

## INTRODUCTION

### *Explanation of book*

“Living between the two worlds of being Latino and American can generate uncertainty. The strange mixture of ethnic pride and racial prejudice creates another sort of confusion. Who am I as a Latino? How can I accept who I am in Christ with joy and confidence? Orlando Crespo has taken his own journey from Puerto Rico to an immigrant neighborhood in Springfield, Massachusetts, and back again to his Latino roots. In this book he helps readers reflect on their own voyages of self-understanding and what it means to have a mixed heritage from the days of the original Spanish Conquest to the present.”

### *First topic*

“Hispanic Americans have been here for so long, and yet kept their identity, that it is rather doubtful they will follow the same process of assimilation by which Swedes, Irish and Italians joined mainstream American society. Especially now that there is an increasing awareness of the value of one’s culture and traditions, it seems safe to predict that Hispanic Americans will be around mañana, and for as many mañanas as it pleases God to grant to this country.... Hispanic Americans... are going back to their historic roots and affirming their distinctive, not as something of which to be ashamed or to hide from view but as something of which to be proud and to exhibit at every possible opportunity.” (pg. 7)

1. Do you agree with this statement? What do you agree or disagree with?
2. Do you have a desire to go back to your roots?
3. Have you ever felt ashamed because you are Hispanic?

### *Second topic*

“Those of us who have been born and raised in this country are a new breed of Latinos/Americans in whom both identities are in operation and who struggle for acceptance in both parent cultures. We are not one or the other. We are both.” (pg.8)

1. What has your experience been like being a Latino/American?
2. Do you feel accepted in both cultures?

### *Third topic*

“I have come to realize that my Latino identity in this country- a conjoining of two ethnic identities- is about God designing a new breed he is pleased to use to influence both cultures and the world” (pg. 8)

1. Have you ever thought about your Latino identity like this?
2. How do you think God wants to use Latinos in this country and the world?

#### *Fourth topic*

"I know too much about God to sit back and do nothing. I have therefore chosen to walk into the confusing of biculturalism, trusting that God will be in those places waiting for me. The Apostle Paul said it well when he faced his weaknesses and said: 'Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong'" 2 Corinthians 12: 8-10 (pg. 9)

1. How is biculturalism confusing to you?
2. How can God help you in those areas of confusion?

#### *Fifth topic*

"While the media is giving increased recognition to Latino culture in the United states, many young Latinos still do not know how to incorporate their ethnic identity into who they are as people. They often swing to extremes, from totally assimilating into American mainstream culture to believing that the Latino culture is superior to all others" (pg. 9)

1. Do you swing from these two extremes?

### **CHAPTER 1: "My Journey Toward a Latino Ethnic Identity"**

#### *First topic*

"My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body." Psalm 139 15-16 (pg. 13)

1. Insert your name in "I" and "my". Insert God in "your". Read it again. How does this verse make you feel about yourself and how God made you?

#### *Second topic*

"A 1972 article in New York magazine captured the sentiments of millions of Whites who were similarly being forced to interact with Puerto Ricans moving in their neighborhoods.

These people were 'Spanish.' They came in swarms like ants turning the sidewalks brown, and they settled in, multiplied, whole sections of the city fallen to their shiny black raincoats and chewing-gum speech. We called them 'meedahs,' [from the word mira, meaning 'look' or look over here']... I only knew they grew in numbers rather than stature, that they were neither white nor black but some indelicate tan, and that they were here, irrevocably; the best you could do to avoid contamination was to keep them out of mind."

1. Did any of your parents live in the US during this time period? If you're not sure what their

experience was like, could you share their stories with us next week?

#### *Third topic*

"I was not proud to be Puerto Rican. We were told we were dirty, loud, uneducated, immoral and unable to speak English 'good.' These were the stereotypes I internalized and learned to live with every day as I stepped out into the White world."

1. What are the stereotypes or prejudices you have had to endure? How has this affected you?

#### *Fourth topic*

"In times of reflection, as I have allowed my pain to surface, God has kept bringing me back to the truth that he made me with great intentionality and purpose. When I wanted to abandon my identity as a Latino, God picked up all the pieces I want to leave behind."

