

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez, C.S.B.

The Vision and Strategy of the U.S. Bishops for Hispanic Ministry

"Hispanic participation in the institutions, programs and activities of the church is to be constantly encouraged and appreciated."

U.S. Bishops' National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry (I, par. 5)

The National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry was approved unanimously by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in November 1987. Few things get through the Conference with such an overwhelming endorsement. Enthusiasm characterized the spirit at the Conference when the Plan was approved; elation marked the mood of the Hispanic leadership around the country.

Significance of the National Plan for Hispanic Ministry

The passage of the Plan was seen as a victory for those who for years had been hoping and working for such episcopal support and strategy for the future of Hispanics in the Church of our

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country. The Plan itself is unique in that few pastoral challenges that face the national Church are ever met with such a vision and strategy as we see in it. Statements and documents of the Conference are often staid, conceptual and abstract without even "landing" as it were to the real, the concrete and the practical. The Plan is remarkable for many reasons, but most especially in its emphatic pastoral approach.

A correct word to describe the Plan is visionary. Since its passage, it is more and more seen as a strong restatement of the Second Vatican Council. The Plan resonates with the themes of *Lumen Gentium* in its emphasis on the Church as communitarian (III,13). It re-echoes the missionary and evangelizing thrust of the Church as taught in *Ad Gentes* (III,13.VI, B and C). It places a strong emphasis on the mission of the Church in the world, thus continuing the spirit and content of *Gaudium et Spes* (VI,C3). It calls for the inculturation of Hispanic spiritual values and traditions in the liturgy, in keeping with liturgical principles found in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (VIII).

The Plan is a useful document as much as it is inspiring. Dioceses and

parishes have at their disposal a national plan of action, a vision, a strategy and a direction. No one has the excuse that they do not know what to do, nor where to go. The specific goals are there, and so are the means needed to reach them. There is even a plan for evaluation of the Plan's implementation.

The Process Behind the Pastoral Plan

The process whereby the Plan was written was in keeping with the contemporary methodology which the United States bishops have found successful in the past four years. This process involves a great amount of consulting with as many people as possible. Such was the methodology used in the writing of the peace pastoral and the one on economic justice. The *Pastoral Response on Women's Concerns* has also used this methodology.

The Hispanics' Pastoral Plan is the result of a process that lasted four years and involved an estimated 200,000 people. It is the fruit of a collaborative effort (and in itself a model of *pastoral de conjunto*—to be explained later) of all

levels of the Church: lay people, religious, deacons, priests and bishops. Because of the involvement of the cross section of the Church the Plan is as an authentic expression of needs and aspirations of the Hispanic peoples of this country. It is an expression of Church at its best—the family of God united in mission.

The Origins and History of the Plan

The idea of a national plan to address and respond to the pressing pastoral and social issues of the Hispanic peoples of the United States comes as a result of the *Encuentro* processes. The *Primer Encuentro Nacional Hispano*

de Pastoral was held in 1972. Two other *Encuentros* followed, one in 1977 and the other in 1985. These were convoked officially by the National Conference of Bishops and organized by the NCCB/USCC Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs.

The *Encuentros* have not only been occasions where people from the grass roots can voice their needs and frustra-



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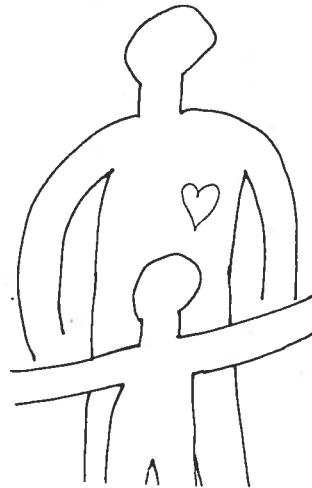
tions, but they have also been real celebrations and promotions of Hispanic unity and strategizing for the future. If nothing else, the *Encuentros* have served to unify Hispanic church leadership both cleric and non-cleric. They have been organized mainly by Hispanics and for Hispanics. The organizers of the *I Encuentro* were Pablo Sedillo, Fr. Virgil Elizondo, Fr. Robert Stern and Bishop Patrick Flores, then auxiliary bishop of San Antonio. A key person who planned the *Primer Encuentro* and the *Segundo Encuentro* was Edgar Beltrán, a priest-expatriate from Colombia. "The *Encuentros* have been powerful moments which have unleashed a series of questions, attitudes and actions contributing in a definitive way for the journeying of our people in their following of Jesus" (from the conclusions of the *Tercer Encuentro*).

