

Vocations in the Hispanic Communities of the United States

A Conference by
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INTRODUCTION

I am grateful to the National Association of Hispanic Priests (ANSH) for the invitation to speak on the theme of priestly vocations in the Hispanic communities of the United States. This occasion offers the opportunity to share some thoughts with you about an aspect of the Church's mission that is very close to my heart. I have dedicated a great deal of my life as a priest to working in the field of vocations, and I have experienced this task as a source of grace and great encouragement. I will limit myself to presenting the theme in three parts -- each giving me the opportunity to underscore some points which in my view are fundamental for the creation of a vocational culture within the Hispanic Catholic communities of the United States.

First, I will discuss the cultural and ecclesial contexts which affect the faith and life of our youth. Second, I will focus on certain strategies and opportunities relevant to the promotion of a vocational culture. Finally, if time allows, I will concentrate my reflections on the actual path that leads young men through the seminary today.

PART I: CULTURAL AND ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

Dominant Culture and the Church

The proper environment for a vocation is one of evangelical charity, inspiring a person to serve the Lord and his people with generosity of life. This generosity arises from an intimate relation with Jesus Christ in an authentically ecclesial context. What affects the vitality of this atmosphere at the level of the local church affects the efficacy of the Church's efforts directed toward the promotion of vocations. Consequently, the vitality of the local church has everything to do with the quality of the efforts and the abundance of the fruits which can be achieved in the area of vocations.

It is often said that the Church in the United States is experiencing a vocations crisis. I do not believe this is the case. Rather, I think that the problem is one of much greater scope: the Church of the United States, similar to the Church of Western Europe, is experiencing a crisis of charity, using this word in its deepest New Testament sense. Let me explain briefly.

Jesus invites us to journey with Him toward the future armed with the help of that Spirit of love which desires to surrender itself with generosity and sacrifice. Only the one who desires to lose his life will be able to find it. The majority of people in the United States say that they believe in Jesus, yet for various reasons, many doubt how faith in Him truly is, at the same time, a path toward true happiness. The problem weakening the dominant culture, and which in turn affects the Church's life, is the lack of awareness of and confidence in Christ's promise. Do we trust that if we give our loyalty and commitment to Christ that He himself will show us the way toward abundant life?

The doubt of many manifests itself in a certain lukewarm attitude in the face of the great problems of our times: apathy in regard to the struggle to defend and promote the dignity of life, indifference in the face of the seductions of egoism, exaggerated worry about how to attain a more comfortable life, or have more enjoyable experiences. Many entertain the subtle temptation to focus their daily attention almost exclusively on worldly concerns.

No program or office exists at the diocesan chancery that can remedy this problem by itself. The only hope for the Church is to preach the Gospel with clarity, so that the grace of Jesus Christ can resonate with new force in our times. The only remedy for human beings is to encounter the person of Jesus in a personal and effective way, and to follow his call to evangelical charity. Only the Holy Spirit can revive the fire of divine love perfectly expressed in the sacrifice of the Lord; only the Spirit can inspire us to *understand* love and to live in the new space created by that blood poured out upon the world from the wounded side of the Lord. In other words, only the Spirit of the Lord can awaken and call us to participate in a lively and active way in the dynamism of love found in the space created around Christ's altar.

Active participation in the Mass implies something much more profound than knowing the responses or singing in a loud voice. To actively participate means entering into the logic of the cross, the wisdom of Christ. In that cross and wisdom, in Him, we find the beauty of *commitment*, of *fidelity* and of *generosity* of soul. This participation is opposed to a certain worldly logic where commitment inspires fear, where fidelity is experienced more as a joke, and generosity is practiced solely in order to receive some advantage in return.

To talk to a young person about the priesthood does not make sense if he has not *entered*, at least a little, into the logic of Jesus Christ. Neither can a couple appreciate very well what it means to live the sacrament of matrimony if they have not *entered into* the manner and meaning of Christ's life. The difficulty we find in attracting vocations to the priesthood in contemporary U.S. culture is the same difficulty we find in preparing couples for matrimony: If the next generation does not understand or experience something of the generosity, the fidelity and commitment of Christ in their lives, the language we use to talk about a vocation to the priesthood, religious life or to the sacrament of matrimony does not get much beyond their ears.

