

March 22, 1943–May 13, 2012



Ada María Isasi-Díaz, a theologian and ethicist who advocated for and with the poor and vulnerable wherever she encountered them, passed away from cancer in New York City on May 13, 2012, at the age of 69. Although several months have passed, many around the world who were sustained by Isasi-Díaz's theological vision continue to mourn her passing. All of her students and those she mentored, in particular the Latina scholars of theology and religion whom she took under her wing, came to see her as *madrina* — godmother. She nurtured many women and men to maturity in the academic guild, and served as mother-guide for women in the church.

Isasi-Díaz was born in La Habana, Cuba, in 1943, the third of eight children. She was educated by the nuns of the Order of Saint Ursula through her primary and secondary education at the Merici Academy, but summers were spent away from the city. Her father worked in sugar mills in different provinces of the island, and Isasi-Díaz witnessed the struggles of workers and, at an early age, began to develop a keen awareness and concern for the poor and oppressed. Through her Catholic religious upbringing, this empathy for and with the poor was cultivated particularly by her mother, who impressed upon Isasi-Díaz the determination of never giving up *la lucha* (the struggle).

Isasi-Díaz left Cuba in 1960, became a political refugee in the United States, and entered the religious community of the Order of Saint Ursula. Before earning her bachelor's degree from the College of New Rochelle in 1971, Isasi-Díaz spent three years in Lima, Peru, as a missionary. In her words, Isasi-Díaz was profoundly affected by that time in Peru: "This experience has marked me for life. I often say it was there that the poor taught me the gospel message of justice. It was there that I learned to respect and admire the religious understandings and practices of the poor and the oppressed and the importance of their everyday struggles, of *lo cotidiano*.

It was there that I realized the centrality of solidarity with the poor and the oppressed in the struggle for justice." (From the biographical sketch posted on Isasi-Díaz's website through

[Drew University's Graduate School of Theology](#)

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Isasi-Díaz decided to leave the convent in 1969 but maintained her sense of call to the vocation of teaching, which she did in a number of different places. In 1975, Isasi-Díaz experienced her first Women's Ordination Conference in Rochester and was "born a feminist." Here she became conscious of the intersections of sexism, racism, and ethnic prejudice, classism and economic oppression — this interconnection of oppression would further guide her theological and ethical analysis in the years to come. Isasi-Díaz's articulation of *mujerista* theology — a "*proyecto histórico*

(historical project) that seeks to transform oppressive reality by sustaining and enabling Hispanas/Latinas' struggle to survive and live fully" (From *La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology*

. Orbis Books, 2004, p. 5) developed as an expression of liberation theology during her years earning a MDiv (1985) and PhD (1990) from Union Theological Seminary, New York.

When Isasi-Díaz began teaching theology and ethics at Drew University's School of Theology in 1991, she maintained her residence in New York City and, more importantly, her connection with Our Lady Queen of Angels Church in East Harlem, NY. She was part of the parish family, attending Mass regularly and becoming deeply invested in the people who were "familia" in this predominantly Latino/a church community. Despite the decision of the Archdiocese of New York to close the parish in 2007, Isasi-Díaz led vigils and worship services outside the church on the sidewalk, in solidarity with the women and men of the community for whom the church served as their home. Here was Isasi-Díaz's vision of *mujerista* theology manifested: the liberative praxis of Latinas in the church acting on their own behalf to resist oppression and affirm their human dignity for the good of the community. For Isasi-Díaz,

mujerista

theology was not academic theology confined within the walls of the seminary or the church; rather, the women of Our Lady Queen of Angels were living examples of

mujerista

theology in action through their justice-making in the world.

As activist-theologian, Isasi-Díaz continued to produce scholarship in the field, not for personal achievement but to clarify and articulate more fully her theological insight developed *en conjunto* (i

n collaboration). Her co-authorship of

Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church

, with Yolanda Tarango (HarperCollins, 1988) began her career as a prolific interlocutor of the experiences of Latinas and the theological/ethical import of everyday struggles for survival and dignity. From that time, all of her major works —

En La Lucha: A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology

(Fortress, 1993/2003);

Women of God, Women of the People

(Chalice, 1995);

Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century

(Orbis, 1996); and

La Lucha Continues: Mujerista Theology

(Orbis, 2004) — stood as a witness to the lives of Latinas/os, directed first and foremost to the community and secondarily to the academy and church much in need of transformative justice.

