NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Windows into a complex community

Tom Roberts | Sep. 16, 2010

The 2009 graduates of the Hispanic Institute pose with instructors at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in California. (Courtesy of Santa Clara University)

BERKELEY, CALIF. -- Oscar would use only his first name. He?s undocumented, from Mexico, and even though he?s lived in the United States for 17 years, his life is a state of constant insecurity. No papers. He?s got to be careful.

He has command of English and a lot of ambition but his prospects remain limited. Without papers he can?t continue his education, and he can?t get a good job.

No one was certain how many others among the 31 attending a two-week Hispanic Institute here in June find themselves in a similar circumstance. For Oscar, who laments that this is his third and final year -- students graduate after the third year -- the institute is a place ?where we don?t feel like second-class citizens.? He feels like that at times even in his Northern California parish, yet it?s also one of the few places where he doesn?t have to worry about immigration status.

Oscar?s story represents but a tiny window into the complexity of what is, for the sake of convenience, brought together under the heading ?Hispanic ministry.? The course at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University is one of the church efforts to form Hispanic or Latino leadership.

The terms themselves give witness to the complexity. Jesuit Fr. Eduardo Fernández, associate professor of pastoral theology and ministry at the school of theology, also teaches at the institute. He explained in an interview that ?the East Coast tends to use Hispanic. On the West Coast, we tend to use Latino.? That leads to a more textured explanation of the differences, for instance, in perceptions among Cubans (with a strong link to Spain, more likely to identify as Hispanic) and Mexicans (more oriented toward Latin America and thus, he said, more inclined to identify themselves as Latino). Some scholars simply note that they use the terms interchangeably.

A minor semantic point, perhaps, but it is an indicator that a term like ?Hispanic ministry? is extreme shorthand for a rich universe of cultural and religious expression that can appear overwhelming in its diversity and dimensions.

The numbers -- and their implications -- are daunting. About a third of the 65.6 million Catholics in the United States are now Latinos, according to a 2007 study done by the Pew Hispanic Center and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. And that percentage continues to grow, not only because of immigration but also because of the new generations of those who have been U.S. citizens for a long time. The study concluded, ?Hispanics are transforming the nation?s religious landscape, especially the Catholic church, not only because of their growing numbers but also because they are practicing a distinctive form of Christianity.?

Numbers alone, however, don?t guarantee an effect on Catholicism. As University of Notre Dame theology professor Timothy Matovina points out in an essay, ?Latinos in U.S. Catholicism,? thousands of U.S. Hispanics defect each year from Catholicism, and younger Latinos do not demonstrate the same fervor as their parents. ?According to Carmen Cervantes, cofounder and executive director of the Latino youth ministry organization Instituto Fe y Vida,? he writes, ??Latino/a teens will soon be more than half of all adolescent Catholics in the U.S., and as a group they are even more religiously inarticulate and disengaged than other Catholic teens.?

Different evangelizing styles

Not only do Hispanics face cultural differences among themselves, but there is an overriding clash with Anglo culture as well as the layered fear of deportation.

All of those elements seemed to mix in an air of practicality that hung over the class on the final day of instruction at the Hispanic Institute. Not long into a lecture that began with some basic ecclesiology, the discussion turned to the difference among approaches to evangelism that might be encountered in today?s culture.

Dr. Cecilia González-Andrieu of Loyola-Marymount University in Los Angeles moved quickly from the concept of mystical union to sacraments and the Catholic understanding that one ?can?t keep God in a box.? At the same time, evangelization can?t be imposed or triumphal, she said.

Nor is evangelization a quick fix, a simple declaration of belief. That?s why, for instance, the RCIA program of preparation for adults is more than an altar call or the thrill of quick conversion one might find outside of the Catholic experience. It involves months of a systematic investigation of faith that culminates in baptism and a visible initiation into the larger community.

Sacraments, she explained, make Christ visible in the wider world. The Eucharist, she said, ?is a visible sign of the reign of God in mission.? All of this Catholic activity, she pointed out, ends up in a very outward mission to the world.