The encounter with Christ's love comes to us by means of the family and the Church. This is how the Lord has desired it; and that is why creating a context that makes the language of Christian vocation understandable

relates directly to the vitality of family life and the life of the local church. Initially, teaching by word and example from the earliest stages of life about how beauty and happiness are found in generosity, commitment and fidelity, comes through the family experience. The spirit of sacrifice and generosity of parents toward their children and brothers and sisters toward their siblings -- all this has to do with how the Christian logic is inculcated in our youth. The quality of Christian life manifested in the local church has to do with this same reality. Devotion and service experienced in the environment of the Christian community promotes in our youth a real maturation in the capacity to understand the language of vocation, and thus in the ability make decisions about how best to serve the Lord.

For this reason, speaking specifically about priestly vocations in the Hispanic communities of the United States, we need to direct our attention to the particular conditions which affect family and ecclesial life of our communities.

The Cultural Context of Our Youth

First, we must recognize the particular environment affecting our Hispanic youth. To this purpose I concentrate now on the tension experienced by our youth between family culture and the dominant culture.

Our youth possess a marvelous capacity for adaptation. In the lives of young people who feel more or less out of place within the dominant culture, this capacity is manifested in a strong and particular way. Hispanic youth today are living on the frontiers of adaptation and at the same time on the *frontier of new cultures*. Sometimes, even unconsciously, they are contributing to the development of new forms of cultural life. The adaptation takes an almost infinite variety of forms, depending on the specific conditions experienced in the daily life of families of Hispanic heritage.

Admitting this, we realize that the strong values of the Hispanic Catholic family and culture in the U.S. are communicated or transmitted with varied degrees of effectiveness, depending on particular circumstances. Sometimes, for instance, the economic conditions of the family do not allow for the development of an authentic family life. The parents work, and

youngsters go to school or they stay with neighbors. This profoundly affects the transmission of the goods of family life. Further, transmission is significantly impacted if the family lives in a *barrio* with families of similar cultural roots. Many families that raise children around parishes in southwest Detroit, for example, live in a context strongly marked by customs, language and a sense of humor one would find in the towns of Jalisco, in Mexico.

This reality follows a path already trod by immigrants from many nations in the history of the United States. Families which establish themselves in the United States, arriving from other countries, are looking for a particular life with other families whose roots are similar. To this very day families who have recently arrived from Albania, Vietnam or Iraq seek to create culturally familiar neighborhoods for raising their families. This has to do with a strong and profound impulse in human beings, a desire to look for ways to provide the best familiar environment for the formation and education of children. We also know well, however, that a first generation family, with children from the second generation, will struggle mightily if they find themselves isolated from other families of similar culture. In such situations the family will have great difficulty transmitting cultural identity and family sensibilities to their children.

Many of our youth take with them a strong cultural foundation and formation, a formation they received at home. In many cases, at home, young people maintain the use of the parents' language; the children feel comfortable with the rhythm of life and values which their parents received from previous generations in the land of their birth. These children are sometimes profoundly marked with customs which flourish in their grandparents' native towns.

Nevertheless, families and communities are rapidly changing. The currents of modern American culture change the dynamic and the context of Hispanic cultural development. The children of Mexican families in some parishes in southwest Detroit enjoy visiting as a family the town of their grandparents in Jalisco. But, very soon, these second generation children note that it is not *their own* atmosphere or environment.

Thus, one cannot take for granted that a young person of 14 born in the United States of parents who established themselves here a little before the birth of their children, will spontaneously identify with the cultural world of the parents, or with the values transmitted by their family culture. But neither is it obvious that this same young person is going to feel comfortable in the youth group where he presents himself as the only Hispanic, or one among a very few. Frequently, the young Hispanic feels somewhat out of place in a North American cultural environment. For this reason it is elemental to our efforts to try to discern in particular cases how strong the sources of Hispanic cultures are in our youth groups. We do this *for the purpose of helping them create for themselves a comfortable space.*

We should take note also that we are living at a time when bridges are being created between the diverse Hispanic cultures themselves. In Detroit, for example, one can find at the same Mass on Sunday a family from Jalisco sharing the pew with families from Guatemala, Puerto Rico, and Columbia. This occurs spontaneously. In ten years we may see the daughter of a family from Jalisco engaged to the son of a Puerto Rican family. We do not know how Christian sensibilities are going to be transmitted when the children born of this Puerto Rican and Jalisco union find themselves in school with third generation children of Albanian or Chaldean/Iraqi culture. What must be noted, then, is that something new is being created in the United States -- a *mestizaje* -- first of cultures and later of blood. The forms this future life will take cannot be described with clarity before hand. I say this in order to emphasize that Christian culture with its values integrally associated with faith, depends on the mode of transmission which in turn depends on familial culture.

