

# Meat and Potatoes

"The Church needs books that encourage young and old to connect the Word with the world," says Ruth Padilla DeBorst (rpadilladeborst@yahoo.com), of Certeza Unida in San Salvador, El Salvador.



Sometimes we wish we could shut him up. Too many questions. Too many "Whys"! It is the word that most frequently drops from his lips, 10, maybe 12 times a day! Parental knowledge has a limit, right?

But, the day our son's inquisitive spirit is satisfied, the day he quits searching for reasons and explanations, would be very sad.

And, sadness is what the author of Hebrews expressed regarding the slow-paced Christian walk of the people to whom he wrote:

Though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about justice. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil (Heb. 5:12-14).

He admits babies only drink milk; the diet of young Christians must be

simple. First things first: the basics of Christianity. As we mature, and in order to do so, we need solids: deeper thinking, more complex food for thought and reflection, greater diversity from which to draw. Otherwise, like those Jewish Christians, we will forever depend on others to keep us fed; we will never grow or lead others to an ever-deepening relationship with the Lord and a growing understanding of His will. We will hide infant minds in adult bodies.

This sad picture does not just speak of the Church way back then and far away. In El Salvador—and in much of Latin America today—hundreds of thousands of people who label themselves evangelical Christians attend church every Sunday, and often every other day of the week also. But, ask them about their core beliefs, and their answers are vague and many times a syncretistic blend of popular wisdom, cultural values and out-of-context Biblical sayings. This phenomenon is not limited to Latin America but is tragically characteristic of some of the fastest-growing evangelical churches across the globe. Even more disturbing, watch those

assiduous church-goers in their families, neighborhoods and work environments, and you will often find little or no evidence of the Gospel in action.

For instance, the local newspaper told of a man who had been arrested for child abuse and wife beating. His neighbors had turned him in because they feared for his family. When interrogated by the police, he said he was a faithful member of a well-known church.

There are always Christians with bad testimonies. That's easy to see, but another problem is not so visible. For too many people, being identified as a Christian means little or nothing in terms of depth of commitment or lifestyle choices.

One would expect an inversely proportional relationship between the growth of the Church and the existence of violence, corruption and injustice in society. The more Christians there are, the fewer social problems would exist. Since the evangelical Church has grown dramatically over the last couple decades in El Salvador, now including about 25 percent of the population, the country should be a stellar example of

justice and the values of God's Kingdom evidenced in all walks of life. A careful look reveals no such effect. Much to the contrary, the Church is looking more and more like the world to which it is meant to bring light! Power-hungry leaders rule autocratically over ever-more passive followers. Families are as broken inside as outside the Church. Violence is as rampant where there is a church, as where there is not one.

Why are there so many Christians, but the bread is unleavened? Why is there so much salt, but it is not flavoring the world? Active yeast must leaven bread. Salt cannot hide its saltiness. If these elements are not working, we must ask why.

Much of the El Salvadoran Church only scratches the surface of people's lives. The trappings of religiosity take on many forms—endless worship services, supernatural signs and wonders, polished corporate management, increased influence in the political arena. But in-depth Bible teaching, submission to God, on-going discipleship, Spirit-led use of gifts, Christ-centered community,—all these adult meat-and-potato ingredients of Christian life—are often noticeably absent.

In keeping with that lack of depth, perhaps actually inducing it, the books that fill the shelves in Christian bookstores, the ones that sell the quickest and are most quoted, are those that offer quick fixes, 'how-to' formulas for

'Christian' success, simple step-by-step teaching—the milk of Christian living.

If the Latin American Church is to be a loving community where women and men grow as disciples and together impact the world as agents of God's Kingdom, it urgently needs solid food! It needs books that encourage Christians to dig into the Word. It needs books that explain and expound on biblical teaching in its original historical context, so that Latin American Christians are equipped to confront the real issues of their world with Kingdom criteria. The Church needs tools that will help Christian men and women question and study for themselves. They must take responsibility for their own growth and theological reflection, and in turn teach others the central ingredients of the Gospel. The Church needs books that encourage young and old to connect the Word with the world. In short, as Ediciones Certeza Unida proclaims, the Church needs "Books: so [our] faith takes root and gives fruit."

The opportunity and challenge to publishers is clear: Produce solid food.

Often less marketable and offering smaller profit margins than best-sellers of Christian pop, what the Church desperately needs are solid references and commentaries, serious approaches to faith and life issues. Let us not underestimate our public; many Christians are starving for substantial sustenance. Some are aware of their need and will

purchase and use books regardless of the cover. But, it is the responsibility of Christian publishers to remove barriers that may hinder readers from choosing solid food. Let's review the look and feel of our books. "Solid" need not imply boring, unreadable, or unapproachable!

Neither should "solid" be considered synonymous with "imported." We must recognize God's work among our own people, the gifts present in our churches and the biblical reflection generated in our own context. Our brothers and sisters need us to identify and encourage these writers, making it possible for their voices be heard. In order to grow in strength and witness, the Latin American church needs solid food with Latin ingredients and flavors!

Solid does not mean rigid, hermetic, once-and-for-all dictates. God's will works itself out in and through human history and creativity. It is constantly contextually relevant. So, if as Christian publishers, we want the Latin American Church to have an appropriate diet for its needs, we must promote questioning. We will celebrate, then, when brothers and sisters dig under the surface and ask hard questions regarding what God's will looks like, for example, in a continent that continues growing poorer. Yes, this question causes discomfort. Hard questions precede growth, and growth is necessary if we are to be meat and potatoes Christians. ❖

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*Ruth Padilla DeBorst leads a workshop at the Letra Viva consultation during CLADE IV, an international event held in Quito, Ecuador.*