

Sharing the Experience of a Mexican American Bishop
Most Rev. Ricardo Ramírez, C.S.B.
Bishop of Las Cruces

Thank you, Bishop Vann, for inviting me to address the priests of the Diocese of Ft. Worth. Over the years, the Diocese of Las Cruces has had an excellent relationship with the Diocese of Ft. Worth. Bishop Delaney and I served together on a couple of committees with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Your diocese has invited me to speak on various occasions. Sister Donna Ferguson has been very helpful as a consultant to our vocations office. We think of your diocese as an elder sister to ours and when we have had questions, especially regarding policy and administration, we have often contacted your diocesan offices to see how you do things. You have the reputation of establishing policies in order to avoid problems, in other words, you have followed the dictum that says “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”

You have asked me to speak about myself as a Mexican American diocesan bishop. Most of the things that I have experienced in the past 23 ½ years as a bishop are things that any American bishop would experience. What might be different in my experience is that I am the founding bishop of a diocese, established in 1982. New Mexico, like Texas, has to deal with racial and cultural biases, something we are discovering to be rampant throughout the United States, as evidenced in the current debates surrounding the issue of immigration.

As a Mexican American bishop I have personally experienced relatively little bias. The Hispanic community has always welcomed me with a sense of pride, which is understandable. The non-Hispanic groups, including the Mescalero Apaches and the “Anglo” Catholic communities, have accepted me as their shepherd, and I sense their respect.

As a Mexican American I have certain advantages, especially having had a lifetime experience of moving in and out of either the Mexican or the American culture. One of the most important assets to me has been my ability to speak both languages and to have been a student of both American and Mexican history. Even though New Mexico is not Texas, my Bay City, Texas, birthplace and childhood prepared me well to serve in a Mexican American milieu. Bay City is located where the Deep South ends and the U.S. Southwest begins. My first accents were Tejano-Spanish or Tex-Mex and the Texas drawl.

When I finished my undergraduate degree at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, I joined the Congregation of St. Basil, a predominantly Euro-American religious community of teacher priests. At the time the congregation was composed of approximately 400 members, and there were only three other Hispanics in it. It was during my first years with the order that the American Anglo influence was the strongest in my life, so much so that I was inclined to deny my Mexican-American roots. I felt that my calling was to teach American history in predominantly Anglo high schools for boys preferably in Michigan.

After being assigned for a summer in Mexico, I discovered my Mexican roots and became very proud of them, yet I looked down on my Mexican American background as something inferior to what was really Mexican, the culture south of the Rio Grande. That summer led to my Mexican adventure, because shortly after that summer, I was to spend ten years both studying and working in Mexico. My mission work took me to many dioceses throughout the Republic of Mexico. In my quest for this Mexican identity, it was necessary that I learn a Spanish other than the Tex-Mex that I had grown up with. It was not easy, but later when people asked me what part of Mexico I was from, I took it as a compliment, and I would ask them to guess, and their guess was Veracruz, that is noted for its unique humor.

When I went to San Antonio in 1976, it was my desire to contribute to Hispanic ministry in the United States. It was at the Mexican American Cultural Center (MACC) that I finally learned to appreciate my Mexican and American heritage. It was there that I learned to appreciate the sometimes painful history of the Mexican American, especially in the southwest. I also learned to appreciate other things about our culture, such as Tejano music, Chicano literature including theater, poetry, the visual arts, and novels, Tex-Mex cuisine, and the Tex-Mex language itself. It was at MACC that I had this exciting rediscovery of my true roots as a Mexican American from south Texas. It was a joyful experience, and I truly believe a moment of grace.

At the national level, it is not difficult for a bishop of any cultural group to be accepted wholeheartedly into the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. I

believe that all of us bishops enjoy a genuine camaraderie at Conference meetings. We may not agree with certain individuals on certain issues, but somehow there is so much that we share in common that we bond easily. It is in committees such as those I serve with Bishop Delaney where we get to know other bishops. Furthermore, the bishops of our Rocky Mountain Region, extended from Wyoming to the Mexican border, form a Jesus Caritas fraternity, which we have maintained for almost 25 years.

You have also asked me to speak about the greatest needs of the various cultural groups in our area: Mexican immigrants, Mexican Americans, Anglos, and others. Each of these groups could easily be subdivided into more subgroups. For example, when we speak of Mexican immigrants, we can refer to those who may be either documented or undocumented; those who are well educated and others with little education. We can refer to immigrant families as opposed to single persons who come here to work. We can refer to immigrants who have come from large urban areas such as Mexico City and those who have come from rural or Indian areas. Because of these differences, the needs will vary. I think it is important to understand that most of these immigrants have been uprooted from villages that have a strong value system and traditional ways. When these come to the United States, they are suffering from a loss of their cultural and religious support systems.

