

## **Two worlds in one city: Suggestions to improve ministry to Hispanics in the U.S.**

By Miguel Angel Solorzano

The U.S. Catholic Church faces a new world: The Spanish-Speaking community

The influx of the recent immigrants from different parts of Latin America has presented a new challenge to parochial ministry in the Catholic parishes of the United States. While the challenges are great, the complexity of the response is equally great.

The American Church and its ministers have spent great energy and effort over the years to serve the needs of the immigrant. For instance, in the state of Texas, Fr. Frank Urbanovsky, known as "padre Panchito," ministered from a trailer park to the Hispanic immigrants in the plains of Texas who came in the early part of this century. More recently, Fr. Joseph Crostwait traveled the whole United States seeking to encourage the Bishops and their priests to reach out to the immigrants.

All over the U.S., there are many pastors who are quietly trying to do the best they can with the limited resources they have; to include in their vision the needs of a significant part of their parishioners who were not previously present in their parish population.

### **1. The Spanish Speaking Media and awareness of Church leaders**

In most major cities of the U.S. there are at least two worlds in the same city: the English and the Spanish speaking communities. There are two national television networks that broadcast in the Spanish language from the U.S. (Univision and Telemundo) with local stations almost everywhere. Also, there are several radio stations and many courtesy newspapers in the Spanish language. The courtesy newspapers in Spanish are given away in several large grocery stores and Hispanic restaurants.

Currently, many leaders of the American Catholic Church do not watch, hear or read these means of communication regularly. They are not aware of what is taking place in the Spanish-speaking community of their own cities. Most of the people who make decisions in the Church, even though they may be of Hispanic descent, are more in contact with the English-speaking world than the Spanish-speaking society and media where they live.

For instance, a Hispanic member of a parish council who attends the Sunday Mass in English gives his opinion about the Spanish language Mass when in fact he may not be familiar with it at all. Or in an institution of formation for future priests, the person in charge of teaching how to minister to the Hispanic Catholics in the U.S. does not even attend a Spanish Mass because "the children at the Spanish Mass are too noisy" and do not allow him to concentrate. The fact is that there are Hispanics who do not speak Spanish and who would identify themselves more with the mainstream U.S. culture than their Mexican, Cuban, Colombian, Bolivian, Salvadoran or Puerto Rican ancestry.

There is an obvious distinction between English-speaking Hispanics who are well settled in the U.S. and new Hispanic immigrants who have not learned English. There are millions of Hispanics born and raised in the U.S. who have never learned to speak Spanish. There are many American-Hispanics who attend the Sunday Eucharist in English and who are fully integrated into American society and the Church. The problem arises when these people are asked to represent the new immigrants. In fact, they belong to a totally different group already established in the U.S.

## 2. A welcoming Church: to immigrants and non-English speaking people

Every Catholic parish should be a welcoming community, especially to immigrants. We need to strive to satisfy the spiritual needs of the incoming flow of immigrants.

Most Latin American immigrants are not registered in any parish. When they come to the U.S. searching for a better life and opportunities, naturally they move to where they can find a job. Parish registration is not a practice in most countries outside the U.S. Immigrants see the Catholic Church as their home; they have been taught that they belong to the Church because of their baptism.

"Are you registered?" should never be the first question a person is asked when requesting a service. Catholics should be registered in a parish, there is no question about it. However, it is important that the leaders of the community be open to newcomers and have the means available to show them how and why they should register in their own parish. If registration is an important practice in a particular parish, a workshop on registration should be given regularly to newcomers to explain to them the reasons why this practice has been implemented in most Catholic parishes of the U.S.

Giving out registration forms will not be enough. Some immigrants will need assistance to fill out the registration forms. Some could be afraid that their names and addresses may be provided to the Immigration and Naturalization Services. Also, after they have registered, people not acquainted with American practices will not pick up the collection envelopes at the beginning of the year or, when they receive the envelopes in the mail, they might not know how to use them. Clear instructions in English and Spanish should arrive with the first box of envelopes.

Many foreign born Hispanic Catholics believe strongly in the passage of the gospel that says "do not let your right hand know what your left hand is doing" or in other words "your charity should be confidential." Some of them wonder why they should use envelopes to log their donations every weekend. (Not only the immigrants but even some U.S. born parishioners might wonder who will review the collection records and why.)