1. In what ways have you denied or turned away from your culture?

2. For what purpose has God made you? (some people may have never thought about this question so give them time to respond and let them know it's ok to say "I don't know")

#### *Fifth topic*

"Discovering the beauty of my people and culture was a vital first step in my cultural conversion. It was a decisive moment that God used to offset the overpowering experience of being part of a minority that was looked down on by White America. Through it God began to shape me into a healthy human being and a Christian no longer in denial of his culture and ethnicity"

1. What are some beautiful things about your people or culture?

#### *Sixth topic*

"Understanding the history of racism against Latinos in the United States is another important factor that has helped me embrace my heritage. Learning of such oppression against my people has made me intensely angry and bitter at times. But it has filled me with compassion and love for my people and for others who have suffered injustices.

Several years ago PBS aired a documentary about Puerto Rico called *Mis Dos Casas (My Two Homes)*. It reviewed some of the struggle for an independent Puerto Rico and the injustices inflicted by the U.S. government. The Ponce Massacre of 1937 was particularly disturbing. As Puerto Ricans marched peacefully in protest against the arrest and imprisonment of Pedro Albizios Campos, leader of the Puerto Rican Nationalist and tear gas bombs opened fire on the unarmed crowd of men, women, and children. When the shooting stopped, 20 people were dead and 150 were wounded. As the women who were not shot helped the dying and program I wept in pain for an hour, as if I had just been told that a family member had been killed in a terrible accident.

In the 1930s U.S. laboratories and chemical companies used Puerto Rican women as guinea pigs to test birth control pills. Once the pill was judged safe for use in the United States, it was no longer available on the island; there sterilization became the chief method to prevent

births. The U.S. government developed a sterilization campaign to limit the number of births of Puerto Ricans. Researchers years later report, 'Commonwealth officials told [Puerto Rican women] that their welfare payments would be cut off unless they agreed to sterilization. Others were told that they had cancer, and that sterilization could save their lives. With still other women, the operation was performed in hospitals immediately after delivery. The mother, exhausted by hours of labor, would submit to the doctor's cold logic.' By 1976 35% of Puerto Rican women and 20% of the men had undergone sterilization - the highest rate of sterilization in the world.

I still have much to learn about Puerto Rican history. But the more I learn, the more I want to become an advocate for change. Puerto Rico's history is my history because I have chosen to identify fully with the Puerto Rican experience. To do so means I must embrace all of the sadness and the pain of our history. It also means I am willing to speak out against the injustices that have been perpetrated against my people. It is not enough to feel the pain; I must recognize that God is committed to bring justice. The psalmist in the Old Testament understood God as the Deliverer who conspired against oppressors by ruining their schemes and meeting the needs of those who called on him in a time of need: 'I know that the Lord secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy'" Psalm 140:12 (pg. 19-21)

1. How do these stories of injustice make you feel?
2. Read Psalm 140:12. How does this truth change any angry or bitter feelings?

### *Seventh topic*

"Living in alienation and marginalization, between two worlds, is often very difficult and lonely. However, the Scriptures have been a source of strength and encouragement in my journey of understanding and embracing myself and my people. Moses' story in particular inspires me. While Moses was not a mestizo (someone who is biracial), he did struggle with issues of identity similar to those Latinos face. He was born a Hebrew, was raised as an Egyptian and became a Midianite. And it was this man of three cultures that God called out to confront the pharaoh and free the Hebrew people from slavery:

'So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' And God said, 'I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.' (Exodus 3:10-12)

Moses is asking about his identity when he asks God: 'Who am I?' In effect he is saying, 'Are you sending me back to the pharaoh as an Egyptian prince, as a Jewish slave or as a midianite shepherd?' This would have enormous implications for the words he would use and the approach he would take in confronting the pharaoh. It is an honest and important question. What is intriguing to me is that God never gives him an answer. He simply tells Moses to go and that his presence will be with Moses.

God is affirming Moses' triculturalism: 'I have created you the way you are, Moses. You are the person I need for this task right now. Go and I will give you all that you need to accomplish what I have set before you.'

