

**Marriage and  
Family Ministry  
Among Hispanic  
Catholics**

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In 1983 the bishops of the United States wrote a pastoral letter on Hispanic ministry titled "The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment." The pastoral letter brought great joy to Hispanic Catholics as they heard the bishops say, "At this moment of grace we recognize the Hispanic community among us as a blessing from God."

The bishops went on to say that Hispanics exemplify and cherish values that are central to the service of the church and society: A loving appreciation for God's gift of life; a marvelous sense of community that celebrates life through fiesta; an authentic and consistent devotion to Mary, the mother of God; and a deep and reverential love for family life, where the entire extended family discovers its roots, its identity and its strength.

Today these gifts are shared by millions of Hispanic Catholics in more than 4,000 parishes where Hispanic ministry is present. In particular, the love of family makes itself quite visible through the countless Hispanic children of all ages present at Sunday liturgies in Spanish across the nation.

The strength of Hispanic marriages and families is rooted in a profoundly Catholic culture that can thrive even in the most difficult of situations. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that out of the 9.9 million Hispanic families residing in the United States, 67 percent consist of a married couple and 44 percent of a married couple with children

under age 18. On the same note, 66 percent of Hispanic children live with two married parents (2007).

These percentages are significantly higher than the median average for families as a whole in this country. However, this relative “success rate” should not be taken for granted. Hispanic couples and families are not immune to the many societal factors that erode marriage and family life today.

Moreover, many Hispanic families have to face the direct impact of forced emigration from their native countries that leaves spouses and entire families divided by borders. They suffer further division under a broken immigration system that not only hinders their efforts for reunification, it also separates spouses, and children from their parents due to deportations oftentimes done without regard for family life or human dignity. Newspapers are filled with stories of children getting home from school to find out that one or both of their parents have been taken into custody for alleged lack of documentation to reside or work in the United States.

These notes aim to start a conversation on the question, How can the church better support couples and families who are Hispanic today and in the future? The conversation begins by looking at who are the Hispanics and what challenges they face today. It follows with practical steps that promote Catholic identity, a sense of belonging and a commitment to ministry among Hispanics. Finally it offers specific pastoral recommendations to strengthen Hispanic couples and families in the context of increasingly culturally diverse parishes.

**Who are the Hispanic/Latino Catholics?**

As we look at the challenges faced by Hispanic/Latino couples and families today, it is important to keep in mind the rich diversity that exists within this ever-growing community. With roots in more than 23 different Latin American countries, variations in the use of language, cultural expressions and religious traditions are evident from one group to another.

Economic status, citizenship and educational differences are also evident as Hispanics are present in every strata **482** origins

of life in U.S. society. More recently, being native-born or foreign-born has meant a very significant difference given the high percentage of new immigrants and their own particular life experiences, needs and aspirations. According to the 2000 census, four out of 10 Hispanics residing in the United States were foreign-born.

Despite their particular lived realities and cultural accents, most Hispanics share three significant things in common: language, culture and faith. In regard to language (or should we say, languages) 32.2 million Hispanic U.S. residents ages 5 and older speak Spanish at home, while more than half also speak English very well.

In regard to culture, Hispanics share a mestizo culture, that is, a culture born out of the fusion of two or more cultures, giving birth to a new culture, and a new people in whose veins runs the blood of Native American, European and African ancestors.

In regard to faith, about 70 percent of Hispanics call themselves Catholic. Most others identify themselves with different Christian denominations and yet anecdotal evidence suggests that many of them continue to practice certain aspects of Catholic faith and life,

particularly those related to popular devotions. This is not surprising since Hispanic culture is shaped by Catholic values, symbols and expressions.

### **The Challenge of a New Beginning**

The social sciences tell us that the main responsibility of parents is to protect and provide for their children, and to empower them into a positive relationship with the institutions of the society in which they live. But what happens when parents don't know how to relate to these institutions or even worse are afraid of them?

Being a new immigrant couple and parents can be extremely difficult and even painful. Stories abound of Hispanic parents agonizing as they see their children slip away from their arms into a world that they don't understand, a culture that more often than not tells new immigrants that they don't belong, that they just aren't good enough.

One can only imagine how frustrating it is for new immigrant parents, regardless of where they come from, not to be able to advocate for their children at schools, at a doctor's visit or in the local sports league. Even more dramatic is for parents to depend on their children as translators at stores, government agencies and schools.

