

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXVIII, No. 1 (Issue 56) May 2020

Articles

Living among Immigrant Neighbors: How a Lutheran Theology of Sanctification Can Inform Our Witness

Leopoldo A. Sánchez M

Abstract: The author lays out a models-based approach to sanctification grounded in Scripture and Luther's writings, which yields five ways of picturing the Christlike life as a participation in His death and resurrection, struggle against the evil one, humble service, hospitality toward strangers, and devotion to God. The essay then moves on to argue that this Lutheran theology of sanctification offers a missional framework for church workers to reflect on the struggles and hopes of immigrant neighbors, as well as ways they can embody a realistic yet winsome witness in their attitudes toward, interactions with, and ministry among these neighbors.

The purpose of this essay is to reflect on how various theological models of sanctification, with special attention to the Lutheran tradition, can inform how we think about the lives of immigrant neighbors and our lives among them today, including our attitudes towards and dealings with them. Here we use the term *immigrant* not in a precise legal sense, but in a broader one to include all categories of displaced people in the world, including refugees, asylum seekers, people who are internally displaced in the same country, and people living in a foreign country either legally or illegally due to a variety of factors. Such factors include family unification, wars and natural disasters, economic need and labor demand, and forced or self-imposed exile due to various forms of persecution (political, religious, ethnic-racial, gang-related).



Rev. Dr. Leopoldo A. Sánchez M. is the Werner R. H. and Elizabeth R. Krause Professor of Hispanic Ministries at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. A Concordia faculty member since 2004, he is professor of systematic theology and director of the Center for Hispanic Studies. Dr. Sánchez's research interests are in the theology of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), sanctification, Spirit Christology, Trinitarian theology, and issues related to the intersection of theology and Global South cultures, such as immigration, poverty and marginality, and Hispanic/Latino cultural identity. sanchezl@csl.edu

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Our goal is not so much to address Lutherans as residents or citizens in the left-hand realm, who undoubtedly hold various opinions (often on opposite ends of the political spectrum) on immigration law and reform.¹ Rather, we seek to reflect with Lutherans—especially church workers—on how their identity as justified, baptized children of God in the right-hand realm, which deals with their common Gospel-rooted unity and mission in Christ in the world, can inform how they speak

Theological modes of sanctification . . . can inform how we think about the lives of immigrant neighbors and . . . our attitudes towards and dealings with them.

of, think about, and act toward immigrant neighbors. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, 70.8 million people are forcibly displaced worldwide due to persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations—the largest number in history.² Given this global missional reality and the urgency in which we are asked to think about our immigrant neighbors today, this essay probes into the implications of a Lutheran theology of sanctification for an embodied witness in a world with the largest number of displaced neighbors in history.

Over the past several years, I have been thinking about a models-based theological approach to the theology of sanctification, convinced that the Lutheran tradition offers complementary ways to speak about the Christian life. This reflection on life in the Spirit in terms of models of sanctification started with the publication in Spanish of *Teología de la santificación*, which offers three ways of speaking about life in the Spirit from Lutheran theology, namely, baptismal, dramatic, and eucharistic.³ The number of models of sanctification grew to five with the publication in English of *Sculptor Spirit*; namely, renewal, dramatic, sacrificial, hospitality, and devotional.⁴ A model is a heuristic device to account for and sum up the rich variety of images used by Scripture, church fathers, Martin Luther, and contemporary theologians to describe what it means to live a sanctified life. It is a way to bring together pictures, narratives, and teachings with a thematic affinity under one semantic field. Each model also has a constructive function because it deals with different issues in the Christian life, thus making it useful for personal growth and pastoral or missional application to various life situations.

In the next section, we will briefly explore, using the lens of our five models of sanctification, what the Christian life might look like among immigrant neighbors, with particular attention to our brothers and sisters in Christ, so that we can walk with them in their struggles and hopes.⁵ In a brief conclusion, we will also suggest how these models apply to ourselves (especially church workers) as we relate to these neighbors. Our approach is framed in a doctrinal, systematic thesis with roots in Scripture and the Great Christian Tradition; namely, that life in the Spirit for the believer reflects or images Christ's own life in the Spirit. The Christian life is thus a

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

Christlike life, not the same as Christ's life but reflective of it. It is a life of faithfulness to God and service to neighbor. Our models-based approach to sanctification suggests at least five Christlike ways of living in the Spirit. Although this approach is informed by a biblical, Christ-centered view of the Spirit's work in our lives, our reflections are meant to be practical and suggestive of what an embodied witness looks like.

