

CHAPTER TWO

HISPANIC/LATINO PRESENCE IN THE USA AND THE CHURCH

By: Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, M.A. and Allan Figueroa Deck, SJ, Ph.D.
Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church

Provenance and History:

People with roots in Latin American countries have lived in the United States from its very beginnings. However, their presence on the national scene was practically invisible. The 1970 Census was the first time Hispanics were counted and recognized as a distinct population. The very term Hispanic was chosen by the U.S. Government to name a growing population that was not a racial or an ethnic group, but a people with roots in more than twenty-three Latin American countries and Spain, sharing a common cultural heritage and language. The term Latino emerged in the 80's as a self-given name, particularly in urban settings. This broadening of identity as Hispanics/Latinos was encouraged by robust immigration from Latin America during the 80's and 90's. Yet today, most Hispanics/Latinos still identify with their nation of origin, for example, and prefer to call themselves Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans, etc.

The roots of the Hispanic/Latino presence in the U.S. go back to colonial times when most of the country's southern flank was under Spanish rule. The first Mass celebrated in what is now the U.S. took place in 1569 in St. Augustine, Florida under Spanish auspices. The Hispanic/Latino presence took on a whole new dimension in the 1840's with the annexation of half of Mexico's territory to the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War. The new border crossed entire populations from big and small towns, as the Mexican-American presence was born in what is now the American West and Southwest. In 1898 the Spanish-American War led to the annexation of Puerto Rico, adding its population to the growing number of U.S. citizens of Hispanic/Latino descent.

The second part of the twentieth century saw a new wave of Hispanic/Latino immigrants come to the United States from Mexico, Central America and South America. In the early 1940's the U.S. and Mexico established the "*Bracero Program*". This program brought thousands of Mexican nationals to work in agriculture. The demand for workers also brought a significant number of Puerto Ricans to the Northeast region. The 60's saw a massive immigration of Cuban refugees as a result of the Cuban Revolution. The 70's and 80's witnessed significant immigration from Central America due to civil wars ravaging places like El Salvador and Guatemala. During the 90's many Latin American countries experienced a severe economic crisis. Growing unemployment and high inflation rates forced nationals from practically every Latin American nation to migrate North in search for better economic opportunities. Immigration from Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru was particularly high during those years.

The beginning of the 70's marked a new era for Hispanic/Latino ministry. Pastoral efforts moved from mostly advocacy and social services to a more comprehensive pastoral approach. Major developments of this period were the ordination of Bishop Patrick Flores as Auxiliary

Bishop for the Archdiocese of San Antonio in 1970 and the transfer of the National Office from San Antonio to Washington DC. Subsequently, eight Regional Offices for Hispanic Affairs were created under the National Office to assist in the Process of *Encuentro*, which prepared the ground for the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry (NPPHM) promulgated in 1987. The foundation of the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) by Fr. Virgil Elizondo was also a sign of this new era in ministry.

In the late 1970's and into the 80's the *Encuentro* process continued to unfold. A number of significant statements by bishops together with conclusions and recommendations of the Second and Third *Encuentros* provided a theological vision and sound blueprint for pastoral planning. Many dioceses have taken these and subsequent statements by the Hispanic bishops as inspiration for the development of Hispanic ministry up to the present. No other cultural/ethnic Catholic community in the U.S. has experienced as comprehensive a process of pastoral reflection as have the Hispanic/Latinos. The heritage and vision of the *Encuentros*, especially the 1987 *National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry* (NPPHM) and the more recent 2002 *Encuentro and Mission* provide the most complete and ecclesially authorized sources for Hispanic ministry today. Indeed, other racial/ethnic communities may find in the *Encuentro* process and methods useful tools for their own pastoral planning.

The National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry (NPPHM) provided a common national vision for Hispanic Ministry and set the tone for a model of Church that was more welcoming, evangelizing, communitarian and missionary. It also called for the development of Hispanic/Latino ministry at the local level base on a policy of ecclesial integration *versus* cultural assimilation. This emphasis led to the establishment of many more diocesan offices for Hispanic ministry, which in turn accelerated the development of Hispanic/Latino ministry in parishes. The growth of the professional diocesan and parish based ministry made possible the creation of national Hispanic Catholic membership organizations and the celebration of 3 *Raices y Alas Congresses* (Roots and Wings Congress). Hispanic/Latino National Catholic organizations include the following. There are several others that deserve mentioning as well but are not for the sake of brevity.

