

Reaching Hispanic candidates



Rev. Clint Ressler

As Hispanic populations continue to grow in the United States, vocations from their numbers are also growing. Many cultural, social and economic factors must be addressed, however, if they are to hear the vocation message. Two vocation directors in heavily-populated, but very different, Hispanic areas, shared their knowledge about this worthy mission.

Rev. Clint Ressler, vocation director for the Diocese of Galveston-Houston, said Hispanics, which make up at least half of the Catholic population, represent the greatest potential growth in vocations. If the diocese can solve some of the cultural, language

and educational barriers it faces, he estimates there could be an additional five priest candidates a year.

One of the biggest barriers to Hispanic vocations is the way in which the message is delivered. U.S. dioceses and seminaries are more systems-oriented and tend to minister by program, with Anglo-focused messages. In Hispanic countries, ministry is more personal, one-on-one, and the priest is heavily involved in the lives of the people.

"A Hispanic candidate or prospect in an American parish sees priesthood as impersonal and, therefore, less attractive to that image of priesthood he knows," said Father Ressler. "If the system is too impersonal, it contributes to the loss of Hispanic seminarians and why some candidates don't enter seminary, or why they prefer a religious order where there is more of a sense of community.

"In our diocese," he added, "we're trying to develop a discernment group just for the Spanish groups. We're doing more personal work with Hispanic candidates, fostering personal relationships with the seminarians and vocation directors, and we go out and meet their families, so it's not just a system they're meeting."

Family relationships are an important part in working with Hispanic candidates. In America, children are expected to separate from their families at some point after high school and become independent. There is a high value placed on independence.

But that is not the case in Hispanic cultures. Rather, there is an expectation that you are always there for the family and the family is always there for you, explained Father Ressler. There is also a strong sense of "machismo," where the male is expected to take care of the family, and the priesthood is not necessarily viewed as a masculine profession.

"The warmth of a family is often lacking in larger seminaries and dioceses. It also explains why we find many Hispanic candidates forming relationships with families in their parishes. They'll spend a lot of their free time with families they've met," said Father Ressler. "Hispanic seminarians can't be thrust into an institution without the need to transfer some of the support he gets from family to the Church family. Fellow seminarians, vocation director, home parish and pastor—all of those entities of support are more important because he's forming a family there."

Father Ressler said access to family and establishing connection, rather than disconnection, is important. One way is to host an annual family day where they can come and visit. These needs are more important to the candidate in the first half of seminary life, and will diminish as he nears ordination.

Recruitment of Hispanic candidates can be difficult on a more practical level. Social and economic factors can restrict their sense of belonging and their ability to attend programs. Many of them are working two jobs just to pay the rent and don't have the time or the transportation to get to a program. Just sending a flyer or posting a program isn't going to work, said Father Ressler. A better approach is to be proactive, extending a personal invitation, personal mentoring and getting to know the family.

Hispanic candidates, particularly newer immigrants, may face an educational disadvantage. Labor is highly emphasized in their culture and many of them do not finish high school because they are working by the time they reach adolescence. If they try to enter a collegiate level seminary, they're often not prepared and systems are not in place to help them get to that level, said Father Ressler.

"Our vocation systems are more academic-driven, whereas in their home countries, it's more of an apprenticeship model. The seminarians are out every weekend doing ministry, which gives them the sense of mission," he said. "We pull them out of that environment and put them in an academic one, and that leads them away from what drew them in the first place. The seminaries have yet to address this issue."

While care needs to be taken in choosing a seminary for the candidate, often the options are limited. In any case, once in seminary, a Hispanic seminarian may feel himself inferior, even if that attitude is not demonstrated by the Anglo majority. Their English may not be as good or they don't feel like they belong. In Mexico, relationships among the seminarians are tighter and with families close by, it's easier to establish a sense of belonging. It is incumbent upon the seminary and diocese to try to overcome these



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What vocation outreach programs best helped you to hear God's call?

Perhaps the most enjoyable and helpful outreach program for me was the "Live-in Weekend" at the seminary. Getting to go to classes with the seminarians and talking to them about their vocation helped me to know others had gone through the same struggle I was going through at the time. I didn't feel so "alone" anymore. However, what helped me the most was having a vocation director that was willing to accompany me in my discernment. To feel I could trust my vocation director in whatever decision he took regarding my vocation really aid me in following God's will in my life.

How has your family supported your decision to become a priest?

The best way my family has supported me in my decision has been by letting me know that I can succeed in anything I do in my life. My parents, being very devout Catholics, have tried their best to encourage me without putting pressure or expectations on me. I know that it means a lot to them that I want to be a priest, but they let me know it's OK with them if I change my mind. Knowing my family backs me up in any decision I take, whether being in seminary or not, is the best support I have been able to get.

lates—a necessary mission

perceptions and give candidates a sense of belonging, said Father Ressler. These issues should also be considered when placing the newly ordained priest in a parish.

