

The mission to form Hispanic leaders continues – in spite of the pandemic

Alex Quezada is a bridge.

Quezada, an immigrant from Mexico, is a link from the Church's past to its future – one who is among the emerging Catholic leaders of the Fifth National Encuentro of Hispanic/Latino Ministry (V Encuentro).

"I feel blessed because God has shown me his love in many ways," said Quezada, who is Hispanic Ministry coordinator at St. John Paul II parish in Kankakee, Illinois, and the relief and development coordinator for the Diocese of Joliet's Justice and Peace Ministry of the Office for Human Dignity.

"He [God] has shown me other side of the coin, too," Quezada said, explaining that he has experienced poverty, seen domestic violence and, as an immigrant, faced racism and discrimination. Last December, Quezada, 45, even faced death after suffering a stroke.

Born in Mexico City, Quezada, the oldest of five siblings, came to Kankakee in 2001 seeking a job and a better future. He worked as a dishwasher, cleaning floors and other low-paying jobs while pursuing a high-school equivalency diploma. He continued studying until he eventually earned certification as a neurolinguistic programming master.

"I didn't practice my faith," he said, referring to his life in Mexico. "And I felt homesick and was hungry to find other Hispanics in Kankakee." He learned there was a Spanish Mass at St. Teresa Church, where he began volunteering.

Quezada said Jehovah witnesses constantly knocked on his door

and asked him hard questions. “They helped me be a better Catholic,” he said. He would go to his parish to ask the priest the questions about the Faith. The priest sent Quezada to the Diocese of Joliet’s Capacitación (“training”) Pastoral program, where he met Elisabeth Román, director of the diocese’s Office of Hispanic and Ethnic Ministry.

Román invited Quezada to participate in the V Encuentro. Quezada became one of more than 30,000 leaders from 2,566 parishes who received training for the V Encuentro. It is estimated that close to 250,000 Hispanic/Latinos participated in the process at its parish, diocesan, regional and national levels.

A plan to move forward

The V Encuentro is the four-year process of discernment and action convened by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to better understand and serve the growing Latino Catholic community in the United States. Started in 2016, it was in its fourth year when the conclusions and recommendations were to be put into action in homes, parishes, dioceses and regions. Then the pandemic hit.

“We never thought that parishes would have to close, we never thought we would stop ministering in person, and we had to adapt immediately; and thanks to the technology, we continued the Encuentro process,” Román said in regards to how the pandemic affected the Church in the U.S. “The leaders were connected, but we discovered that many people did not have access to the technology, so we had to create Facebook and WhatsApp groups to connect.”

The Diocese of Joliet is a microcosm of how parishes and dioceses around the United States are responding to the conclusions and recommendations of the V Encuentro.

“These were dark moments, particularly for the Hispanic

community. We lost members, we got infected, we lost jobs. [COVID] had a huge impact, and when we most needed our parish, our pastors, the Eucharist, our community, we didn't have them. It was and continues to be very difficult for many people," Román said.

While many resources were cut in parishes across the country, including those for Hispanic ministry, Román praised Bishop Ronald A. Hicks of Joliet for supporting Hispanic ministry in the diocese. Following the V Encuentro, the diocese discerned a pastoral plan that defined four priorities: *pastoral juvenil* (youth ministry), *pastoral familiar* (family ministry), *justicia social* (social justice) and *formación pastoral* (ministry formation).

"We have formed four groups of leaders that will work on these priorities," Román said. "We created a pastoral plan from the voices that came from the Encuentro."

The pandemic's effect

But not all dioceses have been able to respond to the recommendations of the V Encuentro.

"There is no doubt that the pandemic has had an impact not only how the V Encuentro's conclusions are to be implemented, but also on how we all live our Catholicism," said Hosffman Ospino, associate professor of Hispanic Ministry and Religious Education at Boston College and a member of the V Encuentro's national leadership team. "Three years after the national gathering in 2018 in Grapevine, Texas, there are signs of a growing number of Catholic leaders, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, who did not participate in the process and know little about the V Encuentro."

In addition, Ospino indicated that the pandemic has had a double-effect. "On the one hand, it corroborated some of the conclusions of the V Encuentro process, highlighting the need

to invest in Hispanic Catholics and structures to support the evangelization efforts among this population. Hispanics in general have been affected by the pandemic, and many Catholic parishes and organizations simply were not prepared to support them in a time of difficulty. We continue to witness an exodus from the Catholic church in the Hispanic community, as many Hispanics, especially on the younger side, are not accompanied appropriately or just don't find a place to be engaged in our current ministerial structures."

According to estimates presented by the V Encuentro, 40% percent of Catholics in the United States are Hispanic/Latino. It is still a significant percent within the overall number of Catholics in the United States. However, is it a concern because only half of Latinos in the United States consider themselves Catholics.

"On the other hand, the pandemic shifted the language and the focus on Hispanic Catholics that was cultivated and proposed during the V Encuentro process," Ospino said. "The pandemic has led many dioceses, parishes and organizations to shift to a survival mode, often cutting personnel and resources, many of these serving Hispanic Catholics. Without resources and personnel, implementing the conclusions of the V Encuentro will be more difficult as we move into the future".

Focus on formation

Quezada said he understands the importance of the Hispanic/Latino Catholics for the U.S. Church – not for the future but for its present. "The V Encuentro opened my eyes to another reality: having goodwill is not enough to serve the People of God. It requires preparation, education, formation," he said.

In reference to Hispanics approaching 50% of the U.S. Catholic population, Quezada said, "*La tortilla se está volteando* (the omelette is flipping). The Hispanic presence in the U.S. is

growing. We Hispanics must be very well prepared so that we don't make the same mistakes that other cultures – majorities – have made in their life journey. V Encuentro helps us go to the peripheries to help those who are at risk and help us see how we as church can welcome everyone.”

Elisabeth Román, who is also president of the board of directors of the National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry (NCCHM) said, “Our community is ready to assume the reins of the churches of which it is already a majority.”

Recently, the NCCHM convened RAICES y ALAS 2021, the National Catholic Congress in Hispanic Ministry, from Sept. 22-26 in Washington, D.C. The congress focussed on the priority areas that emerged from the V Encuentro and recommended actions to the V Encuentro leadership and bishops as part of the national pastoral planning for Hispanic ministry. One of those recommendations was formation.

“I usually tell the bishop and the vicar here in the diocese (of Joliet): You will never have enough priests to serve the Hispanic ministry,” Román said, “but we can form leaders to help those priests serve their communities.”

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