Included in the work of transforming structures of academy and church was, for Isasi-Díaz, the development of Latino/a leaders in theology and ethics to serve in the academy, church, and society on behalf of the Latino/a community. Along with other Latino/a scholars of theology and religion, Isasi-Díaz was a founding member of the Hispanic Theological Initiative, whose mission is to “create and nurture a community of Latina/o scholars to service the academy and the church...[by] increasing the number of number of Latina/o students and faculty in theological education and, by doing so, better equip U.S. institutions to serve the growing Hispanic population.” (From the mission and goals of the [Hispanic Theological Initiative](#) .) Through her commitment to this and other projects aimed toward developing a critical mass of Latina/o scholars in theology, including the Hispanic Summer Program, Isasi-Díaz sought to broaden the dialogue within the church and academy with the voices of those who had been rendered insignificant in both.

Isasi-Díaz's manner of teaching and activism was very much a collaborative, *en conjunto*, style; still, she was known as a demanding teacher and colleague who never allowed even the smallest matter to slide. She sought to instill in those with whom she mentored and worked a sense of urgency and passion for all forms of injustice: the necessity to be fully informed of them and the readiness to act upon them. In her circles of dialogue and collaboration — from her many years of involvement and leadership in the AAR, to her advocacy for and with *Las Hermanas* (the national assembly of Latina Catholic nuns), to her commitment to dialogue with the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) — Isasi-Díaz was fiercely engaged in the work of transformation because her faith informed her that Christian discipleship required nothing less.

Isasi-Díaz's love of God, *Jesucristo*, and the church community inspired a passion and desire for working towards the kin-dom of God — where all persons flourish in right relationship with each other, the creation, and God in ways that do not reinforce hierarchical ordering but rather are grounded in justice and love. She believed in the power of a loving God whose Spirit can transform structures of oppression into structures of justice when people on earth work together

to lift up the poor and vulnerable. This belief led Isasi-Díaz to advocate for justice with and for same-sex partners through marriage equality, to speak out against anti-Muslim violence, and to make connections with ecofeminism and *mujerista* theology.

It also led Isasi-Díaz to pursue one of the last projects on which she was working before she died. Isasi-Díaz was deeply distressed by our current political climate in which she witnessed the downward spiral of our public discourse into a polarized abyss delineated by the lines of right and left. Most troubling for Isasi-Díaz was the way the extreme right had, in her view, appropriated the language and symbolism of Christianity, leaving those with more progressive political stances no space to claim the Christian tradition as a source for justice-making action in the world. She valued the way public intellectuals, such as Cornel West, continued to assert the Christian norms of love, justice, right-relationship, and human dignity as the fundamental argument to push back against right-wing extremist politics. She made it her commitment to assemble a diverse group of theologians and ethicists to reflect upon the most pressing concerns of our day. *Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness in the Twenty-first Century (Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion)* is the culmination of at least six years of Isasi-Díaz's fierce devotion to addressing the deep divisiveness within the nation through the lens of those most impacted by the changing shape of the American Dream.

Isasi-Díaz's theological vision of the kin-dom of God became part of theological discourse, but she desired more than simply adding new jargon to theological language. Her belief in the possibility of ushering into the world a true kinship of humanity never wavered. Any injustice gave her the occasion to pursue the kin-dom with passion, love, and hope — that every act of justice brings the kin-dom closer to reality. As a Cuban theologian, the struggle for that which is yet unseen — *la lucha* in the “now” with the hope of the “not yet” — was no abstract notion.

Isasi-Díaz leaves a legacy that is still unfolding because, in her viewpoint, the work of transformative justice requires much to be done. In her challenge to the Roman Catholic hierarchy, she passes on the legacy of working toward women's ordination and full equality of LGBTQ persons. In her challenge to the academy, she passes on the insistence of *lo cotidiano* (everyday life) as the starting point of theology. In her challenge to the wider church community, she passes on a vision of the kin-dom of God “on earth as it is in heaven,” where all are members of God's family are responsible for the well-being of all. In her challenge to society, particularly in the United States, she passes on the mandate to live up to the ideals upon which the nation was founded. In all these things — indeed in her life's work — Isasi-Díaz has left a mark on theology that is centered on love: of falling in love with God's promise of justice, of nurturing that love in relationship with God and others, and participating fully in the love of God by unfolding the kin-dom of God on earth. Isasi-Díaz once stated that her many “children” — nieces and nephews, students, mentees — were the promise of the kin-dom concretized in the

future. In other words,
la lucha
continues.

This In Memoriam piece was written by Teresa Delgado, Iona College, New York.