One of the places where they often find a connection with what they left behind is the Catholic Church and especially when they see the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe and hear some of the traditional religious hymns from their background.

Let me cite an example of this. The man in charge of Catholic Social Ministry in our diocese is Carlos Corral. He was born in a tiny *ranchería* in northern Chihuahua, Mexico. When the family left Chihuahua to seek a better life in the United States, Carlos was a young boy. His Catholic faith had come to him especially through his grandmother's influence back in Chihuahua, and when the family left, he thought that they were leaving God behind. He was sad that God would not be with him in this new land. Then his mother took him to a church in New Mexico, and he heard a hymn to the Blessed Virgin that he had heard back home. From then on he breathed easier, for God was in the United States too.

Immigrants are highly motivated and their children learn English very quickly. In addition to this, they are also very family-centered and have a deep appreciation of work. The Mexican that is arriving in our country is generally a person of deep faith. These are values that our country needs. They will be attracted to a church that respects their popular religion, such as devotions to saints and festivities that are celebrated during the liturgical or popular devotional calendar.

The needs of this group are many, beginning with material needs such as food, housing, jobs, and legal immigration services. I think that what they mostly need is a respectful acceptance from the receiving community. This is the biggest challenge for any parish, especially with those parishioners who might have strong anti-Mexican biases. Because of their linguistic limitations, they will require the patience of parish

personnel. In dioceses such as yours and mine, it is indispensable that practically every parish have bilingual personnel.

The Mexican American group is made up mainly of people whose families date back many years of presence in the United States. Some Mexican Americans in the southwest can trace their roots back to the time of the Mexican-American war. In northern New Mexico we have Hispanic peoples whose families have been there for 400 years. The Mexican American personality is unique and has a rich cultural treasure house.

Unfortunately, many Mexican Americans do not value their unique heritage as Mexican and American. Those of you who have been to MACC will recall that many Mexican Americans go through an identity crisis, and it may be a struggle for them to come to terms with their mixed identity. One of their needs is to be affirmed of their cultural background which is neither totally Mexican nor totally American. Yet, we pastors cannot insist that they identify themselves in any particular way. Our job as pastors is to meet them where they are and never impose on anyone a culture that they might not claim at this particular stage in their lives.

The theme of the blending of cultures, such as what has happened among Mexican Americans, has been the life-long reflection of Father Virgilio Elizondo, who now teaches at Notre Dame. His genius has been the phenomenon of *mezizaje*. This phenomenon is not only something static we study from a historical or sociological standpoint but something that is going on even now and will continue as

long as there are human beings on this earth. Father Elizondo argues well about the *mestisaje* that took place many centuries ago in Spain. There is no such thing, he says, and I agree, as a pure Spaniard because many cultures contributed to the Spanish culture, including its language and collective psyche. Among those who went to Spain over the centuries were the Romans, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Moors, Celts, Goths, Visigoths, Gypsies, and Jews. In fact, one of the most interesting periods is that of medieval Spain, where Christians, Jews, and Muslims enriched each other's culture including theology, philosophy, and other literary achievements. It was through Spain that the philosophy of Aristotle made its way to the University of Paris.

St. Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica* often refers to Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish scholar of all time, Averroës, the imminent Muslim philosopher, and Avicenna, one of the greatest names in Arabian-Iranian Muslim culture. Both St. Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus were profoundly influenced by the writings of Avicenna. The interesting thing about this period is that each of the three cultures, Muslim, Christian, and Jewish, not only got along but cross-fed one another at a profound level. Our Lady of Guadalupe may be a symbol of these three coming together again. The name Guadalupe happens to be Arabic. Her face is that of a Jewish woman, and she appears as the mother of Jesus Christ. For me, she is the symbol of the dream of unity that is our foremost yearning.

From a pastoral standpoint, there is a great need to evangelize the Mexican American because many of them, like many other groups, are “notional Catholics,”

that is, they are Catholics who have a notion about many things about the Catholic faith but cannot explain to you what exactly their belief is in such things as the Eucharist, devotion to Mary, and how the Church is organized.

