

National Pastoral Initiative for Marriage

Consultation on Marriage Enrichment

January 23, 2007

The Hispanic Experience in Marriage Enrichment

**Ms. Alicia I. Perez, Associate Director of Family Life Ministry
Archdiocese of Galveston Houston**

Hispanics recognize the Church as a beacon of HOPE

Immigrants to the United States from Latin American Countries see the Church as a source of Wisdom. This is the experience they bring from their countries of origin. They see the church as a safe place “*a sanctuary.*”

“For many Latinos, the interrelationship between spirituality and / or religion and cultural practices is extraordinary close. In discussion about Latino worldviews, it is a challenge to separate the origin of beliefs and values. Among Latinos, there is often discussion about the emphasis on respeto or deference to authority or a more hierarchical relationship orientation.”

From Counseling Latinos and la Familia Santiago-Rivera, Arredondo & Gallardo-Cooper

When their marriage is in crisis, couples look to the hierarchy for guidance. They are not always aware of the difference between moral and spiritual guidance, emotional health and interpersonal relational skills. Their mothers, neighbors and friends will tell a couple that has a relationship problem to go to the church “*por un consejo*” (for guidance). They will trust what the priest says.

Therefore, the Church is in a unique position. Parishes are the best possible place to do marriage enrichment and to lead couples to the fountain of knowledge and experience that they may need in their marital relationship.

When couples come asking for help, they usually are in need of an immediate response. Crisis requires a response in “the right now”.

The consequence of not having an answer is more distress for the couples and feelings of dissatisfaction, helplessness, resentment and or betrayal. This presents an opportunity and a challenge to the parish.

A multidimensional approach to Marriage Enrichment is needed to respond to the needs of Latin American couples. First, we need to educate our clergy and their Pastoral Staff (including secretaries) to respond adequately to the needs of couples. Clergy and staff need to listen attentively in order to offer an adequate response and referral. For example: Many married persons call my office asking for a counselor. I cannot make a referral without spending some time listening to the issue they bring or think they have - before

offering a counselor or program that would best suit their needs. Staff persons need to be able to discern whether the issue is a moral issue, a need for emotional help, an addiction problem or a lack of interpersonal and relational skills. It is helpful to have knowledge of the culture in order to put the situation in its right context and avoid stereotyping, which often happens when considering broad and general characteristics about a given ethnic group. It is important to be aware of the cultural context of gender socialization, family-centered beliefs, values and systems in order to offer suggestions and the response that the person needs.

It is very important for the Church to develop a network of providers *and* to develop a relationship with the providers in order to have the connections needed. This includes supporting movements and programs that offer marriage enrichment with a Catholic perspective.

The recent experience of forming Healthy Marriage Coalitions in several cities in the United States is an example of what is possible to accomplish when churches and civil institutions are able to work together and find common ground.

Developing a relationship with the counselors in the area can be of great advantage. On one hand, they can provide the counseling services needed, and, on the other hand, many of them can provide programs or talks on related subjects in our parishes as a part of Adult Education.

Approaches to marriage enrichment include Encounters such as the *Encuentro Matrimonial*, which is well known and recommended in parishes. Their struggles are more about finding priests to staff the encounter and finding affordable places for the weekends. Yet couples find the money to do the weekends. Many pastors are using the *Encuentro Matrimonial* as a place to send couples that are convalidating their marriage and using this program as part of their marriage preparation.

Retrouvaille (for troubled marriages) is very successful in English, but *Retrouvaille* in the U.S. has struggled to make it available in Spanish, mainly due to the challenge for struggling couples to dedicate time to organize themselves for this ministry. They do not see themselves as presenters, particularly when in the presentations they need to talk about their own experience (*los trapitos se lavan en casa*) and they are not ready to share. Those who have benefited from the experience have shared it has done them good but have found it hard to do the follow up sessions. I have seen greater success among couples that have acculturated and are comfortable among the dominant society. While *Encuentro Matrimonial* is the most popular retreat experience for couples that I know of, in Houston we have been lucky to also have *Berit* which is in its structure very much like *Encuentros Matrimonial* but is geared to recently married couples. It was originally started in Mexico City by Mons. Enrique Glennie and a few couples he was working with. Two of those couples now reside in Houston and have brought the movement to the Houston area. Their goal is to form a community of couples interested in growing personally and as couples with a integral (biological, psychological, social and transcendental) dimension. The weekends go very well, but again they have had

difficulties keeping the couples interested in forming the communities. It has worked better with couples with some educational background

The *Movimiento Familiar Cristiano* is extremely popular and successful and helpful in strengthen Catholic families and therefore Catholic marriage. Their goal is to help families live their Catholic faith and values. The MFC does not start with a weekend experience. It recruits couples from among the parishes to form small communities for a 4-cycle formation program. They have a spiritual director that meets with the leader couples to prepare for each session. Once they finish the 4 cycles they are encouraged to participate actively in their parish. The retreat experiences they have are all to strengthen the life of its members. Perhaps one of its difficulties is helping couples that show signs of being in trouble to seek help out side the movement.

Due to the federal government's Healthy Marriage Initiative, we are seeing coalitions formed through out the country that are targeting the low income population (mainly African American and Hispanic) in order to promote healthy marriages. They have been seeking out skills-based programs that will benefit the population intended to serve with the grant they have been awarded.

At the same time, several professional skills-based programs either have received grants to implement their program in Spanish or were motivated to translate their programs in order to be able to respond in time to the needs of the Coalitions. Among those I am aware of: *PREP*, *Active Communications*, *Laughing your Way through Marriage* and *Survival Skills for Healthy Families*.

I personally have used 'Survival Skills for Healthy Families' and "The Strongest Link" which is also used by the Office of Refugee Resettlement Services of Catholic Charities to help families deal with cultural shock and maintain a healthy marital and family relationship. SSHF is a twelve hour family wellness program presented in a large group setting in a series of six two-hour sessions. The sessions are organized around practical guidelines for healthy interactions which are demonstrated and then practiced with the participants. This program is skill-based and has a systems thinking approach.

The program I am now most familiar with is "*Active Communications*" from the Active Relationships Center based in Dallas, Texas, and lead by Kelly Simpson. In a structured and logical format it is designed to provide knowledge and tools for better communication, conflict resolution and greater intimacy. Another goal is to inspire couples with hope that their relationship can grow and improve. It is commonly given in a weekend format by trained facilitators (professional background preferred). A colleague of mine practically re-translated the program, and we were trained along with other professionals in Texas. We then piloted the program throughout Houston. We did a pre- and post- evaluation of the couples relationships as well as a 3-month post evaluation that was part of a study by Drs. Preston and Kotrla from Baylor University. Couples reported improvement in their relationship. We would hope that this program helped the couples begin to see their marital relationship with new eyes and that they acquired some skills to be used in their everyday living.

There are many more programs that are being developed as I speak in the area of Marriage Enrichment that attest to the urgent need to provide resources for couples to sustain a healthy life-giving marriage. I would recommend that more economic resources be put in place in parishes to provide faith and skill-based programs for couples of all ages and all cultures.

A coordinated effort between parishes and the diocese would help to have year-round programs where couples could go when they see the need to strengthen their marriage and possibly get the initial help they need.