Such disadvantages keep Hispanic parents from being perceived by their children as role models on how to be a spouse or a parent. This frustration can also exist between spouses as one of them may be more bilingual and better acculturated in U.S. society, thus adding a layer of dependency on the other.

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*tells new immigrants that they don't belong, that they just aren't good enough."*

New immigrants wanting to get married also face major challenges. Depending on their immigration status, their knowledge of English and their degree of mistrust in the government, these couples may look at the road leading to marriage as an endless obstacle course filled with signs warning: deportation, harassment and waste of time and money.

New immigrant couples wanting to get married in the church face even more challenges. Getting a copy of their baptismal certificate from the parish in their small town somewhere in southern Guatemala or Ecuador is not an easy task. Dealing with issues of previous marriages and annulments are even harder to resolve, particularly in parishes without a Spanish-speaking priest.

### **Cultural Identity**

All children growing up in the United States are impacted by the way we deal with racial and cultural differences as a society. For Hispanics in particular, the issue of race is marked by ambiguity since Hispanics can be of any race. Along with being mestizos, Hispanics/Latinos face an open-ended cultural identity process that adds a second layer of ambiguity to their personal and cultural identity, particularly for children of immigrant parents.

This being "in-between" was captured by a role-play presented by Hispanic teenagers during a retreat some time ago. The role-play began by showing how teens were expected by their parents to carry themselves, speak and even eat as if they were living in Mexico, Puerto Rico or El Salvador. Not being able to fully please their parents,

they would often hear how they were losing their roots and becoming distant from their own parents.

On the other hand, the same teenagers were told in school that they were too Mexican, too Puerto Rican or too Latino and that they needed to be more like everybody else.

The tension of living between two cultures and being told that you have to choose one over the other is one of the most confusing and even dramatic aspects of growing up as a first generation Hispanic/Latino. This confusion plays a significant role in how Hispanic couples relate to one another. Bridging the gap between different sets of expectations, values and roles ranging from housework to sexual intimacy is a challenge.

Women working outside of the home, men having to take on housework, sharing authority in the decision-making process as a couple and reaching agreement on how to raise the children, and religious differences are some areas of tension between Hispanic couples.

### **Culturally Diverse Parish Communities**

A growing number of the more than 68 million Catholics residing in the United States today live in culturally diverse parishes. New waves of Catholic immigrants representing many races, languages and cultures live and celebrate their faith under one roof and share the same spiritual home with post-immigrant Catholic communities in parishes across the country. This is particularly true for Hispanic Catholics as 97 percent of parishes with Hispanic ministry are culturally diverse parishes.

The perceived image of the United States has shifted from a melting pot to a multihued tapestry (“Renewing origins **483**”

the Vision: A Framework for Catholic Youth Ministry," 22). The images of a "pizza supreme," a salad or even a stew also began to be used to illustrate this shift which recognizes cultural differences as a gift that enriches the whole in transforming and unifying ways. On the other hand, the temptation of expecting Catholics from different cultural backgrounds to simply assimilate into a one-size-fits-all program, group or activity continues to linger.

The Catholic Church has been the great advocate for immigrants in the United States. It has also developed models to respond to the challenges faced by new immigrants and their families. Examples of these models are the national parish of the late 1800s and early 1900s and Hispanic ministry as articulated by the U.S. bishops.

*"Striking a balance between the needs and aspirations of families from different cultural and ethnic communities is not an easy task. Equally challenging is accepting each other's differences and confronting each case of prejudice, cultural stereotype and expression of racism present in our society."*

These models have been built upon an understanding of culture as a fundamental part of people's personal, communal and religious identity. As such, this understanding distinguishes and makes a choice between cultural assimilation and ecclesial integration. Through a policy of assimilation, the bishops said in 1987:

"New immigrants are forced to give up their language, culture, values and traditions and adopt a form of life and worship that is foreign to them in order to be accepted as parish members. This

attitude alienates new Catholic immigrants from the church and makes them vulnerable to sects and other denominations.

“By [ecclesial] integration we mean that our Hispanic people are to be welcomed in our church institutions at all levels. They are to be served in their language when possible, and their cultural values and religious traditions are to be respected. Beyond that, we must work toward mutual enrichment through interaction among all cultures” (National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry, 4).

This statement by the bishops resounds loud and clear in the historical memory of the Catholic Church in the United States. The same principle of ecclesial integration versus cultural assimilation propelling Hispanic ministry was at the very root of the national parish model that safeguarded the Catholic identity of European Catholic immigrants. This model provided each community with the ecclesial space they needed to live their faith, to pray and to worship, and to build community in the context of their own language, culture and traditions.

