

Fifteen Questions and Answers on the Quinceañera

1. What is a quinceañera?

The quinceañera is a traditional celebration of life and gratitude to God on the occasion of the fifteenth birthday of a young Hispanic woman. The ritual emphasizes her passage from childhood to adulthood. The family usually requests a Mass or a blessing to be held in the Church. The rite is frequently celebrated in several countries in the Americas, including Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean. It is frequently requested by Hispanic Catholics in the dioceses of the United States of America.

2. What is the origin of the quinceañera?

The tribes of Meso-America, possibly the Mayas and Toltecs, celebrated elaborate rites of passage for their young men and women. Rites of passage are known to have existed in the Iberian Peninsula as well. The Spanish conquistadores may have brought the practice to Meso-America. It is possible that the missionaries would have approved of this practice, since these rites closely paralleled Christian practices of initiation and marriage. The ancient Mozarabic Rite of the Iberian peninsula had elaborate rituals marking the passage of baptized adolescents, each of which included specific references to Christian initiation and each of which was celebrated following the reception of Holy Communion at Mass. With the suppression of the Mozarabic Rite, many of these rituals passed into popular religious practice.

3. How is the quinceañera celebrated?

In the presence of family and friends, the young woman (the quinceañera), often accompanied by fifteen young men and women of her choice, (damas y chambelanes), enters the Church in procession, together with her parents and godparents. If she has prepared the readings, she may serve as the lector for at least one of the readings. After the Liturgy of the Word, the quinceañera makes a commitment to God and the Blessed Virgin to live out the rest of her life according to the teachings of Christ and the Church by renewing her Baptismal promises. Then, signs of faith (medal, Bible, rosary, prayer book) which have been blessed and may be given to her. A special blessing of the quinceañera concludes the Liturgy of the Eucharist. After Mass, the young woman is presented to the community. The ritual continues with a dinner and sometimes a dance in her honor.

4. Who are the participants in the celebration?

The quinceañera and fifteen young men and women of her choice are joined by members of her family and friends for the celebration. The priest(s) or deacon has a key role as the one who represents the Church and who prays the blessing over the young woman. The local community is also encouraged to gather for the celebration.

5. May the quinceañera take place outside Mass?

The ritual may be celebrated simply, outside Mass with the young woman, accompanied by her parents and godparents, coming before the priest or deacon to receive a special blessing in the Church. Or, there may be a more elaborate celebration with elegant clothes, flowers, music and decorations and with more than one priest presiding.

6. Why would this blessing be included in the Book of Blessings?

The Book of Blessings (De Benedictionibus) provides blessings for persons, places, and objects in a wide variety of circumstances and occasions. The Bendición de la Quinceañera is proposed for inclusion in Part I: Blessings Directly Pertaining to Persons, alongside orders for the blessing of a family, a married couple, children, sons and daughters, etc.

7. Why is it necessary to have an approved order of blessing for this practice?

The traditional blessing, part of the popular religion of Latinos and common in some countries of Central and South America and the Caribbean, has developed in the United States into an unofficial “liturgical rite” and is regulated in some dioceses with specific guidelines and norms.

In recent years, the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy has been approached by a number of Bishops requesting the development of a quinceañera ritual for use in the dioceses of the United States of America. There is currently no approved Blessing for the Quinceañera. In a number of US dioceses, unapproved “rituals” of a variety of origins are in widespread use. In the absence of an approved rite, celebrants often spontaneously create prayers and ritual actions. Since only approved and confirmed rites may be used in the Liturgy, a Blessing for the Quinceañera has been proposed by the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy.

8. Why do parents present their daughter for this celebration?

The parents, in coming to the parish Church seeking the blessing, acknowledge that their daughter has reached the age where she is capable of handling additional responsibility. They see the quince años Mass as a way to thank God for the blessing of their daughter’s life and to seek God’s blessing and guidance as she enters adulthood. The extended family, (grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles and cousins) is usually present, to celebrate with the quinceañera. Esponsores, other couples acting as sponsors, may bring forward the blessed religious articles which are presented to the quinceañera.

9. What is the positive value of this celebration for the parish?

The Virgin Mary is a model for women of every class and age group. In a culture where machismo is still evident, the choice by a young Hispanic woman to celebrate her fifteenth birthday in the Church offers a host of possibilities for her and the parish. If the young women are received with understanding and a willingness to meet their needs, the celebration of the quinceañera can be a “teachable moment” for the parish.

10. Could a parish institute a period of preparation for the quinceañera?

The quinceañera, and the fifteen teens who form part of her celebration, could be asked to participate in a day of retreat or in one or several sessions of preparation with talks, activities and prayer, together with the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, prior to the date of the celebration. The focus on the positive contribution of women in society as well as their becoming active participants in the life of the parish can also be emphasized. They may be encouraged to take a more active part in the various parish ministries.

