic community . . . a mujerista understands that her task is to gather the hopes and expectations of the people about justice and peace and to work, not for equality within oppressive structures, but for liberation.” This definition derives from the engagement of Isasi-Díaz in theological discourse with grassroots Latinas, as well as both feminist and womanist scholars, including Letty Russell and Katie Cannon, who encouraged her to define a particular approach to Latina theology. (Cf. Isasi-Díaz, La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 21. It is noteworthy, however, that few Latinas, including Latinas in academic theology, explicitly identify as mujerista theologians. Others identify themselves as Latina feminists or with no particular label at all. Mujerista theology is a vital and meaningful movement in Latina theology, but it is inaccurate to identify all Latina theology as mujerista theology.
17. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, IlaIae, q. 58, a. 1.
25. Ibid., IlaIae, q. 58, a. 7.
26. Ibid., IlaIae, q. 58, a. 7 (emphasis in original).
27. Ibid., IlaIae, q. 90, a. 2.
29. Ibid., 224.