The bishops were very much aware of this when they wrote “The Hispanic Presence” in 1983:

“We are called to appreciate our own histories. ... The church in the United States has been an immigrant church whose outstanding record of care for countless European immigrants remains unmatched. Today that same tradition must inspire in the church’s approach to recent Hispanic immigrants and migrants a similar authority, compassion and decisiveness.”

### **Outreach to Hispanic Youth**

There are more than 4,000 parishes with Hispanic ministry in the United States. However, many of them lack a

ministry with Hispanic young people. If there is one element that can strengthen Hispanic couples, marriages and families it is a sound and vibrant ministry among Hispanic youth and young adults. Such ministry needs to be incarnate in their lived reality and within their specific cultural and linguistic context.

Ministry among adolescents finds definition in 1976 when the pastoral statement "A Vision for Youth Ministry" was issued. Since then, youth ministry has experienced a tremendous growth, becoming a sophisticated and professionalized ministry among mainstream Catholic adolescents. During that same time Hispanic ministry successfully welcomed and developed ministers and ministries among adults following an ecclesial integration model within culturally diverse parishes.

Unfortunately, Hispanic young people have only benefited marginally from the impressive growth of youth ministry or Hispanic ministry for adults. The unspoken assumption that children of new immigrants knew English or were in the process of doing so made the development of culturally specific catechetical programs for them quite difficult.

In the area of youth ministry this assumption was even more prevalent as adolescents from these communities were simply expected to assimilate into the existing mainstream parish youth group, programs and activities. This assumption has proven to be incorrect, as a large segment of the young Catholic population outside of mainstream Catholics has gone without appropriate pastoral attention.

In their document "Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry" (2003), the bishops of the United States make a direct reference that helps explain why

Hispanic Catholic adolescents have been falling through the cracks between successful youth ministry and Hispanic ministry.

In the case of Hispanic ministry, the principle of ecclesial integration versus cultural assimilation was only consistently applied to ministry with adults, leaving adolescents in a kind of cultural and ministerial limbo. Regarding youth ministry, the bishops say that “the traditional [mainstream] model of parish youth ministry has not, for the most part, reached Hispanic adolescents because of economic, linguistic, cultural, age range and educational differences” (No. 70).

In the same document the bishops note that the majority of parish youth ministry programs serve adolescents of well-established families mostly of European descent. They are part of mainstream culture, Englishspeaking and tend to be middle class or upper middle class. Many of them live in the suburbs, are more likely to attend Catholic schools and are collegebound. In contrast, Hispanic adolescents can be monolingual in Spanish or English, **484** origins or bilingual. They can be U.S.-born of many generations or new immigrants; working class or middle class, white, black or brown. Most of them go to public schools, a significant number have a low educational attainment and less than 15 percent are college-bound. Such contrasting economic, linguistic, cultural, racial and educational differences explain, to a good extent, why most Hispanic adolescents living in culturally diverse parishes don't participate in mainstream youth ministry. It also explains the emergence of alternative youth groups and apostolic movements for Hispanics and by Hispanics to fill

the pastoral void created by a policy of assimilation.

### **Inculturation of the Gospel Is Paramount**

The concept of inculturation of the Gospel is pivotal in guiding Hispanic couples and parents through the promising and yet challenging waters of racial and cultural ambiguity. It involves following Jesus' example to become gracious hosts for one another as we acknowledge and embrace our cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity and God's unique presence in each of our lives' histories and cultures (cf. "Many Faces in God's House," p. 5).

*"Hispanic couples are not going to simply show up, register and join in parish activities and programs already in place. They need to hear the good news in the streets, their neighborhoods and their homes."*

It also describes a truly Catholic understanding of ministry among diverse communities that focuses less on how mainstream culture looks at and relates to "minority communities" and more on how to have meaningful conversations and build meaningful relationships among all the culturally and racially diverse members of the parish community.

In the General Directory for Catechesis the church speaks of inculturation of the Gospel message in the following words:

"The Word of God became man, a concrete man, in space and time and rooted in a specific culture. Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the men [and women] among whom he lived. This is the original 'inculturation' of the word of God

and is the model of all evangelization by the Church, called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures” (No. 109).

In the context of a culturally diverse parish, inculturation comprises all the riches of the different cultural and ethnic communities that have been given to Christ as an inheritance. It is a profound process that touches every culture deeply, going to the very center and roots of each culture, taking from each what is compatible with Gospel values while seeking to purify and transform beliefs, attitudes and actions which are contrary to the reign of God. The challenge to inculturate the Gospel reminds us that the most fundamental mission of the church is to evangelize, to bring the good news of Christ to every human situation (“Go and Make Disciples,” p. 2).