The Mexican American community is plagued with persistent problems such as drugs, gangs, domestic violence, and dropouts from schools. There is also an extremely high incidence of teenage pregnancy, and connected with this, an astonishing number of single parents. I was speaking with a fourth grade public school teacher, and she was telling me that 75 percent of her class is from a single parent household. In addition to these problems, about 75 percent of the inmates in our jails and prisons are Mexicans or Mexican Americans. This is probably true in other parts of the southwest as well. The reasons for this high percentage of Hispanic inmates is due to lack of adequate legal representation and because our lawmakers may have over-criminalized drug-related offenses.

We have our work to do in bringing the recently arrived Mexicans with the established Mexican American community. I understand that this is similar to the relationship in the nineteenth century between the Irish who arrived first and those who came later. The tension between Mexicans and Mexican Americans can be seen in the present crisis over immigration reform. For us pastors, this tension affects our parishes, and we have to find ways to bring the two together.

We can begin to work at this in areas where there is common ground: the liturgy, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and moments of fiesta. At a deeper level

of conversation and parish retreats organized to promote dialogue and mutual understanding will help. It would be good to refer to John Paul II's *Ecclesia in America*, the Apostolic Exhortation promulgated after the Synod for America.

Regarding Anglos, we are also dealing with varieties. Some of these are children of first generation immigrants and may have come to Texas from areas in the United States that are very different from where they have landed. We have in the southwest a multi-cultural Church just among those we call Anglos. Those whose families have been in the area for generations will see their parish as something that belongs to them, and they will resist welcoming newcomers. There are still others in this group who happen to be very welcoming and recognize the reality of the new multi-cultural Church.

This group can be very articulate about matters of faith. One of the reasons is that many of this group have had the privilege of a Catholic education, and their children are generally the ones who, because of this Catholic education tradition, will send their children to Catholic schools. They will also be prominent in lay leadership positions in the parish. I find many Anglos with a strong social conscience. Among them it is somewhat easier to discern who is a more conservative Catholic and who is a more progressive kind.

The pastoral need among the Anglos newcomers is that someone reach out to them as they arrive. I heard once that one of the major reasons for Catholics dropping out of the church is because they moved geographically from one part of the country

to another, and when they arrived to their new places, they do not bother to find where the nearest church is.

All of a sudden we may be finding ourselves in the position of missionaries. We can probably all say this is not the Church that we grew up with nor the Church that we thought we were being ordained to serve. It is a unique time for us priests because we are finding that we have to shift gears and adapt to a rapidly changing situation in our parishes. It is healthy to admit our limitations, language or otherwise. There will be many things that we simply will not be able to do or even understand, but if we do our best, we have nothing to lament. Above all people want to be loved, and it is especially at a parish where they will either encounter love or sense some form of rejection. It is up to us to place the best foot of the Church forward and make it unmistakably clear whom we represent. The good shepherd who leads his flock with wisdom, love and strength.

The next section of my presentation is an enumeration of practical pastoral suggestions. Some of these apply not only to our Hispanic communities but across the board.

1. A good place to start is by creating or developing high-quality liturgies with good preaching and good music. Some excellent bilingual music is being composed at this time. I highly recommend that your liturgical music leaders attend the annual conferences on Hispanic liturgical music.

2. Hispanics must be included in every area of parish life, including parish pastoral and finance councils. Every effort must be made to develop parish leadership among Hispanics in order that they might develop their leadership skills.
3. Bilingualism or multilingualism, depending on the parish, need to be practiced as needed. Some might object to having more than one language in the liturgy. I often remind people that even before Vatican II we had in the Mass the *Kyrie Eleison* (Greek), the alleluia and amen (Hebrew), *dominus vobiscum* (Latin), and the sermon would have been preached in English.
4. Pilgrimages to Mexican shrines can be a good way for people to be affirmed in their backgrounds. The non-Mexicans can learn to appreciate the background of the faith of those newcomers to their parish. I have one pastor who takes groups of his parishioners back to their home parishes in Mexico. This offers an opportunity for the pastor to learn more about the faith of his people and the people are overjoyed that their pastor has come to visit their place of origin.
5. There appear to be a disproportionate number of Hispanics in the military. One of the reasons for this is that Hispanics do not have the same opportunities or inclinations to go on to college after high school. Those in the military are mostly young adults, and their chaplains are in an enviable position to serve them and their families.
6. Parish staffs are very crucial in Hispanic ministry, beginning with the receptionist. This person is the first voice that the people will hear from that parish.

If that person answering the phone is neither sensitive nor patient, the person at the other end of the phone might feel rejection or made to feel inferior.

