

## **THE HISPANIC EXPERIENCE IN MARRIAGE PREPARATION**

**By Lydia Pesina**

**Director, Family Life Office, Diocese of Brownsville**

In addressing the Hispanic experience in marriage preparation, it is important to highlight that currently Hispanics constitute the largest minority group in the U.S.--38.8 million or 13% of the population. This includes 13.3 % in the Northeast., 7.7% in the Midwest, 34.8% in the South, and 44.2% in the West. The population is soaring because of immigration and higher birth rates. It is also important to acknowledge the cultural and educational diversity: 66.9% are of Mexican descent, 14.3 % Central and South American, 8.6 % Puerto Rican, 3.7 % Cuban, and 6.5% other. Sixty percent of Hispanics currently in this country are U.S. born. In reference to the educational diversity, it becomes incumbent on us as pastoral agents to consider the current U.S. Hispanic reality when using printed marriage preparation materials and pre-marital inventories: 27% have less than a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education, 16% 9-12 grade education, 45.9% high school and some college, and 11.1% a bachelor's degree or more. (Statistics taken from "USA Today": Census by Haya el Nasser, November 2003).

We talk of Hispanics as a group because there are some strong common traits among the different Spanish speaking cultures. Some traditional and colonial values from Spain transcend the different Hispanic cultures. Hispanics tend to be conservative/ traditional in their cultural lifestyle. Some of the commonalities include:

- "machismo" in the male and more clearly defined male/female roles
- family as the nucleus of Hispanic life
- strong identification with as well as strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity with nuclear and extended family members
- a sense of obligation to provide material and emotional support to members of nuclear and extended family. These traits are especially evident in new immigrants.

There are distinct differences, however, within the Hispanic community when it comes to aspirations and behaviors that are very much shaped by their own family of origin experiences.

In the U.S. Catholic Church today, there are few, if any parishes and dioceses with no Hispanics. Regardless of the particular marriage preparation programs or models currently being used in parishes and dioceses across the nation, one of the challenges is to provide comprehensive marriage preparation to a population that is diverse in language, culture and socio-economic status. I believe that the challenge is even greater for the parishes and dioceses where the Hispanic population is a relatively new reality.

In my home diocese of Brownsville, which constitutes four counties on the Mexican

border at the southernmost tip of Texas, our population is approximately 800,000 Catholics, about 85% Hispanic primarily of Mexican descent. Because our reality is more typical of the Southwest but not of the rest of the country, in preparation for this presentation I e-mailed about fifteen Marriage Preparation Ministers from different dioceses and parishes from around the country and asked them to share with me what issues, needs or concerns they have encountered in providing marriage preparation to Hispanic couples in their parish or diocese. I also asked what has been unique and/or significant in providing marriage preparation to Hispanic couples in their area. I will include a few responses that I received along with my own experience in addressing some of the special considerations one needs to take into account to provide effective marriage preparation to Hispanics. I will also look at the present challenges, the good news of what the involvement of present practices already provides, and what questions we might address in shaping the future direction of marriage preparation to Hispanics.

Some special considerations when providing effective marriage preparation to this population include the following:

- 1) The wide spectrum of levels of enculturation and acculturation among the Hispanic couples. With certain couples this leads to differences in family culture identity and issues of dealing with extended families.
- 2) Language diversity within a couple: E/E, S/S, B/E w/ B/S, E/S, E/B, S/B, etc. and educational diversity.
- 3) The growing number of Hispanic immigrants in all areas of the country, not just the Southwest
- 4) The growing need of Convalidation Preparation Programs for Hispanics as an integral part of parish and diocesan marriage preparation programs

These are but a few considerations to take into account as we look at some of the present challenges and some possibilities for addressing those challenges using what is currently available due to the evolution in Marriage Prep during the past 60 years.

I would like to consider the following three challenges and some possibilities for addressing them : Materials/ Programs/Structures, Leadership Formation, and Evangelization.

### **(1) Materials/Programs/Structures**

Among couples who prefer Spanish or are Spanish-speaking only, the impact of U.S. culture and values, and associated materials available for marriage preparation can pose a challenge. Materials are typically translated from English versions and therefore may not reflect the particular Hispanic culture. Having said that, I believe that good marriage preparation materials and inventories do not necessarily have to be prepared specifically for Hispanics or any other cultural group to be effective. I believe that this is not an either/or proposition. If Spanish and English language materials designed specifically with Hispanics in mind are available, then that is terrific. (For example the Convalidation Program by Graciela Villalobos from California.)