### **The Church Can Make a Difference**

The support Hispanic couples find in their parishes and other faith-based communities can be the key to a solid marriage and a health family. Studies show that Hispanic families with strong ties to their faith community are more likely to achieve a higher level of education as well as economic and social success.

How can the church provide a healthy environment and a sense of community for Hispanics couples and families growing up in culturally diverse parishes today and in the future?

The answer to this question is not only found in what we do, but in who we are, and how we interact with one another. In the document “Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry” (2002), the U.S. bishops articulate a pastoral response calling for Hispanics and all ministers to be bridge people, to be faithful to the message of Christ and to the people they

are called to serve on his behalf and to be mindful that how we do things is as important as what we do.

—First, priests and lay ecclesial ministers need to become more aware and committed to the call to welcome Hispanics, embrace them and journey with them; leaving behind the “we-they” language and moving into the all-of-ustogether language. We must make the church the home and the school of communion (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*. 43).

—Second, what we do as Catholic ministers should be rooted in the double commitment we have to the message of Christ and to the people with whom we live and minister. This requires solid knowledge of Christ and his message as well as interpersonal knowledge of Hispanics in our parish and the cultural, religious, social and economic context in which they live. Such knowledge is born from our efforts to be good listeners, sensitive and authentically interested in people’s lives, needs, aspirations and ideas.

—Third, ordained and lay ministers need to be effective communicators of the message of Christ among people who speak Spanish and have a particular culture and way of doing things. This includes understanding how Hispanics make decisions, how they learn, how they organize and come together with other groups. Such awareness and commitment help us welcome and empower them to develop and exercise their leadership.

### **Pastoral Recommendations**

Striking a balance between the needs and aspirations of families from different cultural and ethnic communities is not an easy task. Equally challenging is accepting each other’s differences and confronting each case of prejudice, cultural stereotype and expression of racism present in our society.

At the convocation of the Encuentro 2000, the national event celebrated in Los Angeles in the jubilee year, the bishops spoke of the need to acknowledge and embrace our cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity and God's unique presence in each other's lives, histories and cultures. The increase in cultural diversity challenges all Catholics to achieve ecclesial integration, to discover ways in which we as Catholic communities can be one church yet come from diverse cultures and ethnicities ("Many Faces in God's House," p. 4).

This twofold commitment to unity in origins **485**

diversity is highlighted in various pastoral statements marking the beginning of the 21st century. The common thread in all of them is a call for a ministry that requires the commitment to welcome and foster the specific cultural identity of each of the many faces in the church while building a profoundly Catholic identity that strengthens the unity of the one body of Christ ("Encuentro and Mission," 2002).

In "Renewing the Vision for Youth Ministry" this call emphasizes "the need to focus on a specialized ministry to youth of particular racial and ethnic cultures and, at the same time, promote mutual awareness and unity among all young people" (No. 22). It is in this context of unity in diversity that specific programs and pastoral practices on marriage and family among Hispanics can be relevant and effective.

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*programs as well as the formation of apostolic movements.”*

The following pastoral recommendations speak of five important areas or principles that can guide ministry efforts in the parish setting.

a) Articulate a vision of marriage and family ministry among Hispanics based on ecclesial integration.

—Be willing to listen to the stories, perspectives and preferences of people from the Hispanic community in your parish.

—Recognize and affirm cultural, linguistic and racial differences as a gift from God, not a problem to be solved.

—Promote the right of Hispanic couples and families to have their own space to live and practice their faith in the context of the one parish community.

—Avoid the temptation to expect Hispanics to assimilate into a one-size-fits-all marriage preparation program or activity.

—Commit to achieve unity in diversity, not uniformity in your programs and events.

b) Foster the inculturation of the Gospel in all cultures.

—Be aware of your own cultural heritage and relate to Hispanics with respect and appreciation of differences and commonalities.

—Use the concept of inculturation of the Gospel as a point of reference in all ministry efforts.

—Be willing to be a bridge-builder between people from cultures rather than a gatekeeper of your own culture.

—Avoid the tendency to see your culture as better or more valuable than the cultures of others and the “we-they” language.

—Commit to the spirit of mission of the new evangelization and its ongoing transformation of all cultures by the

Gospel values.

c) Plan with people, not for people.

