

Ministering to Hispanic Young People

by Fr. Ramón Domínguez, Y.A.

The Context

US Census data reflects the following numbers for our Diocese:

Population of Virginia (July 2008): 7,769,089 (US Census Bureau (USCB))

Hispanics in Virginia (July 2008): 531,396 (USCB)

Population of Diocese of Arlington geographical area (July 2008): 2,820,999 (USCB)

Population of Virginia (July 2006): 7,628,347 (USCB)

Hispanics in Virginia (July 2006): 484,257 (USCB)

Population of Diocese of Arlington geographical area (July 2006): 2,737,276 (USCB)

Population of Catholics in Diocese of Arlington (2008): 413,360 (CDA Directory)

Hispanics in the United States do not come from a single national group as is the case of Koreans, Vietnamese, Filipinos, etc. While all too often they are grouped together as Hispanics or Latinos, their origins come from a wide variety of countries and cultures. While holding Spanish as a common language base, the regional variances are quite diverse. Furthermore, national origin is an important factor as the various Latin American countries are often at war or in conflict with each other.

Nonetheless, there is a shared identity that is helpful to recognize when ministering to this community, especially when it comes to serving the youth. The Hispanic population can generally be grouped into three broad categories. While these categories are fluid, they give an idea of how immigrants move through the process of integrating into the U.S. culture. The first group is the newly arrived. The second group is the U.S.-born children of newly arrived parents. The third group is the U.S.-born children of the second group.

As newly arrived, first generation Hispanics are often faced with the difficult task of learning a new language, culture and academic performance. Their parents, often working long hours or multiple jobs, are limited in their ability to learn English and often depend on the older children to assist them in navigating this new country. While this is often expedient, and in many cases a necessity, since newly arrived parents may not have the educational background to readily learn a new language, it places significant burdens on the development of the young person. Depending on the age of arrival to the U.S., these youth are usually fluent in Spanish and gradually become fluent in English.

As time continues and U.S. born children are added to the newly arrived's families, a new dynamic arises as well. These younger children are usually fluent in English very quickly and only possess a passing ability to speak Spanish in the home. Often their vocabulary is limited to household conversations, religious prayers, and the like. Their music, clothing, and language of choice is predominantly English and from the United States. Culturally, however, they see themselves quite distinct from the general U.S. population and mostly socialize with other Hispanics. While this is not always true, in areas with large groups of Hispanics, this is quite often the case.

By the time these youth have their own children, they still retain the cultural awareness of being Hispanic, but by and large, their ability to speak Spanish, and truly understand their

country of origin's customs is limited to what they learn from their grandparents and what is practiced in their local community.

“Traditional values like hospitality, respect owed to elders, the significance of giving one's word, the importance of the historical memory of families — all this is mingled with attitudes prevailing in the U.S. cultural environment. These attitudes are often different from, or even antagonistic to Hispanic family perspectives. The dangers and opportunities offered to our youth by the dominant culture come in great variety. What commitment, happiness, and the good life mean, and what sex is all about, take new paths when the Hispanic child goes out to encounter the values of the dominant culture of the United States.” (*Bishop Flores, 10/13/2008 ANSH Colorado Conference*)

Recognizing this process, these varying perspectives and these basic groups present the Coordinator of Youth Ministry (CYM) with some challenges in terms of language, cultural sensitivity and social preferences. “The unspoken assumption that they would simply assimilate into the existing mainstream parish youth group, programs and activities has proved to be incorrect.” (*Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, Origins, V36, #18, Oct. 12, 2006*)

One practical approach to address this area of concern is to seek out natural groupings of youth and include them as part of the structured youth ministry program without requiring them to give up those aspects and features that make them valuable and attractive to one another. Often these groupings can be seen connected loosely with gatherings of adults. For example, in many parishes Hispanic adults meet to have charismatic prayer services, or praise and worship. In these parishes sometimes there develops a natural group of youth who are present, but not engaged or involved in the prayer group. This natural grouping is one to which the CYM could begin to connect and provide support and guidance. Establishing contact and a relationship with this group is the first step in building bridges of connectivity between the different cultural groups.

Taking advantage of these natural groupings is a useful first step in identifying and engaging the youth of the parish. As much as we would like to assume that the young read the bulletin, mainstream U.S. youth rarely read it, and Hispanic youth are even less likely to read it, so reaching out to Hispanic youth through bulletin announcements is, at best, marginal. Engaging them in this first step is essential to validate the importance of providing an ecclesial space for them to live and practice their faith in the context of the parish community. These groups need to be affirmed while at the same time, the CYM needs to build bridges and find points of encounter between the Hispanic group(s) and the mainstream youth program.

By CYMs validating and encouraging their participation in these Hispanic youth groups, these youth will acquire a sense of belonging. Hopefully through the efforts of the CYM this sense of belonging will weave into the broader context of the parish community and eventually form youth that can take ownership and the parish will reap their stewardship.

“[To achieve] full commitment to the life and mission of the parish, young people and their families commit to:

- Strengthening the unity of the parish while honoring and embracing the diversity of each one of the cultural/ethnic groups that constitute the parish. Such commitment flows from the conviction that each culture has a piece of the good news that is lived and communicated through the traditions, language, ethos, cultural values and norms of that community.

- Being alert and ready to invite and welcome newcomers in their midst and to provide them with the space and support they need to begin their unique journey of ecclesial integration in the diverse parish family community.” (*Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, Origins, V36, #18, Oct. 12, 2006*)

In *Renewing the Vision* the Bishops call for youth ministry to be multicultural. This is only achieved “when it focuses on specialized ministry to youth of particular racial and ethnic cultures *and* promotes multicultural awareness among all youth ... [and] needs to develop program content that is culturally appropriate and relevant to the needs of the participants” (p.22-23).

There are a number of online resources available for Hispanic youth ministry. These include sites such as:

www.maccca.org
www.sepimiami.org
www.ncchm.org
www.laredpjh.org
www.usccb.org/hispanicaffairs
www.ansh.org
http://www.fipusa.com/index_english.html

Learning about, engaging, and walking with the Hispanics of the parish is an essential experience that can be enriching for the CYM. These youth represent a significant sector of our population and it is vital to instill in them the truth of what it means to be Catholic. It cannot be left to the traditions of the home country, nor can we entrust it to the popular culture. If we wish to touch their hearts and instill in them a fervor to live as true members of the Body of Christ, we must seek them out, build up relationships so that they will walk with us as we lead them to Jesus Christ.

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. Now the body is not a single part, but many. (I Cor. 12:12-14, NAB)

Let us pray that our vision of youth ministry is such that each CYM values each part of the Body of Christ, yet also seeks to keep them focused on the true purpose of ministry which is in the words of Bishop Flores: “to provide a community and social context to experience the joy of prayer, of the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and of service to others.” (*Bishop Flores, 10/13/2008 ANSH Colorado Conference*)

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