CHAPTER FOUR

DIALOGUE: LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Across many disciplines, the study of culture today is about the power of gatekeepers, the rhetorical legitimization of formal organizations, the social determinants of art and ideas, the reproduction of hierarchies, the acquisition of cultural capital, the normalization of the individual self.¹

While Erasmus provided Aguinis with the humanist passport to modernity on a global scale, a contemporary Argentine Catholic served for Aguinis as a gatekeeper of traditional society; he helped to promote the necessity of adaptation and modernization within the Catholic Church in a country still steeped in the homogenous legacy of Counter-Reformation Spain. Written almost a decade after Elogio de la culpa, Las dudas y las certezas: diálogos completos (2001) is a work of dialogue between Marcos Aguinis and the late Catholic bishop Monseñor Laguna that acknowledges the centrality of Erasmus’s religious legacy for Argentina in a way that Elogio de la culpa does not. That is, if Elogio de la culpa insisted on focusing on individual agency as a secularized legacy of Erasmus, Diálogos completos evidenced an explicit acknowledgement that the nation could not achieve the plural democratic character it allegedly sought, the very one Aguinis used Elogio to promote, without first undergoing a religious reformation.²

In Diálogos completos, Laguna and Aguinis stress to their readers that Argentina’s readiness to receive an inter-religious dialogue speaks to the possibility of Argentina achieving democracy, and thereby of moving beyond a state of psychosocial immaturity. Democracy is then presented once more as the nation’s penicillin, poised to counter Argentina’s centuries-long hosting of authoritarian movements and regimes that have caused suffering and shame.³ The dialogue between Aguinis the Jew and Laguna the Catholic serves as both an invitation and a model for the public to engage in conversation in spite of their differences. If Erasmus was

³ Ibid., 167.
credited with the Reformation, which is ultimately seen as the first seed of modernity, democracy, and the modern West, and Latin America is the inheritor of the Counter-Reformation, then Monseñor Laguna provides the missing link between the two.

In order to situate Aguinis’s dialogues within the context of his wider aims and approaches, this chapter consists of the following five sections: The first section speaks to the usefulness of Aguinis’s choice in Monseñor Laguna as a partner in dialogue. The second section contextualizes Aguinis’s work within the company of other writers and renowned intellectuals in Latin America who previously adopted the genre of dialogue. The third section provides an analysis of how Aguinis’s goals, pursued within his dialogues with Laguna, speak to his larger aim of creating inclusive democracy through literature. The fourth section delves into Diálogos completos and provides an analysis of the content and method provided therein as it relates to the themes of the previous three sections. The fifth and final section addresses the global message within the local work.

I. Dialogue Partner, Monseñor Laguna

Aguinis’s choice in partner for his dialogues is not incidental, and serves a purpose that is as meaningful as the previous choice of patrimony rendered by Erasmus, Neruda, and Freud in the essay genre. Much like Erasmus embodied an in-between space, claiming to be an insider of the Church while advocating for its dramatic transformation, so too does the Catholic bishop Monseñor Justo Laguna occupy a tenuous role within his contemporary Church. In representing a modernizing take on Argentine Catholicism, Laguna, like Erasmus, walks a fine line between a traditional and a revolutionary figure precisely in order to be successful in promoting change. Since change from the inside is at the core of Aguinis’s techniques, Laguna provides Aguinis with the platform from which to obtain, through dialogue, the Argentine piece of the puzzle, the counterpart to the global historical connection provided by Erasmus.

Monseñor Laguna’s identity as a Catholic bishop is necessary but not sufficient to earn him the position of Aguinis’s partner in conversation. Laguna proves to be a useful choice for Aguinis because of his

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4 Ibid., 168. Laguna explains that the Church itself has modernized, making liberty a part of the Church’s definition of faith since 1869.