It is a fact that we are losing many Hispanic Catholics to the Evangelical Churches, Jehovah Witnesses, and "Iglesia Universal" (a denomination from Brazil). These and other denominations are spending a great deal of resources in advertisements in the Spanish speaking television, radio and newspapers. They are active in recruiting new members by many means. There are neighborhoods in which Protestant churches, that normally had signs in English, are writing them now only in Spanish.

There are many immigrants who are leaving the Church through deceit. For instance, there are churches with names such as "Our Lady of Guadalupe Chapel" where weddings and "Quinceañeras" are offered on a regular basis to anyone. A chapel with such a name is obviously targeting Hispanic Catholics. Taking advantage of the lack of religious formation and naivety of some immigrants, they are told that it is the same as the Catholic Church. Because of similarities, there are many who have received "sacraments" from other Christian denominations believing that it was a Roman Catholic Church. Others are being lured in with promises of financial and legal assistance to solve their economical and emigrational problems. Heartbreakingly, there are many who join other denominations because they enjoy the welcome that was not present in their own church.

These congregations prepare new Hispanic pastors and leaders and place them in charge of the congregations in a relatively short period of time compared to Catholic practices. More and more Hispanic immigrants are leaving the Catholic Church because their spiritual needs are not being satisfied.

### 3. A teaching Church: Assisting in the handing on of the faith.

#### a) Religious Education for immigrants

There are some Catholic leaders who would like to compel every child to take parochial religious education in the English language only. The excuse is due to the fact that "they are in the USA." They usually say that "if these children are going to the public school here, they know English." Those who make this claim are not aware that even in public schools there are bilingual programs for immigrants, and that one can actually attend a public school in the Spanish language in most major U.S. cities. In California, where the bilingual program has been discontinued recently, English as a second language is given for at least one year before attending the regular classes.

Faith and culture are strongly related to each other. When a person loses one, he or she may lose the other as well. Faith is expressed in a cultural context. As new immigrants come to a new culture, they run the risk of losing the cultural support for their faith tradition. Also, there is the danger of family division and disintegration in handing on the faith tradition. When the religious education is given in their mother tongue, parents are made participants in this important endeavor and the family bonding is strengthened. At the same time, the gradual teaching of basic prayers in English should not be neglected either.

#### b) Catholic Schools:

Catholic school fees in low income neighborhoods should not be so high that they prevent the children of immigrants from attending those schools. Enrollment in Hispanic areas would be much higher if the tuition of \$240 per month were not too expensive for most of them (Example: \$2,650 per year for non-members, \$160 registration fee, \$75 materials, \$50 activities, total \$2,935 with 10 equal payments of \$293.50). In these neighborhoods, the fees should be much less, as a way of increasing the number of students and thus lowering the overall cost of the school.

Enrollment in Catholic schools located in well-to-do neighborhoods is overwhelming. There are waiting lists in several Catholic schools in affluent areas while in the inner city most of them are struggling to remain open. A program of scholarships could be established in which Catholics in an affluent area would sponsor a less advantaged student from another Catholic school.

### 4. A celebrating Church

#### a) Scheduling of Masses in the Spanish Language

Most of the parishes that offer a Mass in the Spanish language will celebrate it around noon. If the Spanish Sunday Mass at noon is crowded, parishes need to be aware that there are many more Spanish-speaking parishioners out there who are not attending Mass. Those attending represent a very small percentage.

In several Latin American countries the Masses on a given Sunday that have the largest attendance are late in the evening; this could be as late as 7:00 p.m. or 8:00 p.m. Traditionally, U.S. Catholics and Protestants go to Church on Sunday morning. On the other hand, most immigrants who have low income jobs, cannot go to Church on Sunday morning. Many of them work cleaning offices after business hours, assisting on construction sites, or waiting at tables in restaurants that are open on Sunday mornings. Some parishes offer Saturday evening Masses in Spanish, but they are not the best option for Spanish speaking Catholics. Sunday is the day of the Lord.

Latin Americans tend to be soccer fans, and most soccer games are usually around noon. A survey should be taken in the parish to learn the best time for the Spanish speaking parishioners to attend Sunday Mass. The schedule needs to be re-evaluated. There is another factor to be considered. We need to recognize that late Sunday evening, even though this may be a good choice for the parishioners, may not be the best for the priests, after several morning Masses.