Traditional values like hospitality, respect owed to elders, the significance of giving one's word, the importance of the historical memory of families -- all this is mingled with attitudes prevailing in the U.S. cultural environment. These attitudes are often different from, or even antagonistic to Hispanic family perspectives. The dangers and opportunities offered to our youth by the dominant culture come in great variety. What commitment, happiness, and the good life mean, and what sex is all about, take new paths when the Hispanic child goes out to encounter the values of the dominant culture of the United States.

It is our task to attempt to detect the particularities of life affecting young people in our parishes, how life is being lived, and how the specific elements of life influence them. We must notice the changes that rapidly affect the dispositions of young people in their understanding of life lived as a Christian in the world. Let us pay attention to this in order to be able to adapt our pastoral strategies to the actual lives that our families and youth are leading.

PART II: STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Before spending some time on strategic and pastoral suggestions regarding the Church's mission to youth, I want to take note first of the role played by parents in the religious dynamic of their children. The moment of religious crisis in the life of an immigrant family occurs within the first years of their arrival to the United States. If parents do not find ways to link themselves to the life of the Catholic Church in their new country, with time they adapt to a secular way of living, and establish family customs and a community orientation that lacks religious content. Or, what is more common, they open themselves to the insistent invitations from evangelical Christian communities. I take it as an almost universal norm that the children of a recently arrived immigrant family learn their orientation to the Church from their parents. For this reason, and many others, the Church's mission towards the first generation, where the use of Spanish dominates, demands a great deal of attention. If parents do not find a link with the church in their own language, they are not going to be able to transmit an appreciation of their religion to their children. In this sense we lose the second generation, which is more or less bilingual, if we do not attend to the first generation, who in the majority of cases (and with just and good reason) desires to hear the Gospel preached in Spanish. Youth are not going to attend the youth groups if the parents never incorporated themselves in the life of the church.

The New Context of Latin American Spirituality

Parents and grandparents of our youth preserve a memory of what the peoples' devotions mean in ordinary life. But this memory is not transmitted or unfolded in the same way, or as profoundly, in the super-secularized context of the United States. For this reason it seems to me

necessary to integrate into our catechesis teaching about the history of Guadalupe, or the story of the Black Christ (*El Cristo Negro*) of Guatemala, or the Virgin of Divine Providence of Puerto Rico, etc. Catechesis does not consist, though, of providing only facts and information. It has to do with communicating the lived meaning of doctrine. This can happen, for instance, when understanding together with love is expressed through the parish *fiesta*. To this end we have to teach to the next generation the deeper meaning of what we celebrate through our processions, and celebrations (*convivencia*), through our singing and eating together.

In touching upon this point I want to propose something to you that is not well noted in the literature about popular Latin American devotions. Devotion to a the Virgin, to the Child Jesus or to the crucified Christ, processions with the Blessed Sacrament -- in a word, all the traditional forms which express the religious sentiments of the faithful in our cultures -- all of them have to do with maintaining alive a concrete contact with the reality of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God. When all is said and done, this is the central mystery of the Catholic faith, and we ought to fight with all our strength so that the community maintains its realistic focus on this mystery. In my view, if there is a predominate temptation for the dominant culture of the Church in the United States it is to reduce Jesus to an abstract idea, stripping Him of his flesh and blood. Hispanic youth come to the United States deeply and realistically convinced that God became man. If we fail to communicate the deep meaning of popular traditions, in time our young people lose this realism, and the person of Jesus Christ is reduced in their conscious awareness.