Our models-based approach to sanctification suggests at least five Christlike ways of living in the Spirit.

When we speak of an embodied witness, we are thinking not primarily in terms of Gospel proclamation, which for Lutherans still remains the primary form of witness, but mainly of a secondary form of it in thought, word, and deed—a witness more akin to how we live our lives before others. The theology of sanctification opens for us a way of thinking about embodied witness from the side, as it were, which in the context of relationship-building, is complementary to and can even set the stage for more direct witness in proclamation. Our reflections are thus mainly concerned with the lives of immigrant neighbors and then also the lives of Christians shining the light of Christ in the world by their good works for the sake of these neighbors. Ours is an application of Jesus' words to the current situation: "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt 5:16).

Renewal

Presenting the Christian life as one of daily repentance, the renewal (also called, baptismal) model of sanctification focuses on the Spirit's work of conforming the believer to Christ in His death and resurrection. In his catechesis on the use of Baptism based on Romans 6, Martin Luther speaks of the Christian life as a daily drowning of the old sinful creature and a daily rising out of the waters as a new creature.⁶ In addition to the image of water, Paul speaks in the language of clothing, calling believers to put off the old sinful flesh and put on the new self in Christ (Eph 4:22–24; cf. Gal 3:27).

When we consider the situation of immigrants from the perspective of spiritual care, there are immigrants who feel justified, guilty, or both for leaving their country. They often feel justified in their choice because they are looking for a better way of life for their families, especially when fleeing dangerous situations that threaten their loved ones. They can also feel guilt and shame because they have left behind their homeland, even friends and family, under duress. They wonder if they have betrayed their nation and loved ones. In the latter situation, immigrants already feel the weight of the law on their shoulders, and church workers must not accuse them further with

the law but offer words of consolation. Church workers can try to assist them (under the law) as needed to reunite with family members without putting them in danger.

In the former situation, immigrants often feel they are justified in their decision to migrate. Insofar as they are looking out for their loved ones' well-being, we must be careful not to rush to judgment concerning their intentions. If their decision to migrate or overstay their visa renders them undocumented, most immigrants might still feel that breaking the law is justified on account of the needs of their families. In this situation, church workers must be ready to share with immigrant neighbors the tension inherent in fulfilling both the law of love and the laws of the land. Such catechesis at times cuts to the heart and leads immigrants to feel guilty and ashamed for breaking laws. In such cases church workers must be ready to offer words of forgiveness and acceptance to the penitent. At the same time, one must be careful not to undermine the difficult decisions they often make in fulfilling their legitimate vocations to take care of their family members the best they can in an imperfect world. Churches must be ready to assist them in the exercise of their vocations and, as far as the law allows, with ways to deal with their legal issues.

Vigilance

Depicting the Christian life as a drama between Christ and the devil, battling for the souls of people, the dramatic model of sanctification speaks to the Spirit's work of forming theologians through spiritual attacks or struggle (Lat. *tentatio*, Ger. *Anfechtung*). When faced by such attacks, Luther advises us to be vigilant by praying for the Spirit's help, spending time in the Word, and seeking the support and intercession of the communion of saints.⁷ In the Scriptures, one thinks of the paradox of deserts, which are both places of communion with God and places where God's children face spiritual attacks (see Lk 4:1–13; 1 Cor 10:1–13).

Immigrants face many challenges in life and in many cases have a keen sense of the power of evil in the world. Many have experienced hunger, political and religious persecution, threats to their lives from gangs, wars, and other misfortunes. Although many immigrants from the Global South hold to a religious worldview (as opposed to a secular one), they still struggle with the experience of the absence of God in the midst of the reality of suffering and evil in the world. It is not uncommon for those who are Christian to describe their migrations as times of temptation and testing—temptation to give up, testing to keep going. Again, church workers should not rush to judge them, but listen to their stories of spiritual struggle.

Indeed, these neighbors often portray life as an immigrant as an instance of a cosmic struggle between God and devil. When immigrants experience extended family separation, insults or hurtful words about their race, ethnicity, or accent, or people who take advantage of their vulnerabilities, they are tempted to doubt God's promises of protection, care, and provision. They can also be tempted to seek after other gods or

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

idols for an answer to their problems and hurts in life. Alcohol and drug abuse, unhealthy relationships, workaholism, depression, loneliness are not uncommon. Churches working with immigrants can assist them to be vigilant about their areas of vulnerability, to be aware of their spiritual “Achilles’ heel”—i.e., those areas where they are most likely to be attacked by the evil one—and walk together with them in their tough deserts by offering them support and accountability (either individually or in groups).

