



## The Flavor of My Faith

Two pounds of chicken, two pounds of pork chops, one pound of *tocino* (Spanish sausage), four large plantains, two pounds yucca, malanga, pumpkin... So goes one recipe for *sancocho*, a stew favored in many Hispanic-American homes. Its unforgettable flavor leaves its imprint on all who have savored it.

While preparing for a leadership summit in New York City recently, I mused that if I had to describe my faith in terms of food, it would be *sancocho*. My theology and praxis, like *sancocho*, consist of a mixture of many ingredients that all come together to create a unique flavor and experience. And just as every cook makes the stew a little differently and yet each is equally delicious, so faith is expressed differently in each person and yet each expression is beautiful in its uniqueness.

In conversation with Karen Valentin, author of *The Flavor of Our Faith: Reflections on Hispanic Life and Christian Faith* (Doubleday, 2006), she told me that the flavor of her faith would be *sofrito* (a base for most Puerto Rican dishes), “because the ingredients are simple and few but relevant and effective. It brings flavor to countless meals, just as my faith does in every facet of my life. It brings out the natural essence in each dish without covering or overwhelming it with strong, heavy spices.”

Valentin reminds us that we see God through our cultural experiences and encourages us to embrace our heritage. Her hope is that the book will help people “reflect on their own experiences and explore and appreciate their own roots.” This is important for those seeking to build partnerships with other cultures because *las apariencias engañan*—appearances are deceiving. To the majority, Latinos

may appear a homogeneous minority, thinking and acting and speaking alike, but nothing is further from the truth. Diversity, or *sancochoism*, as we might call it, is our trademark. True, in one way or another, we are all children of lascivious Iberians and the Indian or African maidens they raped, but heterogeneity rules: Latinos are blacks, Spaniards, Indians, mulattos, and mestizos.

So, too, are the women who are called to lead in this society. Like a good stew made up of a rich variety of vegetables, meats, and spices, we are the sum total of our experiences. Each of us has a unique flavor that contributes to the zest of God’s kingdom. So why do so many of us keep trying to blend in, to downplay the spice we bring to life?

We need to learn to define our own existence and purpose within the tri-cultural world—as Christians, Americans, and \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in your own particular ethnic heritage)—in which we live our lives. When I as a Latina am my fullest self, I recognize the “Blatina” in me as well, the young Puerto Rican woman who shares a mixed ancestry with Africans, Europeans, and Taino Indians. I acknowledge the rich history of the interconnectedness of race and culture, my *mestizaje*, which are the lenses through which I see the world. And I recognize the underpinnings of the spiritual upbringing that helped shape my biblical worldview and my growth into progressive Pentecostalism.

In my dealings with women called into ministry, I have found that many are still trying to fit into a box that has been defined for them by patriarchal, political, and cultural systems in church and society. As women called to lead, we simply must make peace with our faith and family roots—whether good, bad, beautiful, ugly, or all of the above—and acknowledge our “*sancocho*” theology because they impact our relationships, our leadership decisions, and how we go about impacting our community through our call.

Our *sancocho* is, for the most part, embedded theology, which we learn from countless daily encounters with our faith, both in formal and informal settings. Everything we do as leaders—preach, sing, participate in social action, conduct liturgy, etc.—falls under this. It is the language and flavor of our faith that informs our radical quest for social justice and for ideologies that seek to transform our social and political realities today.

I believe that God is calling each of us to take the respite necessary to look back and appreciate our roots and the sum of experiences that have made us who we are today. In this post-everything world, we need to fully accept who we are and the embedded theology that shapes us.

As we seek to make progress for the kingdom of God, as we seek to have greater impact in a world where the church is losing its flavor in an attempt to blend in and be politically correct, I invite you to join me in embracing and celebrating our *sancocho* of beliefs, values, experiences, and mixed cultural experiences. I challenge you to do the same because it will help you shape the future of your ministry and, most importantly, your destiny.

There is only one Truth—the saving resurrection of Christ Jesus—but there are many truths, manifested in our individual and collective lives. I bring to the table a healthier, more balanced approach to community building, leadership, and relationships because I’ve intentionally reflected on and continue to reflect on my journey and the theology that informs and is informed by it.

So what flavor does your faith have? ■

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