Taking into account, however, the new and fluid context of the cultural frontier, we cannot forget that a great part of our effort consists in finding how to translate the experience and the meaning of popular devotion. I use the word translate in two related senses. It is necessary to translate literally the devotional experience into English because in time English takes on more importance in the life of our young people. They themselves are trying to translate into English the experiences that they have had in Spanish, whether they be family or church experiences. This step implies something more profound: they themselves are trying to translate the

meaning of the family and church experiences and relate this meaning to the world that they experience *beyond* at school and in the world of work.

If, in the minds of our youth, devotion in the Hispanic traditions is identified exclusively with the Spanish language, that devotion will hold in their minds exactly the same place that the language holds. This sometimes implies a broad and profound place, but in many cases it implies a place which in time becomes more and more relegated to memory.

We should anticipate that after having gained a comfortable space for themselves, establishing roots in a neighborhood of similar cultures, eventually Hispanic families are going to move away from that place. They move to better locations with better housing, schools, etc. This has happened in every wave of immigration in the United States during the course of history. Everyone looks for a better life for their children. This implies eventual participation in the church life of suburban communities. I know many current families who live in the suburbs, but on Sunday return to the city to participate in the parish life in the Mexican neighborhoods. They want to maintain connection to the culture, devotion, and way of living which these communities manifest with such energy. I also realized, however, that with time the youth of these families will feel more inclined to participate in churches where their school companions participate. With time, perhaps after one generation or two, the youth identify themselves more with life outside the *barrio*.

For this reason I say that part of our effort must consist in translating the traditions and devotions into the context of these new surroundings, so that the second and third generations can understand and share what these traditions contain. It is they, these new generations, that are going to be bearers of the faith, thereby extending the borders of the cultural frontier. In the end, our teaching about the richness of particular traditions within the Hispanic communities helps youth create something new for the future. The more they understand this value the more they will be able to integrate it into the life they themselves are creating and sharing.

I do not want you to misunderstand me; I myself insist on the importance of maintaining alive the use and study of Spanish in our communities. We ought to be able to promote a strong bilingualism in this new frontier of Hispanic culture. But, really, the popular Catholic traditions deserve a translation of high quality, so that their riches can be extended to the context where English predominates. It seems to me that sharing the profound realism of the Incarnation of the Son of God forms part of the providential mission of our Hispanic communities toward the Catholic communities already established in the United States.

Community and Its Importance

Every human being looks for community. Community is the always desired door for humanly sharing the goods of life: to know and to be known, to love and to be loved, are the basic desires of human beings. When someone does not find community in the family, in the *barrio*, in the parish or school, he or she will look for it in other places. The search for community cannot be suppressed, it can only be directed. It can be directed toward authentic expressions, or it can be directed towards malformed ones. Strong parish-based youth groups find their totally opposite image in drug-infested gangs.

Precisely in the cultural context I have called “the cultural frontier,” we have a tremendous opportunity to have an effective impact upon our youth. I consider this an opportunity because youth in Hispanic communities still maintain a great respect towards the church and see her as a community of trust. Our Hispanic youth are looking for contexts that further their steps toward maturity and adult participation in the world. They feel the need to *belong* to a community of trust, and they feel it more urgently than youth fully integrated into the dominant culture. In a word, I believe that youth living in the cultural frontier are more disposed to respond to the Church’s invitation to experience authentic community in the form of a youth group.

Forming Youth Groups

The steps required in the process of forming youth groups coincide with the development toward maturity. Youth arrive at the church’s door seeking how to belong, feeling initially that the church can provide a

context where one feels at home, and where one can take the first steps toward the outside world. This has to do with having a secure environment to exercise and grow in confidence in a world which presents itself as huge and formidable.

It is precisely in the context of activities and groups that involve our youth that we ought to try to create the culture of vocation. This is where the language of evangelical charity ought to predominate. Vocations do not blossom from nothing. They are born from a lively environment in which the church shows itself totally committed to everything that affects the life of youth.

This, then, is where catechetical formation comes to the forefront. Catechesis is not limited to formal classes but rather extends itself to the experience of prayer and service. Our instruction begins from the age of First Communion. I believe that the spirituality of vocation is born in what we learn in the moments of our First Holy Communion: to *recognize* that Jesus is present, to *direct* our attention toward Him, to *give* Him a space where he can cast his gaze toward us. We find the source of everything that has to do with the mature life of Christ, in effect, the Christian vocation, in this experience of Jesus' looking at us. Children have a marvelous capacity to experience this profound reality.