The National Plan of 1987 is actually a response to the U.S. Bishops' request that such a Plan be elaborated. This mandate was made in a pastoral letter entitled *The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment*. The proposal for the letter was first introduced in November of 1982 and work on it was approved by the bishops, with only a few voting against the proposal. Some felt that a precedent would be set if one particular group in the Church was addressed in a pastoral letter; others felt that the conference was already producing too many letters and with little effect. Nonetheless, work on the letter proceeded, with consultation from various Catholic groups from around the country as well as from lay leaders from the various Hispanic groups. The letter was presented to the Conference in November of 1983, amended and unanimously approved.

Addressed to all Catholics in the United States, the letter calls upon everyone to recognize the reality of the Hispanic presence, its gifts and potential for the Church at large. The socio-human reality of U.S. Hispanics is described. The letter lists the past achievements in Hispanic ministry and describes a series of Hispanic issues some of which are internal ecclesial issues such as liturgy, evangelization, popular Catholicism, and Catholic

education; others have to do with social justice issues, such as migrant farmworkers, the family, anti-Hispanic prejudice and racism.

A relatively short letter, it summarizes the accomplishments of the past, enumerates a series of challenges posed by the presence of Hispanics and concludes with the call to convoke the *III Encuentro*. This letter of moderate length and simple in approach was taken to heart by the Hispanic peoples. It was indeed a landmark, insofar as it was the first time that the USCC had acknowledged in a pastoral letter the presence of Hispanics in this country. The letter challenges Hispanics and non-Hispanics to welcome and recognize the "moment of grace" that the Hispanic presence brings. The Hispanics are challenged to share their rich Christian traditions of family, community, *fiesta* and devotion. The *Encuen-*



tro conclusions and commitments were sent to the bishops who, in 1986 and 1987, produced the National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry. The Plan is the third step in a several-year process. The Pastoral Letter was the first step and the *III Encuentro* the second step.

The Content of the Plan

There are eight sections in the Pastoral Plan. The first is an introduction that describes the pastoral planning process. It describes pastoral planning as "the effective organization of the total process of the life of the Church in fulfilling her mission of being a

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leaven of the Kingdom of God in this world." It goes on to explain that pastoral planning includes such elements as the analysis of the reality wherein the Church must carry out her mission; reflection on this reality in the light of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church; commitment to action resulting from this reflection; pastoral theological reflection on this process; the development of a pastoral plan, its implementation and evaluation. The final step of the planning process is "celebration" of the accomplishment of this faith life experience.

The key to this planning process is the concept *pastoral de conjunto* which is defined as "a coresponsible, collaborative ministry involving coordination among pastoral agents of all the elements of pastoral life and the structures of the same in view of a common goal: The Kingdom of God." What this in effect means is that there needs to be a well coordinated pastoral effort involving all levels and all programs in the Church. In other words, all ministry and ministers must move together in the same direction. The emphasis of *pastoral de conjunto* is to express both a community experience and a community effort. *Pastoral de conjunto* is a living and active witness of what the Church is supposed to be: the Body of Christ as Sacrament that effects what it symbolizes and symbolizes what it effects. The emphasis is to do things in a communal way and thus the method is expressive of the essence and mission of the Church which is communion.

The second section briefly outlines the history, culture and social reality of the Hispanic peoples in the United States. This section admits of the differences among Hispanic peoples



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themselves and their cultures, yet it underscores the common values among all Hispanics such as a "profound respect for the dignity of each person. . . deep and reverential love for family life. . . a marvelous sense of community. . . a loving appreciation for God's gift of life and an authentic and consistent devotion to Mary. . . ." The section ends with the challenge for more active participation in the Church, a critique of society from the perspective of the poor, and a commitment to social justice.

The third section provides the doctrinal framework for the plan. It situates the mission of the Church as the continuation of Jesus' work: to an-

nounce the Kingdom of God and the means for entering it. The Church carries out this mission by entering into the cultural, religious and social reality of the people, becoming incarnate in and with the people. The Church is seen as having a prophetic mission in denouncing sin and announcing hope and in this way continuing the historic and tangible presence of Jesus. The Church is identified with the Risen Christ who, with the Holy Spirit, is renewing the world through the Church. This section reminds us that in our ministry we are united with the Triune God in fulfilling our prophetic mission to justice and love. There is also a connection of all ministry with the Eucharist.

The fourth section in two paragraphs touches on the spirituality of Hispanic peoples. It emphasizes the connection between spirituality and all the dimensions of a person's life in the following of Jesus.

