

# A Latino community-opportunities and challenges

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On June 15, 1991 a new community began its life in the United States. On that date Bishop Robert Mulvee welcomed the Missionary Fraternity of Mary (FMM) into the Diocese of Wilmington, Delaware. This occasion was doubly historic since the FMM is the first missionary community founded in the history of Guatemala.

Beginning with a priest and six seminarians informally joining together in 1981, the FMM was formally erected as a Society of Apostolic Life in 1990. Today membership includes 65 priests, 4 sisters, and over 400 in formation. Members serve in missions in Guatemala, Italy, El Salvador, Panama, Brazil, and now in the U.S. Three members are presently serving in the only U.S. mission, working in the Diocese of Wilmington's Rural and Migrant Ministry.

In this article I will examine reasons for this tremendous growth in the FMM. Perhaps there are lessons to be learned by communities who want to attract vocations from the ever-growing number of Spanish-speaking Catholics here in the U.S.

As fundamental charisms, members of the

FMM are involved in ministry to youth and to the marginalized of society. Both of these are key, I believe, to planting and nurturing the seeds of a vocation based on faith, hope, and love. The natural enthusiasm of young people (evidenced by the recent World Youth Day celebrations in Denver) makes for a natural pairing with care for the most needy in society.

Our constitutions do not define this marginalization. It can be physical, social, economic, spiritual, etc... We look to the local bishop to identify the marginalized in his diocese. By concentrating also on youth ministry, we are able to bring the two together, and thus show young people how they can make a difference in the lives of others.

An important thing to remember is that the FMM is almost exclusively a Latino community. There are only two of us in the FMM who are Anglos. As an Anglo, I ask the reader please to keep in mind that I do not speak for the Latino community. I cannot. I

can only speak as an Anglo member of an almost exclusively Latino community and as one who works with Latinos. Because of this, cultural differences sometimes make life in the Fraternity very interesting for me. Even using the word "Fraternity" when speaking of the FMM made me very uncomfortable for a long time, but I had to realize that in Spanish it is not a sexist term.

I was also not prepared for other cultural differences I encountered on my first trip to Guatemala in 1986, and I dare say many readers may not agree with some of the ways we do things. I only ask that you consider the facts and remember that if we want to attract Latinos to our communities we have to embrace the cultural differences and not force others to change to our way of thinking.

I believe that it is impossible to speak of vocation ministry without also speaking of formation. The type of formation process a community uses has a direct and forceful impact on the ministry of those in vocation work. Because of this, I need to address some aspects of formation in the Fraternity.

One of the most controversial elements of this formation is the existence of a minor seminary. While use of minor seminaries in the U.S. has all but disappeared, it is still proving to be an effective and viable option for us. In the Latino culture, life decisions are made at a much earlier age than in the Anglo culture. While Latinos are making decisions regarding vocation and career at 14 and 15 years of age, most U.S. communities have deferred accepting candidates until they have completed at least some college. By the time they reach this stage of their lives, most Latinos have already married or decided on a single lay life. Indeed, according to statistics very few even consider the possibility of college. At the age of 14 or 15, when they are making these decisions, they do not, for the most part, have the chance to explore the possibility of religious life or priesthood.

The FMM provides youth with this opportunity. We presently have in our minor seminary approximately 150 teenage boys (14 years of age and up) who are exploring

the possibility of a vocation. (Our community of women is still in its formative stage and the four founders are not yet able to accept teenage girls, but this is planned for the future.) Those in minor seminary live the same community life as the rest of us, all the while receiving what would be the equivalent of a high-school education.

This brings us to another difference between the FMM and other communities. In terms of academics, we have chosen not to have the same kinds of minimum requirements as others. The high rate of illiteracy in Guatemala has prompted us to accept those who would never pass most basic entrance requirements. Some come to us who can barely read or write, and not necessarily in Spanish. There are over 20 different languages in use in Guatemala, and we have accepted some who cannot even speak Spanish. We believe that God does not call only those who have received the benefits of education. We accept candidates at any academic level, and work with them for as long as it takes to achieve acceptable standards of achievement. Consequently, the formation program is very individualized. There is no set time period that everyone spends in seminary prior to ordination. It depends on their academic level when they begin and the speed with which they progress.

In the United States we tend to assume that everyone has to be at a certain academic level in order to be able to answer a perceived call from God. Unfortunately, when speaking about the Latinos in the U.S., these assumptions can eliminate them from consideration. Especially within the migrant farm worker community you will find many young people who have not had the benefits of a continuous education due to their migrant lifestyle. Is it possible that God does not extend an invitation to religious life to those who are in the migrant stream? I think not.

As you can imagine, this prolonged and individualized formation can seem very complicated in comparison to our standard formation programs. For the FMM, however,

it has meant that we see each candidate as an individual with individual needs, talents, and place within the community. The only thing we all have in common is a desire to follow God's call within the Fraternity. For this I am eternally grateful, since my own journey to the FMM was not normal in any sense of the word.

I was ordained a diocesan priest for Philadelphia and had served there for five years when I first encountered the FMM. One of the founders came to my parish to participate in the Mission Co-operative Appeal conducted each year in every U.S. diocese. (Who says the Mission Co-op is only about money!) For some reason we "clicked" and became friends. Father Eduardo stayed with me for several weeks and invited me to visit him in Guatemala. Thinking that I would never again have the opportunity to visit Central America, I accepted.