Academy of Catholic Hispanic Theologians of the United States (ACHTUS, 1988)

National Association of Hispanic Priests (ANSH, 1989)

National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry (NCCHM, 1990)

National Catholic Association of Diocesan Directors for Hispanic Ministry (NCADDHM, 1991)

National Catholic Network of Hispanic Youth Ministry (La Red, 1996)

In 2005, the Committee on Hispanic Affairs co-sponsored the First National Encuentro for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry which was very well attended and gained the participation of 129 dioceses. This strengthened a framework called *La Red* (the Network) for ongoing development of Hispanic/Latino youth and young adult ministries. Given the extraordinary youth of Hispanics such an organization is much needed.

Besides sharing a common cultural heritage, Hispanics/Latinos share a common faith with deep Christian roots, particularly in the Catholic tradition. Such Catholic identity, rich with popular expressions and traditions, was passed down from generation to generation among the

people despite the pressures of cultural assimilation that found its way even into the Church. The late Cardinal Avery Dulles has suggested that the coming of immigrants, particularly Hispanics, offers the Church a unique opportunity to influence U.S. culture more than it ever has up to this point.

Demographics and Context:

Today Hispanics/Latinos are the fastest growing community in the United States. Just in the past eight years, their presence has increased by more than 11 million, making it the largest minority group at 47 million strong. According to the Census Bureau, Hispanics/Latinos will surpass the 132 million mark by 2050, accounting for 30% of the U.S. total population. Once limited to the West and Southwest, Florida, New York and Chicago, Hispanics/Latinos are now found in virtually every part of the U.S. in growing numbers.

The massive wave of immigrants from Latin American countries that started in the 40's created the conditions for the emergence of culturally specific ministries among Spanish-speaking peoples. In 1945, the U.S. Bishops asked Archbishop Robert E. Lucey, Archbishop of San Antonio, to lead a Committee of Bishops on ministry efforts among a growing Hispanic population. The primary focus of the Committee was the plight of migrant workers in the Southwest. The Office was based in San Antonio, TX.

From 1945 to 1969, a significant number of religious men and women chose to minister to the growing number of Hispanics/Latinos. Among them were Mexican-American priests and religious women who later formed *Padres* and *Hermanas*, the first national Hispanic Catholic organizations. Ministry during these years was marked by a pastoral sense of welcoming, advocacy, social justice, and a sense of solidarity embodied by Cesar Chavez.

Since then, Hispanic/Latino ministry has grown and matured as one of the key ministries in the Church. Over the past sixty-five years, Hispanics/Latinos have accounted for 70% percent of the Catholic Church's growth. According to recent studies, 68% of Hispanics/Latinos residing in the U.S. call themselves Catholic. This constitutes 35% of all Catholics in the country. Hispanics/Latinos already constitute more than 50% of all Catholics under age 29

Gifts They Bring:

Hispanic/Latino Catholics are gifted with a culture and leadership impregnated with Catholic values, traditions and practices. Hispanic/Latino Catholics can contribute to the dialogue between faith and culture in a unique way. They are a bicultural-bilingual people able and willing to build bridges between people from different cultures and ethnicities, and to model hospitality.

Hispanics/Latino Catholics can inspire other believers with their unwavering trust in God's providence, their affective celebration of the faith, and their appreciation of the sanctity of life. Their religious practices and devotions speak of an intimacy with God that generates unconditional love and who cares for them.

A strong sense of family and community life is another characteristic quality of Hispanic/Latino Catholics. Despite adverse circumstances ranging from forced immigration, poverty, discrimination and family separation by deportations, Hispanics/Latinos strive to form families and to keep them together. They also understand and live community as a family of families, and bring this perspective to parish life and apostolic movements.