Sacrifice

Focusing on the Christian life as a sharing in Christ’s humility, the sacrificial model of sanctification highlights the Spirit’s work of shaping believers after the form or likeness of Christ’s servanthood. In a treatise on the Sacrament of Holy Communion, Luther uses the analogy of a country in which inhabitants share the benefits and costs of citizenship to refer to the church as an interdependent communion of love in which, as the apostle Paul puts it, the saints share one another’s burdens (see 1 Cor 12:25–26).⁸ Christians become living sacrifices as they do not conform to the world’s ways, but share in the mind of Christ in acts of love and generosity (see Rom 12:1ff.).

It is not uncommon for immigrants to be portrayed in the media as a burden on society. Yet immigrants are also acknowledged by many to be hard-working people, even sacrificial. A more nuanced picture recognizes that immigrants are not only beneficiaries but contributors to our common way of life. At times the mentality that immigrants are burdensome comes into the church in a somewhat benevolent but no less dangerous form; namely, in the idea that they are only the needy. This leads to a one-sided view of neighbors as mere receivers of our generosity, mercy, or charity. However, when we think about immigrants who are members of our congregations from the perspective of our interdependent communion in Christ, care must be taken that more socioeconomically established members do not adopt a paternalistic attitude toward immigrants that might engender forms of dependency among the immigrants or an elevated view of themselves.

Immigrants are not only beneficiaries but contributors to our common way of life.

An interdependent view of our communion in Christ notes that we do not simply share the burdens of immigrant neighbors but also their gifts to the church, and that they, too, can share not only in the gifts of other members but also pray for them and counsel them in their burdens. This two-way approach to life together helps us to see immigrants not only as people for whom we sacrifice, but also as people who sacrifice for us. Therefore, when it comes to immigrant brothers and sisters in Christ, we

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

remember that Christ Himself comes to us through these saints in His needs but also with His gifts.

Hospitality

Portraying the Christian life as a sharing in Christ's marginality and hospitality toward strangers, the hospitality model of sanctification challenges us to see the Spirit's activity among and toward outsiders and forgotten neighbors. In a commentary on Abraham's hospitality toward the three strangers at Mamre in Genesis 18, Luther calls the church to be the house of Abraham in a world filled with people on the move.⁹ He praises his prince's welcoming disposition toward exiles fleeing into German lands for refuge due mostly to religious persecution.¹⁰

Being in a new land, immigrants understandably feel out of place, like they do not belong. They have different customs, looks, and speak with distinct accents. Immigrants are strangers, the neighbor "other." Understandably, the default reaction to anything strange is suspicion, caution, and fear. "Don't play with strangers!"—we are warned from an early age. Each new wave of immigrants to the US, including the Saxon Lutherans who came up the Mississippi to settle in Missouri, has raised fears among the populace—some justified, some unjustified.

Sadly, these fears are at times expressed in the church in subtle but no less unhelpful ways: "Why do we need a bilingual worship service? When are they going to learn English? Why do we have to share our kitchen with the Hispanic ladies?" When we look at strangers through the eyes of the sinful flesh, we see them as obstacles to our way of life. But when we see them through the eyes of Abraham, the father of hospitality, we see Christ coming to us in the strangers. Immigrants already feel unwelcomed in society and have a great hunger for acceptance and belonging. They do not need to experience the same unwelcoming attitudes in church. The church is a welcoming community in a world that often thrives on division and exclusion. The church stands as a unifying catholic force in the world, a universal communion that gathers people of different cultures, languages, and ethnicities under one Lord.

Devotion

Locating the Christian life in the context of God's created rhythm of repose and activity, the devotional model of sanctification speaks of the Christlike life in the Spirit as a devoted life of labor and prayer, rest and play. Jesus is anointed with the Spirit for a life of service, and yet He does not let His mission get in the way of His time with the Father in prayer (Lk 5:15–16). We are also told that Jesus "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit," thanking and praising His Father for revealing His good news to the disciples (Lk 10:21). When we consider his extensive work of preaching, teaching, and writing, Luther was undoubtedly a very busy person; and yet he can also speak of the Word of

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View Lutheran Mission Matters 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

God doing everything while he was asleep and drinking Wittenberg beer with his friends!¹¹ In a way, he reminds us that a life pleasing to God is one that involves work, but also rest and play.