In the majority of cases the main attention of the parish in what concerns youth centers on those who have arrived at the age of adolescence between 15 and 18. This emphasis has its reasons. Nevertheless, we ought to give special attention to children from age 10 to 14. It seems to me particularly important to offer 10 to 14 year olds a space to experience group activities of prayer and of service in situations that are appropriate for them. They see those who are smaller and they think "we are not children;" and they look at those who belong to the youth groups and they think "we're not yet big like they are." Precisely to help them maintain their relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist, and to benefit from activities with others of their same age, I think that special attention should be given to this age group. The formation of such groups helps deepen the roots of faith and charity in these youth. If they arrive at the age of 14 without having experienced something of the taste of personal prayer and

something of cooperation among companions in the service of others, they are heading away from the path of a vocational environment.

One of the fiercest enemies of evangelical charity is cynicism. It blossoms, for example, in the heart of an 11 year old youth when he or she experiences for the first time, and many other times, that our hopes for life can be disappointed. Youth at this age need help to understand the pattern of life in terms of the interplay between hope and disappointment. There is no doubt that young people of immigrant families experience the back and forth between hope and disappointment very powerfully. Certainly the parents are the first ones responsible to guide their children through these dangerous steps, offering them examples of Christian attitudes in the face of disillusionment. As G.K. Chesterton the great English writer once said, "We are neither optimists nor pessimists; we are Christians, that is, *realists with hope.*" In a well planned way the parish can provide a broader context for grasping a Christian vision of life, and thus help avoid cynicism.

It seems important here to discuss the Sacrament of Confirmation and its vital relationship to the reality of vocations. This has to do with sharing with youth a simple and profound truth: baptism *inserts* the person in the wounded side of Christ crucified, from which is born our new relation with God. Confirmation, in turn, deepens the identity of a Christian with Christ in order to *go forth* with Christ to the work of sanctifying the world. To go forth with Christ, as always, implies going forth in an ecclesial context and with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit comes with power at Confirmation to equip the Christian for the struggle in the world. This struggle takes various forms, principally the matrimonial, religious and priestly forms. I'm afraid that our parochial catechesis on Confirmation has not reached the point of integrating the reality of the sacrament with the practical task of informing youth about the importance of acknowledging the call of Christ as a call to *a life*. If we do not integrate the reality of the sacrament of the Holy Spirit's power into the talks and activities of the youth groups, we will always be talking with youth who are breathing the air of the age (*el aire del siglo*), and consequently thinking about maturity in terms of a professional career. In reality, Christian maturity has to do with decisions about one's vocation, about the *how* and the *with whom* of my going forth into the world as a Christian imbued with the Holy Spirit.

Specifically in the context of experiencing the grace of the Holy Spirit as the grace calling us to serve with Christ, we have an opportunity to help youth between the ages of 14 and 19 to taste the truth of their faith. The Lord says that, "There is no greater love than this: to give up one's life for one's friends." Youth can understand what friendship means. Christian happiness consists in living this surrender, this daily self-donation, in an environment of friendship. The age of adolescence is the most propitious time for making explicit the links between the catechesis about Jesus' love with the experience of prayer and service of the poor, those who suffer and experience the greatest needs. Youth groups, in my view, exist for this purpose: *To provide a community and social context to experience the joy of prayer, of the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and of service to others.* These experiences constitute the foundation of the mature elements needed for the contemplation of a Christian vocation. It seems to me that we have many youth groups that are very strong, but yet we have not arrived at the point of recognizing how they are the principal communities where we can talk openly about the greatness of married life, the religious life and the priestly life. This is where the language of vocation should be taught and understood.