God uses us where we are, in all our complexity and confusion, especially in our ethnic identity, and does great and wonderful things through us. I have begun to view being Latino and American as a gift and an opportunity God has opened up for me to minister to very different groups of people, to draw them to Christ and towards reconciliation with each other.

Embracing my ethnic identity in all its complexity has become an opportunity to witness to God's greatness. As Moses' confidence came from God, so our trust must be in him to do great things through us even in the midst of our confusion and doubts about who we are. If God embraces us in our complexity and is able to accomplish his purposes through us, how much more should we accept ourselves culturally and ethnically?" (pg. 23-24)

1. How has being Latino and American been a gift for you in your life?
2. How can you be a witness to God's greatness by embracing your ethnic identity in all its complexity?

#### *Eighth topic*

"I have learned to live above the victimization and accomplish great things in God's strength and grace. He is a God who is for me and travels with me."

1. In what ways do you or have you played the victim because of your ethnicity?
2. How can God's strength and grace help you overcome that?

## **CHAPTER 2: "Our Identity as American Latinos"**

#### *First topic*

"As we continue to grow in number and diversity, one of the great challenges we face is how to define what it means to be Latino in America." (pg. 28)

1. How would you define what it means to be Latino in America?

#### *Second topic*

"... it is a combination of two elements that helps us define who we are. First, somewhere in our family there is a Latino heritage that resonates with us when we are with others of Hispanic heritage. We can trace our heritage back to a Hispanic country. The second important factor is that we willingly choose to identify with that heritage by being open about our ethnic roots, taking initiative to learn more about our Latino culture and caring about the issues relevant to our people." (pg. 30)

1. What do you agree or disagree with about this definition of what it means to be a Latino in America?
2. Do you willingly choose to identify with your Hispanic heritage? Why or why not?

#### *Third topic*

"Every Latino born in America is not Latino but American. To be truly Latino you must have

been born in a Latino country.' This is how many define being Latino." (pg. 30)

1. What do you think of that definition?
2. Has anyone told you you're not really Latino because you were born in America? How did that make you feel?
3. If you weren't born in America, have you ever told someone else that they are not truly Latino because they were born in America?

#### *Fourth topic*

"This U.S.-based Latino identity, which I will refer to as 'American or U.S. Latino,' is a natural reaction to the rejection we have faced from both parent cultures. We belong to both, yet we belong to neither. In this place of paradox, U.S. Latinos are choosing to continue to identify with their heritage but accept the fact that they are not Latino as defined by our first-generation *puro* brothers and cousins."

1. Have you ever felt rejected by American culture?
2. Have you ever felt rejected by Hispanic culture?
3. When people ask what ethnicity you are, what do you say?
4. Why would you or Why wouldn't you say you are "American Latino"?

#### *Fifth topic*

"I recount such incidents only because they suggest the fierce power Spanish had for many people I met at home; the way Spanish was associated with closeness. Most of those people who called me a pocho could have spoken English to me. But they would not. They seemed to think that Spanish was the only language we could use, that Spanish alone permitted our close association. (Such persons are vulnerable always to the ghetto merchant and the politician who have learned the value of speaking their clients' family language to gain immediate trust.) For my part, I felt that I had somehow committed a sin of betrayal by learning English. But betrayal against whom? Not against visitors to the house exactly. No, I felt that I had betrayed my immediate family. I knew that I had turned to English only with angry reluctance. But once I spoke English with ease, I came to feel guilty. (This guilt defied logic.) I felt that I had shattered the intimate bond that had once held the family close. This original sin against my family told whenever anyone addressed me in Spanish and I responded, confounded." (pg. 35)