"It is important that the pastor be someone who is more hands-on than hands-off, where there is a sense of collaboration," he said. "Having a pastor who spends time with the candidate and mentors him are important to reinforce that sense of family and belonging."

Father Ressler added that each Hispanic candidate has different

levels of need. For recent immigrants the need will be greater, but many Hispanic families have been in America for so long that all they have left from the culture is their Hispanic surname.

The situation is different in the Archdiocese of Miami where Hispanics are heavily integrated into the culture and there is an abundance of Hispanic parishes.

About 80 percent of the diocese is Hispanic, 10 percent Anglo-American and 10 percent Haitian. Miami also has the only bilingual college seminary and major seminary in the country where Hispanic candidates can learn English and celebrate Mass and Liturgy of the Hours in Spanish.

Of the 41 seminarians in the diocese today, only three are Anglo-American; six are Haitian-Americans, and all others are Hispanic American, the majority born outside the United States, according to Vocation Director, Rev. Manny Alvarez.

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Where there any family or cultural factors that were challenges in your decision?

I must say there was one particular issue I had to do plenty of discerning on. Culturally speaking, any devout (Catholic) Hispanic family desires to have a priest in their family. Therefore, I had to discern on whether I wanted to be a priest because I knew that would make my parents happy, or if the Lord was truly calling me. However, it did not take long before I was sure this was the life for me.

What differences do you see in the American seminaries vs. Mexican or other Hispanic countries?

Formation stays pretty much the same across the board, but I think the way the priesthood is perceived changes. For the most part, talking from my experience, priests (and seminarians for that matter) are looked upon as "gods" by the Mexican communities. If a priest said it, then it must be true; no one dares to question what a priest says. This, in my opinion, can drive seminarians and priest into what I call a "superego", because we actually start believing everything we say is "word of God". Most people still hold a great respect and love for priests in Hispanic countries.

There is not much of a difference in how vocations are occurring among Hispanics, than among Anglo-Americans, he said. Vocations are coming from parishes that emphasize vocations, pray for vocations, and have adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, just as they are coming from families that are rooted in the Catholic faith and support vocations.

Father Alvarez is himself an example. He was born in Miami to Cuban parents, and raised in an environment where going to Mass, participating in Church ministries and attending youth groups were regularly practiced. It was common to have a priest for dinner, and they became role models for him. His family was open to vocations, which is not the case for the majority of Hispanic family. Many Hispanic families prefer their sons get married and have families because there is this idea of "machismo," he said. But, like any other culture, if the family is close to the Church and active, they are more inclined to support a religious vocation.

"In my experience dealing with many men coming from Latin American families, the Church is the center of the town and the center of their lives, and the priest is regarded as a member of the family. They don't see Church as a Sunday obligation, but as a part of their daily lives," said Father Alvarez.

Mexican families, in particular, have a strong religious identity and many consider themselves sons of Our Lady of Guadalupe before sons of Mexico, he added. Forming Spanish-speaking faith groups outside of the larger parish can be a helpful tool in promoting vocations.

"They use a lot of methods here that the Latin American bishops use. The emphasis goes beyond Sunday attendance to forming small groups that meet in homes to foster the faith outside of the faith environment," said Father Alvarez. "If the faith is brought to them and they see prayer groups in their homes like I saw, it is helpful in fostering vocations."

Another successful approach is the practice of passing a "vocation" or "blessing" cup from family to family. The cup is a reminder of the chalice used at Mass, said Father Alvarez, and a good way to bring prayer for vocations into the home. Families do that during the evening meal for a week, and then pass the cup to another family at Mass on Sunday.

Father Alvarez has not experienced much in the way of educational or economic disadvantages in serving Hispanic candidates. The main issue for the diocese is immigration and making sure the candidates have proper legal papers and Visas before applying to the seminary, which the diocese helps them through. The other main obstacle is learning English, for which the bilingual seminaries are helpful.

"For some of the candidates, their families are back in their home countries, but the majority of them have at least one family member here," he noted. "We let them travel and see their families once a year, and it is not a major obstacle for them."

Placement in a parish is also not a problem where almost every parish has multiple Spanish Masses and there is an abundance of need for Spanish priests. The difference is if the Hispanic priest is placed in a primarily Anglo-speaking parish and he doesn't have command of the English language.

"Nowadays, statistics show that half of the Catholic population is going to be Hispanic," said Father Alvarez. "They are integrating so well into society."

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Rev. Manny Alvarez