

# BOISI CENTER

## INTERVIEWS



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**ERNESTO CORTES** is the co-director of the Industrial Areas Foundation and the Director of the West/Southwest IAF. He spoke with Boisi Center associate director **Erik Owens** before delivering the 12th Annual Prophetic Voices Lecture on prophetic action and imagination at the Boisi Center.

**OWENS:** Much of the work you do as a community organizer is based in religious communities. Can you explain why that is? What do religious people or communities offer in the broader quest for justice?

**CORTES:** I want to make a caveat first. These broad-based organizations that we build are institutions, and networks of institutions. They are political organizations in a larger context. They are not about partisan politics, but they are political. They are political in an Aristotelian/Thomistic tradition of concern about the common good, concern about the formation of children, concern about what happens to communities, and concern for developing the capacity of citizens. They are concerned about the capacity of ordinary people to be citizens, and to be able to articulate, deliberate, and negotiate for the common good, but also in ways which deal with their own interests. And so, because they are about the political, and seek to develop people's capacity to act on their own behalf, they have to understand and exercise power.

Having said that, we have found that the formation and transformation of people occurs much more effectively if the work that we do is connected to institutions; ones that teach people the importance of tradition. And I make the distinction which both Whitehead and

Pelikan make, which is that tradition is the living ideas of the dead while traditionalism is the dead ideas of the living. And so what we were trying to get people to understand is that they have to think institutionally, and by thinking institutionally, they have to be concerned about



people who have gone before them and people who are to come. So it is not just their own individual performance that matters, it is also how they contribute to the common good, how they contribute to the larger political order.

Essentially, we find that faith institutions are the most important resource that people have for thinking institutional-

ly, and thinking about past and future generations in the present. That means parishes, congregations, synagogues, mosques, etc.

**OWENS:** Why do you think that is? Are you suggesting that the churches or synagogues or mosques or other religious communities have a sense of tradition that other communities might not? Is there something inherent in the practice of faith, or in the nature of the message, the content, that promotes a sense of tradition?

**CORTES:** Well, the content is critical. Henri de Lubac wrote a book called *Catholicism*, which I liked a lot, and he argues there is a social dimension to the Sacraments. And so there is no full understanding of the Eucharist unless you also understand that it is about the body of Christ. And the body of Christ is the coming together of the faithful to live out the life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. So that body, and the act of building up that body, and of building up that community, is central to fully understanding the Eucharist. Whitehead talks about it in one of his essays, "The Aims of Education." The communion of saints is an insistent present which recognizes the past and the future generations. So that notion of the body of the community, and the building up of the body, has always been interesting.

My mother used to always tell me that the worst thing that a man could do—a Mexicano male could do—was not recognize his own children. And so she would never have anything to do with any man who would not recognize his own children. Now, for her, this meant that a man needs to accept the fact that he is obligated to those children, for their care and their well-being. They have a claim on him forever. That claim of recognition became real important to me. When Saint Paul talks about recognition, I think he meant what my mother meant.

This was so central to my mother's thinking about what was important to human relationships. She was very, very, very forgiving, extraordinarily so, and would always try to give people the benefit of the doubt. But failing to recognize one's own children was one thing she would not forgive. And so that notion of recognition became so important to my own thinking, and it was very useful to me in thinking about the work we do.

**OWENS:** In *The City of God*, Augustine speaks about the commonwealth in terms of loves that we have in common. And yet, as I understand it, community organizing is based on common interest rather than common loves.

**CORTES:** The word interest comes from the Latin word *inter esse*, to be among or between, that which the self is among or between. My interest is connected to that which I am in relationship, my children and my family. There is a woman named Carmen Badillo, who got involved with community organizing because she was concerned about her children. They were going to an elementary school and she was concerned about their safety. Since they were walking to school, sidewalks were very, very important to her. And so we began to organize with her PTA and her parish, St. Martin de Porres, around the issue of sidewalks. And she was able to attract the leadership of the PTA as well as some of the leadership of the parish to unite around that common issue.

Once we dealt with the sidewalk issue, then we were concerned about drainage. The kids had to go around a drainage ditch in order to get to school, and it was dangerous. The city was just delaying this project. One of my favorite actions was getting Mrs. Badillo in the middle of this huge ditch with the public works director. With the TV cameras coming down on her, she asked, 'when are you going to finish this ditch so our kids can get to school?'

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So when we get this flooding project done, Mrs. Badillo begins to think about issues in other communities, and she realizes that she has friends and relatives in other parts of the city who were also concerned about some of the same issues. She began to think about larger questions of school finance, and then development issues. And so her moral sphere broadened, and her interest broadened. It was no longer just her own children that she cared about; she cared about other people's children.

There is this capacity for an enlarged notion of interest which, as de Tocqueville talks about in *Democracy in America*,

overcomes what he calls the Augustinian soul. This is an inclination to become self-absorbed, or to make larger claims on life than are appropriate. But the Augustinian soul is mitigated by religion and by the intermediate institutions of family, neighborhood, and congregation. People become full citizens by working through these intermediate institutions where they engage townships, school boards, and city councils in face-to-face arguing and deliberation, negotiation, etc. That is how the Augustinian soul is fully attenuated and limited, and there is a potential for human flourishing.

**OWENS:** Could you speak to any specific religious principles or practices that ground your own work?

**CORTES:** Well, I have come to learn to love the concept of subsidiarity, which we call the “the iron rule”—never, ever do for anybody what he or she can do for themselves. And the iron rule is not a rationale for social Darwinism. It suggests and indicates an obligation on the part of leaders and institutions to mentor, to guide, to teach, to develop people's imagination and curiosity, develop their agency, so they become more capable of flourishing.