—First listen and welcome the unique perspectives of Hispanics regarding marriage and family.

—Include them from the beginning in the development of plans, programs and activities.

—Use the language of ministry *to*, *with* and *for* Hispanic young people and couples as regards marriage preparation and family.

—Avoid planning for others and judging them when they don't show up for your activity.

—Build community in everything you do within the Hispanic community and with all the members of the parish.

d) Broaden your understanding of youth ministry groups, programs and structures, and cast a bigger net.

—Recognize the unique lived experiences, needs and aspirations of Hispanic young people and

—Understand the existence of more than one marriage preparation program in your parish as a blessing and as the first step toward ecclesial integration among all couples.

—Promote the formation of culturally specific programs and activities, and of apostolic movements for marriage and family life as effective means of evangelization, catechesis and community-building.

—Avoid the perception that allowing the formation of culturally specific programs and activities creates division or separation.

—Commit to create welcoming spaces for Hispanics living in your parish.

e) Empower Hispanic couples into leadership positions.

—Understand the way in which different groups view leadership, organize themselves and make decisions.

—Identify Hispanic young leaders and couples and mentor them into ministry within their own cultural community and in the parish as a whole.

—Advocate for inclusion of young people and their families in leadership positions within youth ministry and in the parish.

—Avoid a mentality of scarcity when growth in ministry generates demands for more resources.

—Commit to the awesome mission of weaving a vibrant Hispanic marriage and family ministry in your parish.

### **Developing a Marriage and Family Ministry**

The following seven steps are a road map for developing a marriage and family ministry among Hispanics in your parish. Each step marks a new development and has its own central task to accomplish as Hispanics go from being guests to becoming stewards of the parish community. The seven steps also describe an ongoing process of ecclesial integration that builds unity in diversity.

1. Meet Hispanic couples where they are. This step involves becoming aware of the Hispanic presence in the parish and their need for marriage and family ministry. The task is for the parish leadership to see and relate to Hispanic couples in a true spirit of mission just like Jesus did.

Hispanic couples are not going to simply show up, register and join in parish activities and programs already in place. They need to hear the good news in the streets, their neighborhoods and their homes. They need to know that God loves them and that by virtue of their baptism they are members of the Catholic Church and invited to share in the grace of a marriage blessed by God and supported by the parish community. **486**  
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nity.

2. Welcome them and make them feel at home. Establishing a group for couples is the most concrete step to have them feel at home and develop a sense of trust.

3. Develop ministries and ministers. Once Hispanic couples have the ecclesial space to share, learn and pray in the context of their own culture, they are extremely successful in building community among themselves. This includes the development of plans and programs as well as the formation of apostolic movements like Engaged Encounter, Marriage Encounter, Movimiento Familiar Cristiano, small ecclesial communities and others.

4. Build relationships across cultures and ministries. This step focuses on building relationships across cultures and ministries. Its central task is to bring couples from different cultures together for specific activities. The following are some examples of common experiences that can bring diverse faith community together.

—Liturgy and prayer: Bicultural or multicultural celebrations throughout the liturgical calendar year are essential to foster unity in diversity.

—Community building: Parish social events and activities are great opportunities for building community across cultural boundaries. Multicultural festivals where couples from different cultures bring a dish and share a cultural expression such as dances are quite popular in many parishes.

—Formation and leadership development: Workshops on communication and skills development, retreats and faith-formation programs for Hispanic couples are a must.

—Advocacy and service: Visits to couples and families in migrant camps,

English as a second language programs and ministries with homebound and disadvantaged couples and families are unique opportunities to strengthen marriages.

5. Champion leadership development and formation: This step calls for the parish to commit resources to the leadership development and formation of Hispanic couples. Its central task is to develop a Hispanic leadership base for marriage and family ministry within the Hispanic community and in the parish as a whole. The hiring of a person as coordinator for Hispanic marriage, family and youth ministry, at least part time, is also a benchmark.

6. Open wide the doors of the decision-making process: The main focus of this step is to secure the participation of Hispanic couples in the parish's decision-making process. It involves making room for Hispanics to sit at the table where decisions are made not only within Hispanic ministry but also in the life of the parish community as a whole.

7. Strengthen a sense of ownership: Parishes that have reached this level of development are equipped with a committed, well-prepared and vibrant Hispanic leadership team for marriage and family ministry. Hispanics move from having a sense of belonging to achieving ownership. Pastoral planning is done taking into consideration the needs, aspirations and contributions of all parishioners, Hispanic and otherwise.

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