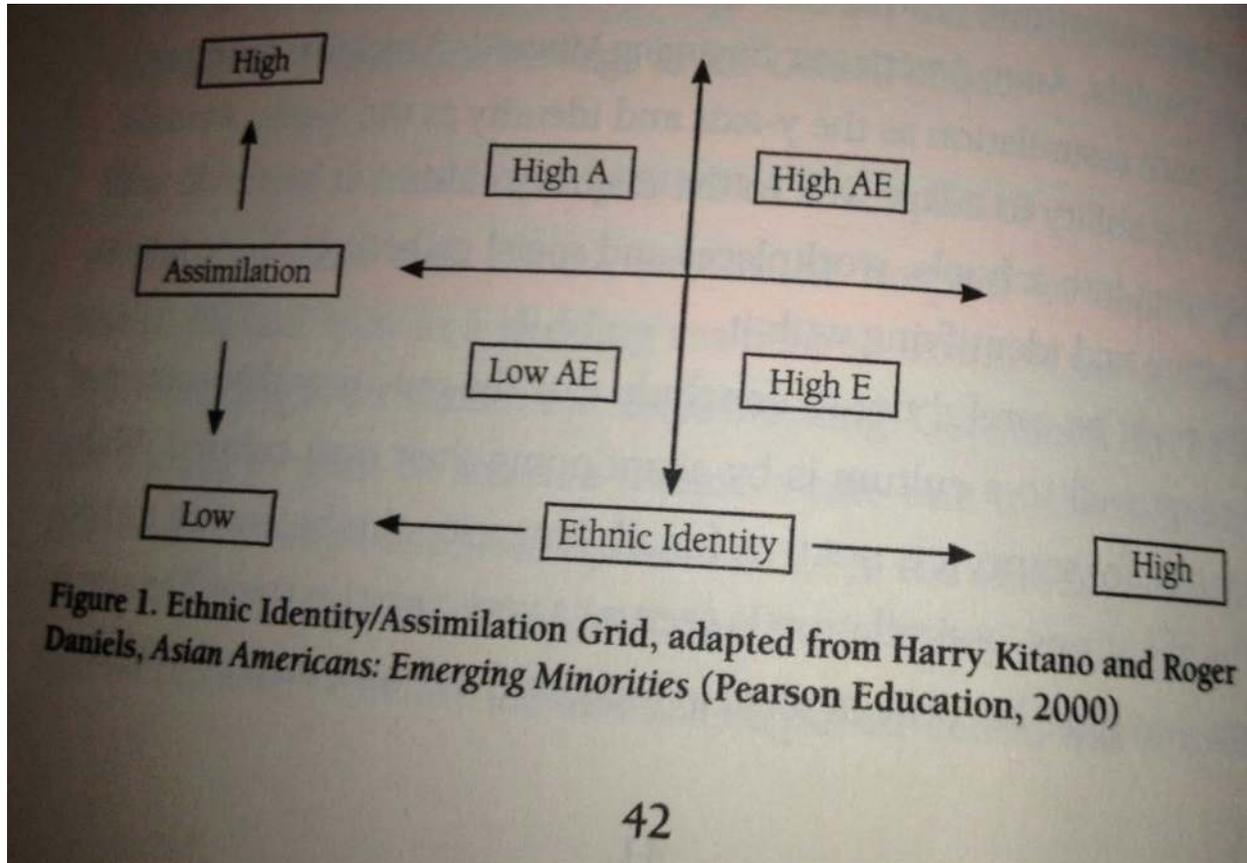
1. What language is spoken in your home?
2. Did your parents encourage you to learn English?
3. Do you feel confident or embarrassed when speaking Spanish?
4. How does your ability to speak or not speak Spanish affect how you see yourself as a Latino?

### **Chapter 3: "Where you stand in your own ethnic identity"**

#### *Explanation of the grid*

"This grid is a map on which you can place a red dot to mark 'You Are Here' in your ethnic

journey. The grid (adapted from Harry Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*) includes four quadrants, with assimilation as the y-axis and identity as the x-axis. *Assimilation* is the ability to adapt well to the majority culture. It has to do with integrating into schools, workplaces and social gatherings of the majority culture and identifying with it.” (pg. 41)



### Questions

1. “What are the strengths and weaknesses of each quadrant?”
2. “Where would you place yourself? Why?”
3. “From a Christian perspective, which of these seems to be closest to where we should be?”
4. “Based on the quadrant you find yourself in, identify some needs you have for growing in ethnic identity. What resources (people, books, films, magazines, organizations) could be a source fo learning and growth for you?”
5. “Based on the quadrant you find yourself in, what is God teaching you about yourself? Where are you hopeful and where are you discouraged?”
6. “What are the dangers of using this information against another Latino? How can it be misued in a hurtful way?” (pg. 53)