

Entre Amigos – Opinion/Commentary

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Send, oh Lord, workers to your vineyard

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

-- Pssst. Hey, you! Yes, you. Have you ever wondered whether God is calling you to the priesthood or the religious life?

-- Nah, that's not for me.

-- In that, you are right. Being a priest or a sister is about being for others.

-- I'm not sure I understand.

-- Come and see...

Would you accept such invitation? A group of fishermen did many, many years ago. As did Lazarus' sisters, Martha and Maria, and Mary of Magdala; Augustine and Francis of Assisi, Teresa of Avila and Rose of Lima; Teresa of Calcutta and Damien of Molokai; Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger; my hometown parish priest and the little sister taking care of the elderly at the nursing home; a young woman lawyer, and an architect with a promising future; an Internet wiz, and a strawberry and grape picker from California.

The Lord sets his shore wherever He pleases, and from it He continues to call men and women of today to follow him in a radical way, with total self-giving, to feed his sheep by preaching the Good News in word and deed.

The Lord invites, yes, but it takes a village to “promote and nurture” vocations. In his message for the recent World Day of Prayer for Vocations, Pope Benedict XVI said: “Particularly in these times, when the voice of the Lord seems to be drowned out by ‘other voices’ and his invitation to follow him by the gift of one’s own life may seem too difficult, every Christian community, every member of the Church, needs consciously to feel responsibility for promoting vocations. It is important to encourage and support those who show clear signs of a call to priestly life and religious consecration, and to enable them to feel the warmth of the whole community as they respond ‘yes’ to God and the Church.”

This plea has especial urgency for the U.S. Hispanic community of today.

The annual survey of “ordinands” (men about to be ordained priests) — commissioned yearly by the U.S. bishops’ Secretariat for Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the and conducted by CARA — shows that even though vocations to the priesthood in the Latino community have

grown overtime, they are not keeping pace with the total share of the Hispanic Catholic population in the country.

If we want to address this reality, we must strive to understand the true causes of depressed vocations in the Hispanic community; to look beyond the traditional clichés and examine the apparent and as well as the hidden causes, which are not as easy to see but often have a great deal of influence. Ignorance of the latter, particularly, hampers seminaries and religious orders' ability to reach out effectively to this community.

For example, immigration status may be a problem in some cases; but we sin of lack of imagination and missionary zeal if we keep ignoring the fact that over 50 percent of U.S. Catholics under the age of 18 are Latino, and the vast majority of them were born in this country. Our pastoral work with Hispanic adolescents is at light-years' distance from the efforts that we've put in reaching out Hispanic young adults. At this critical age to pose our young Latinos questions about vocation, who is paying attention to their needs and worries? Who knows what's attractive to them or how their family situation affects the choices they made? Who is out there trying to instill in them the ideal and noble call of service in front of a world that constantly invites them to personal success, hedonism and distraction?

Vocations offices and U.S. seminaries seem to have failed so far in reaching out to Hispanic families. Some just didn't know how, in other cases the avoidance has seemed intentional. Either way, it is a luxury we can no longer afford. Vocations directors must make themselves present to the Hispanic families, get to know us, share our table. They must make an effort to understand our kids' realities and plan for a vocations' outreach that speaks to them.

A pastoral vocacional (vocations outreach) is needed that *appreciates, nurtures* and is able to *retain* Hispanic vocations. Seminaries that project openness to diversity in their ranks and seem to understand the impact of culture in the formation process may be especially helpful in the always difficult task of retaining vocations. Also, to the community oriented Latino man the perspective of a "lonely priest" may be an important draw back. Latinos emphasize service and community as well as prayer and learning. Thus, a connected priest who is relational while celibate is a much healthier and attractive perspective.

Of course, none of those efforts will bear much fruit unless first, in the family and in the parish community, we clearly send the message to our young people (and to those not so young who may discover a late vocation) that a vocation to the priesthood and the consecrated life is something desirable, appreciated and highly respected among us. Unfortunately, sometimes we parents are the main roadblock between our kids and a religious vocation. We think the seminary and the convent are great, for the neighbors' kids...

The ideas keep flowing but I've run out of space.

Send, oh Lord, workers to your vineyard. Grant us the creativity and holy imagination to be able to identify, encourage and support all those in our midst to whom you have given a priestly or religious vocation.

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