A Journey of Inclusion

Growing up as Hispanic/Latino Catholics in the U.S.

Alejandro Aguilera

As a Catholic, a minister, and a father Aguilera reflects on the painful and the splendid dimensions of growing up as a Hispanic American. He offers important guidance challenging parents and ministers to be “bridge people.”

I

Fresh out of college and with dreams of transforming the world, I came to the United States as a lay missionary in the summer of 1983. I remember vividly my first weeks in the rural parish where I came to serve, and my personal encounter with the Hispanic community. The music of the Sunday Mass in Spanish, the smell of fresh fruit during our visits to the labor camps, and the taste the chile con carne Tejano style are some of the many things still fresh in my memory. In a special way I remember the shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe inside the church, always surrounded with flowers and lit candles. At first I was quite surprised to see Our Lady in such a prominent place in a parish so far north. However, it didn’t take long to understand that her presence was a visible sign that Hispanics were not only welcomed by the parish community, they had indeed become an integral part of it. The message of Our Lady to Juan Diego, almost five hundred years ago, was a request to build her a home so that people could visit her and find consolation, hope, and love in a familiar place they could call their own. In my experience, her message in that rural parish in the United States was also about a home where people could visit her. But in this case she did not ask for a home to be built. She

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asked for the home already standing to open its doors to her and to “all the inhabitants of this land” who would need her consolation, her love, and her message of hope as the Mother of the true God.

I was very blessed to land in a vibrant parish that, at the time, was the flagship of Hispanic ministry for an entire region. The pastor was bilingual, as were most other staff members and a good number of parish council members, including its president. The Sunday Mass and the celebration of all the sacraments were available in Spanish. Religious education for adults and children and the resources used for them were also available in both languages. Social services, community advocacy, visits to the labor camps and special activities were designed to serve Hispanics in their own language and cultural context. And yet, there were many opportunities in which the parish came together as one. Among them were bilingual liturgies, special projects, fundraisers, and social activities.

The previous snapshot gives a good picture of what mature Hispanic ministry looks like in a parish. Such maturity is achieved through years of pastoral care and its foundation is the establishment of the Sunday Mass in Spanish. In most cases the Misa en Español is the decisive starting point from which God will give many blessings to his people in the form of catechesis, service, fellowship, prayer, and the reception of other sacraments.

Back then I had no idea that many years later I would find myself still deeply involved in a ministry that had become such an important part of my life. What started as a one-year volunteer experience with a return plane ticket to my home in Mexico City has become a faith-filled journey of many years in what is called Hispanic ministry.

II

My first years in ministry continue to be a source of hope and inspiration to this day. However, they also gave me occasion to see, and sometimes experience, the challenges faced by Hispanics of all ages. I knew then, as I know now, that growing up as a Hispanic in the United States can be a difficult journey filled with ambiguity about race, cultural identity and our place in society. The very terms Hispanic or Latino can generate complex conversations about a people so diverse and yet with very strong commonalities.

My daughter Renata was in first grade when she came face to face with the bewildering realization that skin color can make a difference in how people are treated by others. It happened during that time of the year when we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday. As part of the celebration, her teacher decided to show a documentary on the Civil Rights Movement featuring Rosa Parks and the great Bus boycott. Renata was unusually quiet when my wife Mary picked her up from school that afternoon. Mary asked her about her day, but she was reluctant
to answer and her face showed an expression of concern. Mary sensed that Renata was worried about something. With the intuition and skill that only mothers can master, Mary helped her feel safe about sharing her day. She spoke about Rosa Parks and her decision to not give up her seat on the bus, about black people being treated poorly . . . about the unfairness of it all. Mary listened attentively and asked questions as Renata shared the details of the documentary and the subsequent discussion in the classroom about Rosa Parks’ courage and determination not to give up her seat. At one point Renata paused and looked straight into her mother’s eyes. Mary asked if there was something else bothering her. Renata hesitated but finally said “I am worried these things could happen again. . . . I am worried about my Daddy, about something happening to him because of the color of his skin.”

When I came home that night, and after the children had gone to bed, Mary told me about Renata’s hard day at school and her concern for me. My reaction was a mixture of anger and sadness. The ghost of racism had visited my home that day and the task of uninviting it had begun. My first decision was not to bring up the issue myself but wait until Renata was ready to share her experience and worries with me. The next day I went to the bookstore and got Renata a bilingual children’s book, English and Spanish, which I signed “My dearest Renata, I give you this book so you may grow in love of your two cultures and in the appreciation of others.” Renata loved the book and soon was able not only to understand Spanish but to read it as well, since we spoke both English and Spanish at home.

A year later, almost to the date since that lesson in U.S. history as a first-grader, Renata asked Mary if she could bring the ceramic picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe to school for “show and tell.” Mary was intrigued by the request and asked her why she wanted to bring the picture of La Virgen de Guadalupe to school. Renata’s answer was firm and without hesitation: “Because I want my friends to know about my people.” Later that day a parent from one of Renata’s classmates mentioned to Mary how impressed her daughter was with Renata’s sharing on Our Lady of Guadalupe, and how awesome it was that Renata was related to the Virgin Mary.

Mary and I talked for a long time about the two events that had taken place in Renata’s classroom over the past year. I was very proud, and at the same time humbled, by Renata’s ability to overcome the distorted perception of color and . . . growing up . . .