However, I believe that the most effective marriage preparation tool will always be the marriage preparation ministers who will en flesh the cultural messages with their own experiences. For example, in our diocese, since about 1985, we have opted to use FOCCUS as the primary tool for the now 371 Sponsor Couples throughout the 68 parishes for several reasons. One of the reasons is that we have many sponsor couples who are primarily or strictly Spanish- speaking and some with limited education or writing skills; however, if they have reading skills and have or can acquire reflective and facilitative skills through proper training, they can effectively “witness and facilitate.” The statements take on the cultural nuances necessary to allow the engaged to enter into a process of reflection and understanding about their unique relationship, their family cultural dynamics, and about the essential elements of a sacramental marriage. One of the challenges is to have enough well-trained Hispanic Sponsor Couples to more effectively reflect the culture; however, for non-Hispanic Sponsor Couples, a general awareness and sensitivity to Hispanic cultures will suffice.

For group programs on weekends or evenings for couples who are monolingual Spanish, bilingual and/or understand one language but are more proficient in the other, having booklets printed with uniformly side by side English/Spanish pages works very well. Participants can be informed ahead of time that the presentations will be done all in English or all in Spanish but that the written work and their dialogue can be done in whatever combination of languages best works for them. For example, Catholic Engaged Encounter outlines and materials are internationally available in both languages and I understand that UNITAS has been translated into Spanish. I don't know if there is an official translation or adaptations made with permission.

Resources such as Fr. Rob Ruhnke's *For Better and Forever 3.0*, which is available in Spanish, can easily be used in a weekend format. When Fr. Ruhnke first published his 3.0 resource several years ago and before he translated it into Spanish, I asked him for permission to translate 12 topics and to print it for our own diocese to use in English/Spanish, face- to-face format. We used it successfully with our Diocesan Two-Day Marriage Preparation Retreat (not an overnighter). This format has also been successful using the *REFOCCUS* material (with FOCCUS Inc. written permission) English/ Spanish face-to-face for a one day Convalidation Conference in preparing civilly married couples requesting the Sacrament of Marriage.

In areas of the country where there are insufficient pastoral agents to provide presentations or couple-to-couple preparation in Spanish, many monolingual Spanish speakers know enough English to understand the basic concepts verbally. If the written materials are English/Spanish they can write and dialogue in Spanish. I personally advocate for same materials/same content/same format/different languages for marriage preparation whenever possible. I believe that the leaders and the participants will en flesh the meanings needed through their own cultural lens. I also believe that in keeping the programs the same in content and quality, the ministry with Hispanics does not become peripheral.

Having said that, resources such as the Abridged FOCCUS 2005 are important to have available as alternatives. It is a tool which is a shorter and more appropriate version of FOCUS for lower socio-economic, less educated persons, available both in English and Spanish.

A short sidebar on Spanish language materials: In my experience I think that often we do not have as many Spanish language materials in the market because those of us that are Spanish-speaking sometimes “shoot ourselves in the foot” when we complain about the Spanish not being “our Spanish” because certain words or phrases are not our own colloquialisms. I am not advocating for unprofessional translating; however, I believe that if the statement or the question gets the couple to where they need to go, each couple can do their own reflection and application.

As for the structures of Marriage Preparation Programs, the more variety in day, time and length we can have available to all couples with difficult work schedules, which includes many of the Hispanic poor, the better we can serve them without shortening or short-changing their preparation. For example, the one day Convalidation Conference using *REFOCCUS* which I mentioned earlier works wonderfully, as does using *REFOCCUS* in a series of evenings facilitated by a Sponsor Couple which helps accommodate couples with difficult work schedules.

Because of the great diversity in the degrees of acculturation, especially for new arrivals, it is important to keep in mind that we are preparing couples for the marriage they will soon initiate and for the marriage that they will have five years down the road when they are at a different point in their acculturation process in this country. Family Ministry programs such as Movimiento Familiar Cristiano can be an excellent resource in helping newly married couples not only deal with the challenges and spiritual tasks at the different stages of the family life cycle but also in adjusting to marriage in the U.S.