7. There is no easy way to combat racism. I have learned not to create guilt trips nor point fingers in an accusatory manner. You do not eliminate racism by calling people racist. Eliminating racism may take a long time, but we can further it along by organizing occasions for dialogue and storytelling. This can happen within the bicultural or multicultural parish. If a parish is predominantly of one group, twinning could be set up between a predominantly non-Hispanic with a Hispanic parish and celebrate their faith together with opportunities offered for the storytelling that I am talking about. There may be many things in which people differ, but within the Catholic church we all share a great deal of similarities and ample common ground, such as the Eucharist and devotion to Mary.

8. In order to help meet the human and social needs of Hispanics, it is good for the diocese and the parish to establish good working relationships with local, state, and federal agencies who specialize in serving the poor. We have quite a few *colonias* in our diocese. These are impoverished communities that are lacking in very basic things such as potable water, sanitation, paved streets, drainage, and adequate housing. Every so often I invite representatives of agencies that serve these *colonias* in order that they might coordinate their efforts and create networks for mutual assistance. Remember that the bishops have the Catholic Campaign for Human Development at your disposal. It is a good example of encouraging people to help

themselves. Community organizing is essential for people to discover their self-worth, identity, and develop leadership, and to pull their resources to create better communities.

9. There is a great need to affirm such Hispanic cultural expressions such as music, dance, art and literature. Our diocese, through its foundation, has organized the annual Las Cruces International Mariachi Conference. Almost 1,000 young people come each year to learn mariachi music from some of the best mariachis in the world. Students of Mexican folkloric dance are also attracted to this conference. The students perform with professional groups at a Spectacular Concert, and the next day approximately 6,000 or 7,000 people come to the closing Mariachi Mass. I am not suggesting that you organize a mariachi conference, it takes a lot of time, effort and financing, but you will find ways to affirm the Mexican culture in a significant way at the parish level.

10. Your ministry among Hispanics could bring criticism from others who might ask, “Why are you paying so much attention to them? Do they have more rights than we?” Your answer is to use the example of a family when a child in a family of several children is hurting, the parents will focus their attention on the hurting child; this does not mean that they do not love the others in an equal way. Remember even Jesus spoke about leaving the 99 sheep to look for and pay attention to the lost one.

I was asked to share some of our pastoral experiences in my diocese.

- Consultation, consultation, consultation. Our parishioners often complain that our seminarians are not taught four little words: “What do you think?”
Sometimes we forget to be sensitive to what our parishioners think, value, or prefer. We just presume they are going to like anything we decide to do. My pastoral letters lately have involved an enormous amount of consultation, such as the ones on domestic violence. I have done two of these, one on domestic violence in general, the other on violence inflicted on children and infants. The consultation process involved hearings throughout the diocese meant to educate the bishop on the reality of domestic violence in our society. The use of process has helped us substantially. Our best assemblies are those which begin with discussions at the parish base on pastoral issues chosen for the assembly.
- Process has been key to many of the strategic pastoral decisions taken at the diocesan level. Process has been of immense help to us. Generally it has followed the SEE, JUDGE, and ACT model. We begin at the grass roots level, preferably with small groups in the parish, in order to discern the reality we are faced with. The results of these discussions are then taken to the diocesan level, either at assemblies or at the priests’ pastoral council. We have only recently begun to include the Diocesan Pastoral Council, which is mainly made up of lay persons.
- We have been blessed with the consultative services offered by the National Pastoral Life Center (NPLC) in New York. In the early years of the diocese,

we decided to contract the NPLC to help us plan and evaluate what we are doing. No one in our local church had had experience starting a diocese, and we needed all the help we could get. Msgr. Phil Murnion and Mr. Harry Fagan would come twice a year to meet with my “kitchen cabinet” made up of key staff, heads of departments and area vicars (deans). Basically they would ask what was going well and then what was not. They could be honest and up front and could get away with it; after all, they would leave after two or three days with us and not have to face those they confronted on a regular basis. Harry Fagan died and then Phil hired Sr. Donna Ciangio. The new team was as helpful as the previous one, but then Phil died, and now Sr. Donna comes for consultation by herself. A major contribution was the NPLC’s affirmation of what we were doing right and made us feel as important as any diocese or archdiocese in the country. It is always good to have someone come in from the outside to tell us what they see. Another resource from the outside was the National Parish Life Center in Kansas City, Missouri. Ms. Jean Marie Hiesberger and her staff began the search for a solution to the diminishing number of priests in the U.S. Her Center helped us create our own approaches.