Silence, The Gospel, The Blessed Sacrament

The dominant culture which presents itself to our youth does not tolerate silence. It is the culture of the screen and of the speaker system. Hispanic cultures like all other cultures imbued with the Catholic spirit, appreciate the silence and the respect owed to the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. (Perhaps some of you have nocturnal adoration in your parishes.) This respect and appreciation cannot be sustained in the current cultural environment if we do not consciously try to teach about it. It is necessary, for example, to maintain and extend the opportunities for our youth to learn the practice of silent meditation nurtured with the Gospel text, and directed to the encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. In a world as noisy as ours, youth seek from us a solid teaching about how to speak with Jesus, how to listen to His voice, and how to discern His presence. That is why I consider so important the practical teaching about how to read the Gospel, how to meditate and benefit from moments of silence before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, how to adore - all this I consider indispensable for the

catechetical formation of adolescents in preparation for Confirmation and for activities of the youth groups. *Without personal contact with the voice of Jesus there is no Christian vocation of any kind.*

The Movements

I want to point out an ecclesial reality that is very helpful in this area. We could speak of it in terms of “the Movements”. This reality embraces many spiritual and service groups who frequently pursue an extra-parochial life. I do not say extra-ecclesial life, because these groups are born in the heart of the local church through the efforts of laity who belong to and participate in parish life. But, insofar as they dedicate themselves to the Charismatic Renewal, for example, or to the Cursillo or to Marriage Encounter, they dedicate themselves to laboring beyond the parish. They exist with a certain fluidity, and with an astounding capacity for adaptation to local conditions. Many of our laity most committed to the mission of the Church are dedicated to the spirituality of these movements. Many youth receive their orientation towards the Church from their parents’ commitment to these movements. In Detroit the Charismatic Movement, *Jornadas*, *Barrios Unidos* and others, exist, thanks to the efforts of many people who have received their Catholic formation in Mexico, Guatemala or Honduras. Precisely by means of these movements they bring what they have received, sow it on new soil and try to guide the growth of a living adaptation. We have to admit that in many places the movements are facilitating an ecclesial and cultural environment which attracts the attention of our youth.

The movements directed toward our youth groups have strongly established themselves in various contexts of ecclesial life in the United States. It is fundamental that we priests support these efforts by dedicating attention and time to the formation of leaders within these groups.

The challenge consists in trying to integrate and guide the movements without diluting, or worse, suppressing their particular strengths and charisms. To integrate means first of all to create lines of communication and interchange between the clergy of the local church and the groups and movements. Sometimes there exists distrust between the pastors or parish leadership, and the leaders of these groups, for the simple reason that the

latter sometimes embrace an environment which goes beyond parochial life. These groups in turn sometimes consider themselves not well appreciated by those who work in the parish context.

I would say that the focus of our efforts to promote a spirit of cooperation and integration should be directed toward the communion of the whole church around the altar. In this sense every movement tends towards ecclesial, diocesan, and parish life. The movement finds its force and its end in the sacrifice of Christ, while parish life derives vitality from the presence of these movements.

PART III: TODAY'S PATH TO THE SEMINARY

How to Begin Talking About the Topic

Everything I have said has to do with the vitality of the local church, with our gaze focused specifically on the life of youth. The ecclesial environment ought to cultivate the idea that a Christian does not choose between a career and a vocation, but he or she chooses among various vocations. Certainly a youth of 23 contemplating entering the seminary frequently considers the option comparing it to the career of doctor or engineer. But in reality the comparison is not adequate. The priestly or religious vocation is to be compared first of all to matrimony. The discernment process is formulated in the question: *How do I want to commit myself to the task of being Jesus' disciple in the world?* The majority choose the path that leads toward married life. And this, I want to emphasize, makes sense as a vocation only in the context of a Christian commitment to fidelity and generosity -- the same Christian context which gives meaning to the priestly and religious life. I'm afraid we often lose the catechetical opportunity to point out this relation. Perhaps we find it difficult to explain to the modern world the meaning of our commitment to celibacy. In any event, we ought to deepen our teaching about the grace of celibacy as a way of living in imitation of Jesus, and as a testimony to our faith in the resurrection of the body.

The importance of the witness and example of real priests in this regard is crucial. If a priest is not convinced of the supreme importance of his ministry and the value of his evangelical style of life, his way of being will

not communicate an invitation for youth to consider the option of priesthood or the religious life. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to establish the habit by means of which youth and priests can enter into a particular discussion about the priestly or religious life. I think it is important that priests frequently visit youth groups of every type and of all ages in order to establish the context for this conversation. The lay leaders of these groups are very capable, but the priest should be present in order to communicate the Church's concern for youth and to invite the question of vocations.