Immigrants are busy people. They understand the value of a strong work ethic and regularly do the type of labor few people are willing to do today. Due to language, educational, and visa limitations, they are often underemployed or underpaid and thus need one, two, or even three jobs to make ends meet and save a little for a rainy day. Because immigrant parents do not want their children to go through the hardships they have experienced, they tend to sacrifice greatly to make opportunities available to their loved ones that they never had. They are overworked and tired and have little time or money for rest and relaxation—and even less time for play and recreation! Churches with a heart for immigrant families need to consider this dynamic when planning activities such as home visits, English as a Second Language (ESL) lessons, Bible studies, theological education courses or leadership workshops, congregational meetings, and worship services.

Immigrant neighbors do not always have a say in their weekly work schedules, and it is not uncommon that many have to work on Sundays. If all the church's main activities take place on Sunday, then creative solutions to make space for spiritual rest in the Word of God and prayer in the context of the communion of saints need to be discussed. When working amid busy people, church workers should also model a life that makes room for literal rest (*siesta*) and enjoying God's gifts of creation (*fiesta*). Congregations might ask how they can model but also create spaces in their weekly rhythm of activities for immigrant families to relax and play in the theater of God's creation. By doing so, church workers can find ways to help overworked immigrant families grow in lives of devotion through their work activity, but also through their receptivity of God's gifts in worship, rest, and play.

Immigrant neighbors do not always have a say in their weekly work schedules. . . . Creative solutions to make space for spiritual rest in the Word of God and prayer . . . need to be discussed.

Conclusion

In our reflection, we have focused mainly on how church workers can live out an embodied witness today by walking with immigrants as these neighbors seek to live out lives of repentance, struggle with evil in the world, live sacrificially in our midst, hunger for belonging, and struggle with living a healthy, devotional life. Let us not forget also that, when dealing with immigrant neighbors in terms of spiritual care, we ourselves are all called to repent of our sins for times we have put the worst

Copyright 2020 Lutheran Society for Missiology. Used by permission.

View *Lutheran Mission Matters* 28, no. 1 (2020) at <https://lsfm.global/>.

Membership in LSFM is available at <https://www.lsfm.global/join-the-society-for-missiology/>.

E-mail lsfmissiology@gmail.com to purchase a print copy of a single issue.

construction on these neighbors (renewal), to be vigilant about the ways we are tempted to speak ill of them (dramatic), to serve and share life with them (sacrificial), to act in welcoming ways toward them (hospitality), and to thank and praise God for them (devotional).

We conclude with Luther's exhortation to the church to exercise mercy and hospitality to strangers—an important way in which the church can shine the light of Christ in a world with unprecedented numbers of people on the move.

The church can and must not be indifferent to these difficulties of the brethren. By God's command and by the instruction of the forefathers it is constrained to practice works of mercy, to feed the hungry and the thirsty, to receive exiles hospitably, to comfort prisoners, and to visit the sick.¹²

We ourselves are all called to repent of our sins for times we have put the worst construction on these neighbors.

Endnotes

¹ Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "Bearing So Much Similar Fruit: Lutheran Theology and Comprehensive Immigration Reform," in Ronald W. Duty and Marie A. Failing, eds. *Secular Governance: Lutheran Perspectives on Contemporary Legal Issues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 184–205.

² This includes 25.9 million who are refugees, 41.3 million who are people internally displaced in the same country, and 3.5 million who are asylum-seekers. See <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2019/6/5d03b22b4/worldwide-displacement-tops-70-million-un-refugee-chief-urges-greater-solidarity.html>.

³ Leopoldo Sánchez, *Teología de la santificación: la espiritualidad del cristiano* (St. Louis: Editorial Concordia, 2013).

⁴ Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019). The renewal model is the baptismal one, and the sacrificial model includes the eucharistic one.

⁵ For a brief use of a models-based approach to sanctification for dealing with the problem of racism, see Leopoldo Sanchez, "Racism, Dealing with It," August 14, 2017, <https://concordiatheology.org/2017/08/racism-dealing-with-it>.

⁶ Luther, "Large Catechism IV 12," in Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 360.

⁷ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 34: Career of the Reformer IV*, "Preface to German Writings," ed. Lewis W. Spitz (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 285–287. See also Luther, "Comfort When Facing Grave Temptations," in LW 42:185.

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 35: Word and Sacrament I*, "The Blessed Sacrament," ed. E. Theodore Bachman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 52–53.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 3: Lectures on Genesis, Chapters 15-20*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960), 188.

¹⁰ LW 3:182.

¹¹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Vol. 51: Sermons I*, "The Second Sermon, March 10, 1522, Monday After Invocavit," ed. John Doberstain (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 77.

¹² LW 3:180.