- Annual assemblies for those in parish leadership. The aim is to produce good leadership skills among parish staffs and lay ministers. It seems that every time we have an assembly, we come up with three recurrent goals: youth, family, and development of lay leaders.

- Mobile ministry events. Some years instead of having one core assembly, we have gone on the road and offered mini assemblies in the corners of the diocese.
- Over the past several years, I have been able to invite the diocesan priests to my home for lunch. Since we are not that many diocesan priests, I am able to offer this hospitality. We have a nice lunch and then have an open discussion about anything that the priests want to talk about. Sometimes we begin at 11 a.m. and sometimes go as late as 4 p.m. discussing things. The priests seem to appreciate these gatherings.
- Pastoral letters from the bishop and from The Pastoral Center staff. One of our best documents was our “Heritage and Hope” statement which we are sharing with you today.
- The next pastoral letter will be on handing on the faith. The issue is also the challenge for the church in the United States today: how do we assure that our Catholic faith will be handed on to the forthcoming generations? We know that there is so much ignorance about our faith, even about the most fundamental things such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the sacraments, social teachings of the Church and church-state relationships. We were impressed by Dr. John Cavadini’s article in *Commonweal* a couple of years ago, who wrote that even at Notre Dame where students come from some of our best Catholic high schools, do not know the essentials. He says that they may know more about

reincarnation than they know about Incarnation. They cannot even begin to explain the Trinity and may even be confused about our teaching on the Eucharist. The consultation process for this letter has begun with interviews with catechists. I am also giving each newly-confirmed a letter from me asking them such questions as, “What does Jesus Christ mean to you? What do you like or not like about the Church? What was most helpful to you in the confirmation process? Who has been most influential in helping you in your faith life?” I have given them my e-mail address, and I am hoping that a good number of these newly-confirmed will answer. Later this year there will be further consultations with parents and grandparents and youth leaders. We expect the pastoral letter on Handing on the Faith to be ready for the celebration of our 25th anniversary as a diocese next year.

Why are we interested in dealing with minorities in the Church? The reason, of course, is inclusion. We do not want to lose any more Hispanics, for example.

Andrew Greeley, the sociologist priest, tells us that some 60,000 U.S. Hispanics leave Catholicism every year. Consider the following statistics: Hispanics are now the largest minority group in the country and are the largest ethnic group in the U.S. Catholic Church. By the year 2050 the U.S. Hispanic population is expected to reach 96.5 million, almost 25 percent of the total U.S. population. By 2010, half of all the Catholics in the U.S. will be Hispanic. Handing on the faith has to be a paramount concern for Church leadership today.

Another reason why what you are discussing at this assembly is so important is for the sake of *communio*. The theme of *communio* is strong in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It has its origin in the Holy Trinity itself, and it was the most passionate desire expressed by Jesus before he died, “Father, that they be one as you and I are one.” Unity is what we often pray for at Mass. The prayer for communion is in each one of the Eucharistic Prayers and is given stronger emphasis in the Eucharistic Prayers for reconciliation. Composed of people of all nations and bound together in the one faith can be one of the greatest services the Church can render to the rest of the world. What distresses us today is a terribly divided world, separated by racial and religious lines as well as political and nationalistic attitudes. We need to show the world that even though we can be so different, we can be one in spirit. Our goal must be to bring to reality that which we express in the Eucharist. We break bread together and drink of the same cup, united around the same altar. What we do in liturgy should be a reflection of the unity in our lives.

What the Church needs in the southwest, including your diocese, is a major mobilization pastoral effort, something like a Marshall Plan approach. Every department of our respective dioceses should be required to tell the bishop what it will do to face the challenge of this new Church. Of course, this will not happen overnight but will require an extended process involving strategic planning.

The Church in the United States is surviving the great scandals of clergy sexual abuse against minors. Much has been said about the need for renewing the Church,

beginning with us priests and bishops. One of the areas that we need to look at in this opportune time is the relationship between priests and bishops. In every diocese, we bishops must respond as never before to the needs of our priests. We bishops need to be sensitive to the new demands on priests and the Church of today. Priests, on their side, need to understand the enormous, sometimes unreasonable demands on bishops. Both bishops and priests need each other; we need each other's affirmation, we need each other's patience, we need each other's sensitivity, we need each other's love. I can assure you that your little sister, the Diocese of Las Cruces, will continue to look up to its big sister in Fort Worth. Keep up your good work. We want to keep learning from you. Thank you.