Now, this requires agitation and imagination. It requires engagement. And to me, that is best exemplified in the prophetic tradition, and specifically the call of Moses. Moses was thrown out of Egypt because he was intemperate and violent, and the people rejected his leadership. However, he sees something extraordinary in the ordinary work of his life as a shepherd. In that extraordinary experience (the burning bush), he is taken outside of himself and is called. That call recalls his memory of the anguish and the brokenness of the people that he identified with, the Hebrews, those who were without status, without anyone. And their inarticulate cry moves Yahweh, and Yahweh says, I hear the voice of my people crying out. But they do not cry to Yahweh. They are not crying to anybody

in particular. They are just crying out of the burden of their own situation. And that agitates Moses and after much hesitancy he responds, and he responds in the way that Abraham Joshua Heschel calls the prophetic response, and Moses is convulsed. And Heschel talks about the prophet going through these convulsions, which is the same description of what happens to Jesus of Nazareth in Luke's gospel, when he sees the widow of Nain.

So that notion of the identifying with people's pain and suffering, to me, is at the root of anger, because if you look at the meaning of the word anger, it means loss or grief, a Norse word, *ang*. And so that experience of loss and grief, and ability to identify with other people's grief, and other people's loss, and other people's pain, so much so that you are viscerally affected by it, is at the center of the prophetic tradition. And that, to me, resonates.

**OWENS:** At the same time, subsidiarity is embraced by many for different projects these days, as you well know. I wonder if you might speak to the rhetorical status of subsidiarity today, as used by, say, Paul Ryan. You have just described it as being rooted in empathy, self-empowerment, and community interest, but obviously there are countervailing forces.

**CORTES:** I think Ryan totally misunderstands the concept, because the notion of subsidiarity is that decisions should be made by the most appropriate body. It is not an individualistic concept. Subsidiarity also requires solidarity; you cannot separate them. You cannot separate subsidiarity and *comunio*, and the understanding of *comunio* as a self emerges in a relationship, the self develops in relationship. And the relationship that the self emerges in is the face of the other. There is a theologian named David Ford who has a book called *Self and Salvation*, where he argues that the Eucharistic notion is enhanced by Levinas' notion of the other, and you see the face of the



other in the face of the crucified Christ. And knowing that, engaging that face of the other, is requisite for understanding – because Eucharist does not mean just the face of the other who is happy and prosperous. It also means the face of the other who is at the margin of life, and the face of the other who is outcast and rejected and a stranger. And so therefore, if you are going to engage the face of the other, you have to know what ails them, what infects them, what they are awed by, what their fears are. And that means you have to be attentive and listen to them. And so this cannot be an intellectual exercise. There has to be active engagement, and listening, and conversation. So out of these conversations, out of this engagement, a deeper understanding of our interest begins to emerge. And as we begin to develop the capacity and agency to act on these interests, then we can exercise fully this understanding of subsidiarity.

**OWENS:** You said that subsidiarity is about decisions being made at the lowest appropriate level, closest to the ground.

**CORTES:** Exactly, and by those people who are most affected by those decisions. And I would ask you to synthesize that with a little book that Stuart Hampshire wrote, called *Justice is Conflict*. And he said that justice is not acquired unless

those people who are affected by the decisions are able to exercise voice and be heard in making the decisions that affect them.

And the word is appropriate, because it may not be appropriate for the decisions to be made, for example, at the local level. It might be more appropriate for the decisions to be made at the state level, or the federal level, or international level. And that word appropriateness is always going to be attached to subsidiarity.

**OWENS:** Right. It does not deny that there may be a higher level of organization or broader group of people that should be involved. That is, I think, a differential that we see in the political debate between making a decision at a certain level versus making that the only source for funding or action.

**CORTES:** That is correct. In fact, I would hold that we recognize that, for example, local communities do not always have the resources to do some of the things that they need to do in order for human flourishing to take place. Therefore, it requires the national government to respond. That does not mean, however, that local communities cannot figure out, should not figure out, or should not have the capacity to figure out, appropriate responses as long as it is not a mask for

the hypocrisy of denying services and capability to people.

**OWENS:** One last question. We invited you to deliver this year's Prophetic Voices lecture because we see in your work both prophetic witness and prophetic action. But I wonder how the notion of being a prophet sits with you personally? And what is the role of the prophet in contemporary American society?

**CORTES:** I have always admired the prophets; I admire prophetic imagination and the prophetic tradition. I hope that I can, at the end of my work, say that I have been a good teacher and mentor. If that is true, I would be more than satisfied. That will be measured by the number of good and effective professional organiz-


ers that emerge. That said, however, there is an enormous amount of engagement with the prophetic tradition that I have yet to do. I return to the prophets at different times and different places, in different ways, and I am always astounded by the extent to which I miss prophetic voices, both in the Scripture and in the tradition, but also in our own communities. Until I am no longer astounded by my own miscues and my own blindness, I cannot claim that mantle yet.

**OWENS:** It is a bold thing to call someone a prophet, but it is also a heavy mantle to wear.

**CORTES:** I am not quite ready to accept it just yet. One thing that has been most comforting to me is that I have learned to

understand politics by asking the question: what is the relevant time period? For a politician, it is the next election. For a bureaucrat, it is the budget cycle. For an executive, it is a quarter. But for a grandparent, it is a generation. And now that I have two grandchildren, and am thinking about what the world will be like for them, and how they will flourish, and how they will develop, and how they will be formed, it makes this work much more interesting and more relevant, and more hopeful.


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