

Hispanic Catholic Youth: Challenges & Opportunities

It is often said that youth are the future of society, or of the church. In the case of the Hispanic community in the Catholic church, however, the truth is that youth is the present. The numbers speak for themselves: between 18 and 20 million people of ages between 9 and 28 are Hispanics, and that amounts to 41% of Catholics under 30 years of age.

This raises many questions:

What does the church offer in terms of education, resources and opportunities for leadership to these young people?

- In which ways does the church speak to these young people?
 - What are their specific needs?
 - How do the young people see themselves? With whom or with what do they identify?
 - How can the concept of vocation be introduced to them?
- What is the vocational culture of their environments like?
- What could and should be done?

Knowing the audience:

According to a study of Fe y Vida (www.feyvida.org), Hispanic youth can be classified in four different groups:

1. Immigrant workers, who need faith to face the challenges of life.
2. Identity seekers, who need faith to develop a sense of hope.
3. Those who are immersed in the mainstream, who need faith in order to overcome individualism and consumerism.
4. High risk youth, who need faith to go from anger and hatred to healing and forgiveness.

Challenges:

- Every time a group of Hispanic leaders gathers to reflect on the reality of their ministry, inevitably the concern is raised about the situation of formal education among Hispanic youth. Without an adequate academic education because they had to leave their countries of origin, or because they dropped out of school before completing their degrees, they cannot have access to good jobs, they don't have access to higher education either and, therefore, they cannot aspire to take leadership positions in the church or society.
- Many of our young people have not had any Christian formation opportunities in their countries of origin. If they must eventually assume the leadership of the church, they must be able to have solid formation programs of faith education. For this, resources, persons, dedication, and commitment are needed.
- Many of the young people feel trapped between two cultures



and two very different religious experiences. The religious expressions of the dominant cultures leave them cold and feels impersonal to them. Their parents traditional religiosity may not speak to their experience. As they don't feel they can identify with either one, they tend to withdraw.

- Christian groups of different denominations—particularly Pentecostal and Evangelicals—often speak to the experience, emotion, and spirituality of young people more strongly than the traditional Catholic practice.

What to do in the face of all this?

- Above all, do not be afraid of inviting young people and allowing them to participate and assume responsibility in your groups and communities.
- Invite young people to participate in planning for your community.
- Allow the young people to take on leadership for specific activities.
- Offer opportunities for young people to celebrate their cultural and Catholic identity.
- Advocate for their rights to education. Support initiatives in defense of the DREAM Act. Understand the system of education in the US and its challenges.
- Work with families so they understand the need for adequate education and to encourage their children to pursue a higher education.
- Create safe and sacred spaces within the community.

Think of a concrete and simple action you could start this month to foster Hispanic youth leadership.