#### b) "Quinceañeras" and Traditional Celebrations

The "Quinceañera" celebration is a moment of thanksgiving on the 15th birthday of a girl. Culturally speaking, it started as a social event to present the girl to the community. This is not only a pre-Colombian tradition of the people of this hemisphere but European as well. We all know that it is not a sacrament. Outside the U.S., where Quinceañeras are celebrated, they usually take place during the celebration of the Eucharist.

The Quinceañera celebration is not necessarily related to the renewal of baptismal promises. Authors such as Sister Angela Erevia in her book "Religious Celebration for the Quinceañera," published by the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, in an effort to "Christianize" this practice has included the renewal of baptismal promises in the Quinceañera celebration. This renewal is a good practice but it is not the original purpose of the celebration nor the only option.

The "Quinceañera" is a "thanksgiving celebration" for the gift of life and a moment to bless and pray for the girl who has reached the age of 15. It is a great opportunity to evangelize and to welcome back in the Church those who have been away. The elaboration of this event has made it more difficult for it to take place. There should be no unnecessary requirements, rituals, and parish policies which almost make it impossible for Latin American immigrants to celebrate the occasion.

We know that in principle, a sacrament should be preceded by an adequate evangelization and catechetical preparation. However, the "Quinceañera" is not a sacrament. There is a well-intended effort to evangelize those who approach the parish requesting the celebration of a "Quinceañera." However, frequently the list of requirements in some parishes is very demanding: two continual years of attending religious education, baptism, first communion, participation in a retreat and at least six months of registration in a parish, plus some fees.

All of these requirements would be impossible to complete by the daughter of an immigrant working family who moved three months ago to an apartment complex close to the parish and whose parents are struggling to survive in the U.S. Instead, the parish should strive to satisfy the spiritual needs of those families who are approaching the parish, maybe for the first time in several years.

The parish should provide different ways to satisfy the spiritual needs of these parishioners. Because of weddings and other services, it is obvious that it would be very difficult to have a private celebration of the Eucharist for every 15 year old girl. There are other ways to satisfy this spiritual need if we are willing to do so.

Some alternatives could include: 1) A private Liturgy of the Word with a blessing; 2) A blessing during the regular Saturday evening or Sunday Mass. If the celebration takes place during a regular Mass, the special blessing for the girl could be given after the homily or at the end. The renewal of baptismal promises may be omitted if the girl is not ready yet to renew them. Even if the girl has not received her First Communion, a blessing could be given and she should be encouraged to join the religious education program or C.C.E. (Continual Christian Education), as it is called in some Dioceses.

In regard to terminology: C.C.E. or C.C.D. (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, an old term) which is of common usage in the U.S., is not a term familiar to immigrants. In Latin America, Catholics call it "Doctrina" or "Catecismo." Educated immigrants, who are fluent in English, might not even recognize the letters, C.C.E.

There are other Latin American traditions, that are not very common in the U.S., but maybe requested once in a while. For example, the presentation of a three year old child to the Church. According to the Vatican Council II these traditions should be respected. There are biblical foundations for most of these customs. It is very easy to satisfy these needs. In keeping with the spirit of the Sunday liturgy, a blessing during Mass or a few words announcing the event to the congregation would be more than enough. There is no need to use a special ritual to do it. We just need to use common sense and a desire to serve the people.

#### 5. Bending two worlds together

There are many bishops, pastors, and pastoral staffs who are struggling to serve the needs of the more recent immigrants to our country and to our parishes. Answers are not easy. Many of the leaders of our church have attempted to reach out to the pastoral needs of these members of our Church but the needs of pastoral service will not go away.

We need to re-think the manner of ministry to the immigrant. There are many questions such as: Is there not a responsibility on the part of the immigrants to inculturate themselves into the culture and the ways of American society? Should there be a total immersion of the immigrants into the new culture? There should be a bi-cultural effort.

Some may respond to these and other issues by saying, "This is the way it is in America. Take it or go back to your own country." The fact is that most of these immigrants are not going back. There are other denominations which are adapting themselves to satisfy the needs of these people. The Catholic Church should not be left behind. We need to be more creative and undertake more initiatives. We have a responsibility before God for these people. The children of these immigrants will be a large and important part of tomorrow's U.S. Catholic Church, if we take care of them today.

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