When I arrived in Guatemala I fell in love with the people, the country, and the Fraternity. After several years of discernment, and having traveled to Guatemala several times each year, I came to the conclusion that God was calling me to expand my vocation in a new direction and applied for admission to the FMM.

My formation process really coincided with the community's formation. Because I was already ordained a priest, I did not fit in with the seminarians' formation program. Since I was the first priest to apply for entrance, the Fraternity had to respond in a different way. Complicating this was the fact that I was still a priest of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, with responsibilities in a parish. My formation was, therefore, very individualized, consisting of time I spent in Guatemala and time that several members of the Formation Team spent with me in Philadelphia.

In 1991 I was released from service in Philadelphia and became the first member of the Fraternity to establish a house in the United States, where I work as Director of Rural and Migrant Ministry in the Diocese of Wilmington. As you can imagine, only a community that is truly flexible and open to

the individual needs of its members would have responded to someone in a situation such as mine.

My acceptance was interesting also from the standpoint of age. As a 39-year-old priest of 13 years, I find myself in a rather strange position. I am the 15th oldest member in a community of 450 and second in time of ordination! Each year Bishop Mulvee meets with the major superior (or a designated representative) of each community working in the diocese. While others are concerned with the challenges of dealing with an aging community, the retirement collection for religious, and second-career vocations, I find that I am thinking about the problems of establishing a minor seminary in the United States and how to deal with the immigration problems of minors.

Having said all that, what lessons can other communities learn from the Missionary Fraternity of Mary? And what right do I have to even suggest that communities with hundreds of years of experience and the combined wisdom of thousands of members should even consider listening to these suggestions?

I must admit that I was very skeptical when I first saw what was happening in the FMM. I did not think that what they do could possibly be applied in the United States. And I still believe, after working with the Anglo community, that many of these suggestions would not be possible or desirable. However, after working with the Latino community for five years, I have come to realize that my prejudice against the possibility of applying this process was just that—prejudice.

First and foremost, we cannot look to vocation formation in the Latino community through Anglo eyes. If your community has Latino members, listen to them. More importantly, put them in the position of actively working with vocation and formation programs. If you do not have Latino members, find Latino members of other communities and listen to them. The concept of shared for-

mation programs for Latino candidates could have a great impact in this area and is an idea that needs to be expanded in all parts of the United States.

As I said previously, I am an Anglo. No matter how long I work with the Latino community, I will never be a Latino. I will never truly understand and fully appreciate the Latino mentality. Therefore I cannot be as effective in fostering Latino vocations. Some will harken back to the glorious days of missionaries who evangelized and converted foreign countries throughout history. They always managed to attract vocations, and they were of a different culture than the indigenous peoples. Why should we change what has always worked in the past? I submit to you that missionaries did adapt to the culture of the country they were visiting. They established schools, novitiates, seminaries, etc. that ministered to people in their own language and took into consideration their own cultural heritage.

I also submit to you that we are not talking about a foreign country. I am speaking about formation in the United States of those who have Spanish as their primary language. Why is it that we consider it necessary that anyone who want to enter our community be able to speak English? Certainly it is good for anyone living in this country to be able to speak English, but why do we insist on this as a pre-requisite?

This is admittedly very difficult. Many communities have spent years trying to fine-tune vocation and formation programs, and what I am suggesting is that their programs do not work in the Latino community. If you doubt this, answer this question: How many Latino vocations has your present program fostered? Perhaps instead of trying to Anglicize prospective vocations, we need to try to Latinize our own congregations.

Some concrete applications are necessary. First and foremost, I believe that our work with young people, especially Latino youth, has to become a priority. Many of us were first interested in the idea of a vocation due

to the example of religious who were working in our school, parish, or youth program. As numbers have forced more and more congregations to down-size their apostolates, assigning priorities is vital to the continued existence of communities. I suggest that ministry to Latino children should be one of those priorities. This implies that we should be encouraging our members to become proficient in Spanish and to acculturate themselves to the Latino reality.

We also have to provide children with Latino religious role models. Bringing together Latino religious from many congregations for special celebrations would help make a powerful impression on our youth. The December 12th feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe seems a natural for such a celebration. In addition, inviting Latinos in formation programs to these celebrations would also provide much needed encouragement to those in a discernment process.

We need to set-up vocation and formation programs that are truly Latino. This means empowering Latino members of our congregations, no matter how young in age or experience, to plan and implement these programs. I believe, and the experience of the FMM proves, that a 20-year-old Latino can be more effective in vocation and formation of Latinos than a 35-year-old Anglo. We also need materials (forms, advertisements, brochures, etc...) written in Spanish. Notice that I said "written in" and not "translated into." It is not sufficient to simply translate our present materials into Spanish. A different culture means a different approach. What works for a 20 or 30-year-old Anglo will not work for a Latino teenager.

As religious communities, we should do everything possible to provide opportunities for young people to experience the life of a religious in a profound way. This means that we need to think about re-opening minor seminaries and initiating candidate programs for teenagers. At the very least, we should try to have houses/convents/rectories where young people are welcome to come and live for a time, enabling them to experience first-hand

the happy, faith-filled lives that we lead. (This, of course, presumes that we have happy, faith-filled people in these community houses/convents/rectories!)

All of these ideas are from an Anglo perspective and based on my own observations, but the suggestions are things that are working for the Missionary Fraternity of Mary in Guatemala, and possibly will also work in the United States. Given the present difficulties in attracting Latino vocations in this country, I do not think we can afford not to try any viable option. It is my sincere hope

that every community will soon have members who will be able to write an article like this from a Latino perspective.

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