## **(2) Leadership Formation**

There exists an ongoing need for adequately prepared marriage preparation ministers who can support and/or deliver programs across the board. When we add to that need the Spanish language and the diversity in Hispanic cultures, the needs multiply exponentially. Many parishes around the country with a growing Spanish speaking population have few or no staff members with a command of the Spanish language. A staff member from a parish in Kentucky spoke about not having enough Spanish-speaking priests or deacons in the area to celebrate a marriage so couples sometimes have to be sent to other parishes.

Especially in areas such as these, there is a need for all pastoral agents--ordained, lay ecclesial ministers, and volunteers--to learn Spanish and/or have some basic knowledge and sensitivity to Hispanic cultures. Programs such as those available through MACC, the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, are ideal for language and culture immersion.

For all volunteers in ministry, and Hispanics are no exception, we as a Church owe them good, solid, preparation and continuing education. For the past eight years, our Family Life Office has offered four Continuing Education Sessions a year over eight Marriage topics, two in English and two in Spanish, for our Parish Sponsor Couples, and we request that all attend at least one a year (some do, some don't). I can tell you that the sessions presented in Spanish are always much better attended than the English. People are hungry for formation opportunities. Also, family ministry formation courses such as NACFLM's *Ministries with Families 10,1* which

are available in Spanish, provide good ministry formation. (*MWF 201* will be available in Spanish in the near future).

### **(3) Evangelization**

There exists a widespread need for evangelization among all cultures, including Hispanic cultures. Many engaged couples seek to celebrate the Sacrament of Matrimony with little or no adult knowledge or informed decision to practice the Catholic faith. The need to complete the Sacraments of Initiation is also a significant challenge among many Hispanic engaged couples. Many couples are not well versed in nor practice the Catholic faith, and have misconceptions about Catholic teachings on topics such as sexuality, sacraments, and the differences between civil and Church marriages. There is a need for good Convalidation Programs to meet the growing number of civilly married couples seeking marriage in the Church, many of them Hispanic.

I believe that all that is done in Marriage Preparation today is great evangelization and that more often than not Hispanic couples turn or return to the Church as they discover a welcoming community and a reassurance that their lives are sacred and that in beginning this marriage, they are starting a new Domestic Church. But in addition to that, concrete evangelizing efforts need to be incorporated in the marriage preparation process so as to initiate or reawaken the vocation received at Baptism.

The good news is that much of what is needed to offer comprehensive, quality marriage preparation to and with Hispanics is already available: Marriage Preparation programs in Spanish as we have heard about today, training and formation opportunities, and evangelizing efforts to minister effectively. These provide opportunities to creatively adapt available resources to provide good comprehensive marriage preparation to the particular Hispanic population each parish/diocese serves.

For example, the one day Convalidation Conference that I mentioned earlier has been helpful in responding to the growing need of Convalidation Preparation in our area utilizing an already existing Marriage Enrichment Program (REFOCCUS). In this one day program, we present 10 Points on the Sacrament of Matrimony from the Catechism of the Catholic Church (adapted from "Before You Say I Do"), include a short presentation on what it means to convalidate a civil union to a sacramental marriage--that this is a new yes in the Lord and not just a blessing; plus a short introduction to the Billings Method of Natural Family Planning. The rest of the day is basically a marriage enrichment day utilizing 3 or 4 of the REFOCCUS topics so that couples have an opportunity to reflect on and discuss the strengths and limitations in their marriage at present and how this is the marriage they are bringing to the altar. We do a 15-20 minute presentation on the topic, give them an opportunity to complete that theme's section of the inventory separately and then about 15-20 minutes for them to discuss their responses.

Perhaps some of the questions we might address in shaping the future direction of Marriage Preparation to Hispanics are:

- 1) How do we promote and augment what is currently available in materials and resources, especially in Spanish, so that Hispanics preparing for marriage can most benefit from them?
- 2) How do we provide training and formation to all pastoral agents serving the Spanish-speaking as well as educate them on some of the basic understandings of Hispanic cultures?
- 3) How do we address the growing need to provide preparation for convalidations and preparation for Sacraments of Initiation for couples seeking to marry in the Church?
- 4) What creative ways can be utilized to assist parishes with few Spanish-speaking pastoral agents in preparing the Spanish-speaking (for example, videos for the engaged on training videos for volunteers)?

These are but a few questions to consider as we look at the overall picture of responding to the variety of needs for such a diverse group in such a diverse country.