In addition, Hispanic/Latino Catholics have an authentic Marian devotion and a persistent love for the Church. Hispanics/Latinos see the Church as their home; the place where they celebrate the Sacraments as they receive the saving grace of Christ, and experience the maternal love of Mary, the Mother of Christ, and their Mother, They seek a sense of belonging in the Church and can be very generous when they reach a sense of ownership and stewardship.

Hispanics/Latinos offer the Church an Historical Memory, a consistent pastoral methodology, and a clear Catholic vision for ministry embodied in the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry and other documents that promote unity in diversity and social justice.

Finally, Hispanic/Latinos contribute very significantly to the life and mission of the Church, and to society in general. Millions of Hispanic/Latino Catholics participate in the celebration of the Sunday liturgy in Spanish in more than four-thousand parishes across the country. They generate ordained, religious and lay ministers in parishes and apostolic movements, and constitute 25% of all lay people engaged in faith formation programs in dioceses across the nation. For the first time in U.S. history, Hispanic/Latino priests are being ordained in significant numbers every year. The economic and political growth is also gaining influence.

Challenges:

Today, pastoral outreach (by priests, religious, and laity) to the large numbers of faithful, especially the youth and young adults, is a key challenge for Hispanic/Latino Catholics. Recent studies done by the Pew Research Center show that the Catholic identity of Hispanics declines with every generation. It is also being reported by Pew that the majority of Puerto Ricans in the U.S. are no longer Roman Catholic. This ought to be taken as a huge wakeup call for Church leaders. Another characteristic of the pastoral context is a lack of awareness on the part of some Church leaders regarding the general principles and vision underpinning Hispanic ministry as formulated in the *Encuentro* processes and sanctioned by the bishops at the level of the Bishops Conference. Nor is there an adequate familiarity with the Church's teaching on evangelization which provides a framework for grasping intercultural relations and what is meant by inculturation. Without this familiarity it is questionable that one can preach or teach effectively and as the Church proposes today. Experience demonstrates that particularly in the case of Hispanics there is a need for small faith communities. Today's large, anonymous parish is often unsuitable especially for recent immigrant Hispanics who flourish in small faith communities.

Tapping into the flourishing ecclesial movements (e.g. the Charismatic Renewal, the Cursillo, Marriage Encounter, etc.) is a key challenge for Hispanic/Latino Catholics. The growing number of Hispanic priests and seminarians is a hopeful development. However, the fact that the vast majority of them are not U.S. born is a matter of concern since the inculturation of the faith at the heart of the Church's mission has to be grounded on the receiving culture

which is often unfamiliar to those born outside the U.S. (and vice-versa). Successful evangelization requires intercultural attitudes, skills and knowledge on the part of ALL ministers. The presence of only 3% of school-age Hispanics in Catholic schools K-12 reflects an ominous situation for emerging Church leadership since Hispanics will be the majority of Catholics in the next 20 years. Where will an educated leadership for the Church come from?

Millions of Hispanics/Latinos are impacted by a broken immigration system that separates their families and keeps them in the shadows, where they are more easily exploited and mistreated. Hispanics/Latinos experience today a higher degree of rejection and discrimination due to a growing anti-immigrant sentiment.

Hispanics/Latinos have the highest drop-out rate in the U.S. and continue to suffer from low educational attainment. Despite constituting more than half of all Catholic children, only 3% of Hispanics/Latinos attend Catholic grade-schools.

A one-size-fits-all mentality continues to exclude Hispanic/Latino immigrants from many parishes that refuse to welcome them and their children through culturally specific ministries. This policy of assimilation makes them more susceptible to proselytism by groups ranging from other religious denominations and even gangs.

The current economic downturn and the subsequent cuts in ministry have limited the Church's capacity to respond to a growing and engaging Hispanic/Latino population. The closing of Catholic schools, and parish consolidations in areas with high Hispanic/Latino populations, weaken their opportunities to strengthen their Catholic identity and develop the leadership needed by an emerging majority Catholic population.

Questions for discussion:

1. What similarities do you see between the Hispanic/Latino Family and your own?
2. What do you find helpful or would like to know more about?
3. What common actions of projects do you see the Hispanic/Latino family and your own family engaging together in the future?