11. Why is this celebration necessary when the Church has the sacrament of Confirmation?

The Sacrament of Confirmation is one of the three sacraments of initiation by which the baptized “are more perfectly bound to the Church and are enriched with a special strength of the Holy

Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread and defend the faith by word and deed.”¹ The celebration of the quince años complements the Sacrament by providing a special blessing for a young Catholic woman as she enters adulthood, preparing her for her new responsibilities.

Today’s teenagers live in a culture which urges them to embrace “the facile myths of success and power,”² in direct contrast to the Catholic values espoused by their parents. At the time of the celebration of the blessing of the quinceañera, a young woman comes to the Church seeking a blessing. Standing before the altar, she is publicly presented by her family and friends in a gesture of thanksgiving.

12. Does this celebration sometimes become too costly and extravagant?

Yes. Unfortunately, the advantage of living in a country where material things are readily available often encourages families to give into a competitive consumerism and spend exorbitant sums on such celebrations. The same tendency is often seen in the planning of celebrations of the Sacrament of Marriage.

However, as with weddings, many Hispanic families save for years to provide the celebration for their daughter, granddaughter, goddaughter or niece. While to an uninformed observer, the financial expenditure may appear far beyond the means of the family, the reality may be very different. The custom of having padrinos/madrinas and esponsores makes it possible for there to be a larger array of donated gifts and services. Family members who are seamstresses, musicians, drivers of limousines, florist shop workers, cooks, bakers and photographers often donate their services as gifts. The church decorations, food and music for the fiesta, are often provided by family and friends.

Parishes may also give pastoral guidance in having the celebration for several girls at one Mass, thus focusing more on the liturgy than on any one family, or offering the use of the parish hall for the fiesta which follows. A parish, a parish organization or several parish organizations could sponsor a fiesta following a monthly religious celebration for all the quinceañeras of the parish. It is suggested that a time of preparation be set before the date of the celebration so that all participants understand the meaning of the religious celebration and have an opportunity to ready themselves spiritually.

13. How can this celebration be a means of strengthening the faith of Latino youth?

Adults have a responsibility to pass on the faith to younger members of the community. The celebration of quince años is a crucial time in the life of a young Hispanic woman. While society invites youth to gang membership, drug and alcohol abuse and irresponsible sexual behavior, the Church can offer the quinceañera an opportunity to reflect on her role as a Catholic Christian woman in a society which often distorts the woman’s role.

The U.S. Bishops’ pastoral letter, *Renewing the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry* is a call to personal discipleship, evangelization and leadership of youth so strong that the bishops ask the entire Church to make ministry with adolescents its concern as well. The letter focuses on three goals: empowering young people to live as disciples of Christ in today’s world; drawing young people to responsible participation in the life, mission and work of the

faith community; and fostering the personal and spiritual growth of each young person.

The quinceañera ritual is valuable for the religious message it sends not only to young people, but also to parents, grandparents, godparents and the entire parish in calling them to prayerfully join with youth in making a commitment to God and the Church.

14. Why is the rite just for girls?

According to traditional usage, the Bendición de la Quinceañera has been a celebration for young Hispanic women. This is the practice in the countries of origin of the young women requesting the blessing. Recently, in the Western and Southwestern parts of the United States a limited number of young Hispanic males have requested this blessing for themselves or, in one case, twins (male and female), requested a joint celebration. There is no basis in the traditional usage, however, for the inclusion of young men in the rite.

The celebration also can be a strengthening of the identity of the quinceañera within her family and as a Catholic, as well as an affirmation of the gift of women as a blessing to the Church. In the Hispanic community, traditionally it has been the women who hand on the faith. The abuelita (grandmother) holds a special place in the family for that reason. Women organize feast days, celebrate rituals and offer prayers. The mother sets up the altarcito in the home where prayers are offered for the living and the dead. She makes the home a domestic church. Hispanic women are the evangelizers and teachers of values, yet their leadership has often gone unrecognized. The Quince Años Blessing publicly acknowledges this historic role.

15. Why is the Bendición de la Quinceañera presented in English and in Spanish?

In many parishes the young women who come to the church asking for the Bendición de la Quinceañera speak only Spanish, others are bilingual, and some of those who were born in this country speak only English. Those participating in the celebration, the parents, godparents, relatives and friends, also share in this linguistic diversity. Many young women who choose the Eucharistic celebration in English and who pray in this language, nevertheless desire to participate in the traditional custom of the Quinceañera and prefer that at least some of the celebration be done in English.

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11; Cf. OC, Introduction 2.

² Pope John Paul II, World Youth Day Address, August, 2005.

Source: USCCB, Committee on Divine Worship, <http://www.usccb.org/liturgy/page2.shtml>