Applying to the Seminary

Diocesan vocation offices certainly need to invest time and money in order to cultivate priestly vocations in Hispanic communities. Nevertheless, with a lot of good will, those responsible for these offices sometimes do not always know how or where to enter into the life of the youth groups in our largely Hispanic parishes. In these cases the Spanish-speaking parish priests ought to give advice and help to the vocation directors so that they may know the actual situation of the families of the youth and of the youth groups. At the same time vocation directors ought to ask advice from the leaders committed to the mission of youth ministry at the parish level.

Here we should note the difficulty that is sometimes presented to a young person encountering the structure of the dioceses or of a religious community. In many cases it is not easy for our youth to get through the door of the diocesan office. This does not happen because they are prohibited from going in, but because they do not feel at ease in doing so. For a young person at home in a large Hispanic parish, going into a diocesan office is a difficult step out, toward the public world of North American culture. If the vocation offices do not have persons working in the office who can attend to a Spanish-speaking youth in a way that puts him at ease, they ought to look for someone who can, in order to remedy the situation. At the same time it falls on us, Hispanic priests, to guide youth during the process of encountering the diocese, making application, taking the physical and psychological exams, and so forth. Many can become discouraged because they do not have anyone who can really help them during this process.

In the United States we have achieved a marvelously well-organized church administration. The American genius includes knowing how to organize and administer, and it gives great value to the typed page as the principle instrument for moving things along. This is reflected in the very process by which we apply and enter a seminary. But Latin American cultures maintain a strong focus on the primacy of the word spoken by persons of trust. I do not think that the challenge of this difference consists of having to choose between one focus and another, rather it consists in understanding and knowing how to manage one approach without dismissing the importance of the other. We priests who are familiar with Hispanic youth need to help young persons work through the system; we can do so precisely because of our positions as persons of trust.

Today we are confronting the anomalous situation of the immigration laws of the United States. (This situation has lasted so long that it almost presents itself as something normal.) If a young man presents himself as a student for the seminary, and if he is here without the documents required by the government, the church finds itself in a difficult situation. The response to these situations by the Church in U.S. dioceses has been as varied as the local conditions affecting the circumstances. I do not wish to say much about this, in order not to prejudice the progress that many are making, but it is worth noting that remedies to immigration problems do exist, and *it seems to me the responsibility of vocation offices to share among themselves at a national level the measures that have led to positive results*. This presupposes a great deal of cooperation between the vocations offices in dioceses and the offices of Hispanic and immigration affairs.

I would add that religious communities have adapted to this reality more rapidly. They enjoy some flexibility in terms of formation and education, especially when it is a community with houses in other countries.

Life in the Seminary

To enter the seminary in any culture is an experience that requires preparation. My years of work as director of vocations have confirmed me in the notion that many enter the seminary with good will but without having received an appropriate preparation for understanding the

experience, for surviving it from the very beginning, and for putting down the necessary roots to attain the desired results. For all the more reason do we need to be concerned about a young man with a strong Hispanic cultural identity who enters the seminary feeling himself a stranger to the dominant culture of the ecclesiastical institution. While the response of the seminaries in the United States to this reality has improved, the participation of Spanish-speaking priests who have roots in the culture is vital. Identifying such priests to serve on formation teams, or in spiritual direction, or as theology professors continues to be a priority for the future of the Church in the United States. Participation by such priests in seminary formation helps the seminarian cultivate the process of internal translation, a process that each Hispanic seminarian has to elaborate as he works through his personal appropriation of vocation, formation and mission.

I will end my reflections by touching on this point: One of the greatest riches of our Latin American cultures is their facility for initiating and cultivating personal contact and trust -- knowing how to walk together with other people. Among us this strength can manifest itself in forms both high and noble. This contact with and personal concern for people has much to do with what our Catholic culture has transmitted to us about the significance of evangelical charity manifested in the person of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I know that priests have a lot of work; I know that there is not enough time for everything. But if we lose personal contact with our youth groups, with movements, and with seminarians, we lose something that is essential to priestly life, to the life of the Gospel, to evangelical life, and to our culture as well. I want you to appreciate how this *way of living* the pastoral life is one of the highest contributions of our cultures to the ecclesial life of the United States.

Thank you for your kind attention.