González-Andrieu is a systematic theologian specializing in theological aesthetics, a discipline that gleans its

information from ?the theologies that are not in the canonical text? but that are equally important to those who, in different ways, express them. In an interview, she said she believes theological aesthetics is particularly important in the 21st century ?for those of us who especially want to give a place at the theological table to women and people of color and people on the margins.? For answers to her questions, then, she looks to such things as cultural and pietistic practices. What does it mean that a group maintains an altar for the Day of the Dead? ?What is the vision of redemption?? What is the vision of the communion of saints? What is being said in the little hangings that people put on saints??

The presumption is not that these are ?just illustrations of existing theologies that somehow the European theologians have already said? -- or, more likely, she added, theologies they?ve missed.

?What have women been saying for centuries in ways when they were not allowed to write or teach or any of those things? What were they saying, and what are communities saying?? she asked.

If the Latino/Hispanic experience is so varied, then, is it reasonable to speak of it in a single phrase? Can it be spoken of as a single Hispanic community, and, if so, what binds these disparate expressions of culture and religion together?

One clear similarity is language, said Fernández, whose book *Mexican-American Catholics* is part of a Paulist series on pastoral spirituality. In addition, he said, the experience of conquest by Spain and its consequences bridges cultures in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Another shared experience, said González-Andrieu, is that ?of being other ... that?s part of our common language with one another, we are other, we are on the margins.?

A ?second mixing?

Across cultures, the Hispanic community in the United States also shares poverty, the inability to get an education, ?or we share the painfulness of trying to come and join our families, whether we?re coming across the strait from Cuba on a boat or across a desert. ... Really the thing that we most share in the United States is the second mixing with another culture.?

That mixing today spreads well beyond the Southwest and California and it includes other national groupings. Storm Lake, in northwestern Iowa, isn?t normally a flash point in the national immigration debate, but Francisco Villegas, one of six participants sent to the institute by the diocese of Sioux City, Iowa, is a lector at St. Mary Parish in that diocese.

Villegas, a self-employed construction worker and a U.S. citizen, said meat-packing plants in the region have drawn a large labor force from Mexico and from South Africa, with whom local authorities have an arrangement to take a certain number of immigrants. He said there is some tension in the area between the two groups, Hispanic and African, but the parish school has played a significant role in improving relationships between those two groups and with the Anglo community.

If Oscar sometimes feels like a second-class citizen in his parish, Villegas? experience in Iowa has been different. His pastor is Anglo but lived in Mexico for a long time and ?accommodates both communities,? speaking in English or Spanish as needed, he said.

What Villegas has seen is that more and more Anglos are joining in Hispanic forms of worship, coming to Guadalupe celebrations. At the same time, Hispanics have had to alter their celebrations at times, taking their dancing and mariachi bands inside because much of the year in Iowa it is too cold to hold festivities outside.

Rosie Canas, whose family originated in Mexico, was born and raised in Indio, Calif., and she?s seen her current parish, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, in Southern California go from majority Anglo to majority Hispanic. According to the parish Web site, on weekends there are five Spanish-language Masses and three in English.

She said the parish engages in a lot of political organizing on behalf of immigrants and that because of its location it often is a first point of refuge for new arrivals.

Canas graduated from the institute this year and said she thinks the course has given her tools that will allow her, as a second-generation Mexican American, to give back to her community and to help develop new leaders in the parish.

That would be a perfect conclusion to the process for Paulina Espinosa, who?s been directing the 22-year-old program for the past seven years. She said it is essential ?to develop leaders in the local parishes who are comfortable enough with their faith and their leadership skills to really begin taking leadership roles.? The need, she said, becomes greater each year as the community continues to grow and spread throughout the country.

[Tom Roberts is *NCR* editor at large. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org.]

The Next Step FORWARD [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *09/03/2015 - 16:58*): http://ncronline.org/news/people/windows-complex-community

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end