

DATE: December 5, 2008

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Cultural Diversity Secretariat Hosts Consultation On Faith Formation Among Hispanics To Advance Bishops' Priority

BALTIMORE—Experts on faith formation and leadership development among the Hispanic community in the United States met December 2-3 with staff members of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity in the Church of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to share reflections, core values and recommendations in moving forward.

The Catholic bishops have set forth faith formation with an emphasis on sacramental practice as one of their five priorities for 2008-2011. Attention to cultural diversity with an emphasis on Hispanic ministry is another.

The goal of the Symposium on Faith Formation Among Hispanics/Latinos was to start a dialogue that will lead “to improve faith formation practices among Hispanics/Latinos of all ages in parishes, dioceses and Catholic institutions,” said Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, assistant director of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity in the Church and Hispanic Affairs, who facilitated the dialogue.

The symposium convened a small, diverse group. Among the participants were theologians, directors of academic programs in higher education institutions, the chairman of NCCL’s (National Conference of Catechetical Leadership) Forum on Catechesis with Hispanics, the president of *Federación de Institutos Pastorales* (Federation of Hispanic Pastoral Institutes or FIP), directors of Hispanic pastoral institutes, Hispanic ministry and diaconate formation programs, publishing houses and others.

The morning sessions reviewed the present status of faith formation among Hispanics in order to identify “best practices” in parishes, dioceses and Catholic institutions. The afternoon dialogue generated a set of core values to guide the process and offer concrete recommendations.

Professor Hosffman Ospino, Ph.D., faculty director of Hispanic Ministry Programs for Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, outlined challenges impeding the access of Latinos to higher education, especially to theology and ministry degrees where Latinos are severely underrepresented. He recommended the development of new models of collaboration among institutions of higher education, dioceses, and Hispanic Catholic organizations.

Alex Sandoval, pastoral associate at Good Shepherd Parish in Garland, Texas, noted how services to Spanish-speaking parishioners have had to evolve since the 80s to respond to new realities, including growth and awareness of misconceptions such as assuming all Hispanic children or teens speak English or prefer to learn about their faith in that language. Improved faith formation for both parents and children has resulted in increased Mass attendance, sacramental reception and involvement in the parish community, he said. Sandoval said his parish now offers all services in English and Spanish, and 90 percent of parish staff is bilingual. Parishioners also have become creative on how to generate substantial resources to cover the cost of the paid positions needed to attend to their needs.

Sister Ruth Bolarte, IHM, of the Catholic Institute for Evangelization of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and president of FIP, noted the lack of common standards among the institutes that provide introductory, basic and intermediate level certificates for catechists, youth and Hispanic ministry leadership and the efforts to seek a common accreditation.

Dora Tobar, PhD., of Maryland, former director of religious education, presented “catechesis familiar” (family catechesis) as a Hispanic model of catechesis to be offered the entire U.S. Church. The concept is based on the idea that parents are the main catechists of their children and that improving parent’s faith formation will allow them to exercise that important responsibility. Foremost it achieves the goal of improved adult education by enabling parents to deepen their understanding of faith and its impact in daily life, making them aware of the important role of the family as domestic church.

Martha Nuñez, director of the Bible Institute in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, shared that more than 100,000 Hispanic children were baptized in the Archdiocese in 2007. She added that hundreds of new Hispanic catechists are added to the ministry every year. Nuñez attributes the vibrancy in faith formation among Hispanics to the fact that it offers formation opportunities in the language people speak and in the cultural context people live and express their faith.

Among the main recommendations of the group were

- A strong push for family catechesis models
- Understanding faith formation as a process that happens over time and must not be a one-size-fits-all program
- Promoting a diversity of choices and models of faith formation of all ages within the parish, especially as it relates to languages and culture
- Developing programs with a strong evangelization content
- Favoring a small community setting that that allows for reflection and dialogue and the methodology of see, judge, act
- Working closely with apostolic movements
- Establishing mechanisms of collaboration among those involved in faith formation; and
- Developing a framework for faith formation of Hispanics in the United States in collaboration with the USCCB.

In the short term, the proceedings of this dialogue will inform the work of the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity and the results will be offered to the Bishops' Task Forces on Faith Formation and Sacramental Practice and on Cultural Diversity to help guide the development of plans and activities.

In the longer term, the findings will be shared with national organizations and experts for continued conversation with the hope of producing a set of guidelines or recommendations to improve faith and leadership formation among Hispanic Catholics.

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