The fifth section is actually a single, somewhat complex sentence which gives the general objective of the Plan. This brief but rich statement is the heart of the letter, for it incorporates the exciting and challenging ecclesiology that runs throughout the entire pastoral plan: "to live and promote by means of a *pastoral de conjunto* a model of Church that is: communitarian, evangelizing, and missionary, incarnate in the reality of the Hispanic people and

open to the diversity of cultures, a promoter and example of justice that develops leadership through education that is leaven for the Kingdom of God in society." This sentence may come across in the English language as static and abstract, but in Spanish it comes across more as a poetic expression of what the Plan is all about.

The sixth section is the most detailed section of the Plan. It goes into the specific dimensions. There are four areas that the plan outlines and each has its own background, specific objective, programs and projects.

1. The first dimension treated is *Pastoral de Conjunto*, which calls for integration and coordination as described above.

2. The second dimension is that of evangelization. It is here that the Plan calls for the elaboration of criteria and training for the creation, development and support of small ecclesial communities.

3. The third dimension is the missionary option which deals with the issues of farmworkers, the formation of Christian social responsibility, Hispanics in the military, the promotion of family life ministry, women in the Church and youth ministry.

4. The fourth dimension is that of leadership formation. In this section, such things as vocation to the ordained ministry and religious life, formation and training of lay people and the elaboration of materials for Hispanic ministry are presented.

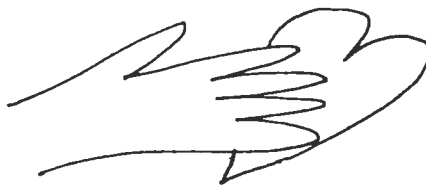
The seventh section deals with how all of these plans and programs are to be evaluated at every level and the eighth section provides a good description of Hispanic spirituality and its connection with the liturgy.

The Results of the Plan

Future surveys and scientific research will eventually give documented evidence for what has happened or will happen as a direct result of the National Plan for Hispanic Ministry. While there are many strong criticisms regarding the Pastoral Plan and its results so far, I believe that the Plan has had some

significant positive results. For one thing, there is a greater awareness on the part of bishops regarding the rich presence of Hispanics in their respective dioceses and archdioceses. As a result, more bishops have taken seriously the pastoral and social needs of Hispanic peoples.

The American Board of Catholic Missions, a home mission funding agency of the Bishops' Conference, has made Hispanic ministry one of its highest priorities and accordingly funds millions of dollars annually to dioceses, institutes and projects that have to do with Hispanic ministry. While funding at the national level is limited, nonetheless many dioceses and parishes have implemented programs as a direct result of the National Pastoral Plan.



There has been an increase of Hispanic vocations to the priesthood in the past several years. I recently attended the Midwest Hispanic Seminarians Conference where there were approximately seventy-five young men preparing for the priesthood just in that section of the country. There have emerged in the past few years several "houses of discernment" for Hispanic men who are interested in the priesthood and religious life. These houses are found in Chicago, Los Angeles, Houston and in some other places. Moreover, an increasing number of dioceses require that their seminarians learn Spanish before ordination. In a recent survey conducted by the NCCB/USCC Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs regarding Hispanic ministry, 34.1% responded that candidates for the priesthood are required to study Spanish and 47.3% reported that it is optional. Last summer, 750 students participated in the language, cultural and pastoral programs at the Mexican American Culture Center. There continues to be a strong response for the

need to know Spanish in the Church in the United States. In January 1990, I addressed over 1,000 Hispanic catechists at the Los Angeles Religious Education Congress.

The survey conducted by the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs showed that 61.5% of respondents have taken steps to implement the National Plan. The most useful aspects of the Pastoral Plan were: Lay Leadership (47.7%), *Pastoral de Conjunto* (39.4%), Youth Ministry (39.4%), Small Ecclesial Communities (35.8%), Evangelization Through Parish Renewal (24.8%) and Family Life (22%). Especially encouraging was that 52.3% of the respondents have an Office for Hispanic Pastoral Affairs, or for an Hispanic Apostolate.

Conclusion

The National Plan for Hispanic Ministry is good news to the entire Church of the United States. In the early twenty-first century over fifty percent of the Church in this country will be Hispanic. If local churches, dioceses and parishes take the vision and the strategy of the Plan to heart, the Church of our country will be strong in its mission to be the light of nations and the hope and joy of the world. While we may justifiably lament the significant dropout rate of Hispanics from the Catholic Church, we are encouraged by the noble efforts being carried out throughout this country's fifty states to bring the Gospel, Jesus Christ, to a largely unchurched and unevangelized group of people.

Our hopes are in the promise of the Word of God: "For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful. . . it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it" (Is 55, 10-11).

And these same hopes are in the faith of the Hispanic peoples, a faith deeply embedded in their hearts, a faith that if shared can only serve to enrich, and enliven and embrace the total life of the Church in the United States. •