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race in U.S. society, and with her wise understanding of the dignity of every human being regardless of skin color. I truly didn’t know what we did as parents over that year to empower Renata into reconciling racial differences and losing the fear of her father, with his brown skin, suffering the consequences of racism. Maybe it was the miraculous power of Our Lady of Guadalupe telling Renata that everybody was equal in God’s eyes. The fact of the matter is that Renata was not worried about her father anymore, for his skin color was just like the one of the Mother of God and who could argue against that. Moreover, Renata had understood, at some level, that this world was not about choosing between being one thing against the other, but rather, being “both-and.” After all, her family was the fruit of different races and cultures coming together . . . all under God’s protecting love.

I believe that Renata’s experience of the tension and misunderstanding between people of different races is not uncommon. On the contrary, it happens every day all across our country in some way or another. All children growing up in the United States are impacted by the way we deal with racial differences as a society today, and in the past. For Hispanics in particular, the issue of race is marked by ambiguity since Hispanics can be of any race. Most of us are mestizos in the literal sense of the word; that is, we embody more than one race. While most Mexicans and Central Americans tend to bring together Native American and European ancestry, many Hispanics from the Caribbean add their African ancestry to the mix. The people in South America have a lesser degree of mestizaje. In countries like Argentina or Chile they tend to be more European, while countries like Bolivia or Ecuador have a large population of Native-Americans. But wherever you come from in Latin America, as soon as you cross the border you become a Hispanic or, as of late, a Latino.

The growing numbers of new immigrants coming from all corners of Latin America led the Census Bureau to follow the catch-all word “Hispanic” with multiple options during the 2000 Census. I remember my own three children choosing three different words that year to describe who they were: Mexican American, Latino, and Hispanic American. The results of the census that year showed that four out of ten Hispanics/Latinos living in the United States were foreign-born, the highest percentage ever registered.

Along with being mestizos, an open-ended cultural identity adds a second layer of ambiguity Hispanics/Latinos have to deal with day in and day out. This being “in-between” was captured by a role-play presented by Hispanic teenagers during a retreat I led in the late nineties. The role-play began by showing how teens were

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expected by their parents to carry themselves, speak, and even eat as if they were living in Mexico, Puerto Rico, or El Salvador. Not being able to fully please their parents they would often hear how they were losing their roots and becoming distant from their own parents. On the other hand, the same teenagers were told in school that they were too Mexican or too Hispanic and that they needed to be more like everybody else. The tension of living between two cultures and being told that you have to choose one over the other is one of the most confusing and even dramatic aspects of growing up as a first generation Hispanic/Latino. On the same note, being a new immigrant parent can be extremely painful.

Over the years I have heard the stories and the struggles of many parents suffering the agony of seeing their children slip away from their arms into a world they don’t understand, a world that more often than not tells them that they don’t belong, that they just aren’t good enough. I will never forget the tears running down a father’s face as he shared how his children often told him that he didn’t care about them and how they couldn’t understand why he never went to parents’ meetings or other events at their school. How could he explain to them that he felt completely out of place at such meetings because of language barriers and feeling self-conscious about being Hispanic and, in this case, being undocumented. Stories like this one have gotten worse in the past few years as thousands of Hispanic families live in constant fear of deportation. Newspapers across the country are filled with stories of families, mostly Hispanic, being separated as U.S. citizen children are left behind by their undocumented father, or mother, or both.

Social sciences tell us that the main responsibility of parents is to protect and provide for their children, and to empower them to develop positive relationships with other people as well as with the institutions of the society in which they live. One can only imagine how frustrating it is for new immigrant parents, regardless of where they come from, not to be able to advocate for their children. Even more dramatic for parents is to depend on their children as translators at stores, government agencies and yes, schools. However, this and other challenges are often overcome by the resilience and the love of family characteristic of Hispanic parents. Among many examples I remember a situation in a rural town in western Oregon. Hispanic parents were concerned that their children were not being taken seriously by teachers or administrators at the local high school. After meeting at the parish hall and with the support of the staff, a number of parents decided to call for a meeting with the school principal. That was the beginning of a parents’
group dedicated to advocate for Hispanic students in an organized and positive manner, and with long-lasting impact.

The support Hispanics find in their parishes and other faith-based communities can be the key to achieving positive change on behalf of Hispanic students. Studies show that Hispanic families with strong ties to their faith community are more likely to achieve a higher level of education as well as economic and social success. However, even in their faith communities Hispanics/Latinos can feel the pressure of having to prove themselves. Even Hispanics who have been U.S. citizens for many generations have experienced “being reminded” that they don’t quite belong in U.S. society. I first learned of this challenge listening to a Hispanic deacon from Texas as he said: “My family has been in the United States for five generations. My grandfather fought in WWI, my father fought in WWII and I fought in Vietnam. And yet people look at me and ask ‘where are you from?’” I respond ‘I am from Texas.’ They ask again, ‘but where were your parents from?’ And it goes on until I say, ‘Well. . . generations ago my family came from Mexico.’ Then those asking are satisfied as they have placed me outside. . . coming in. But when you ask them where they are from, they simply say ‘I am an American’ as if they came from nowhere.” What impacted me the most about the deacon’s sharing was the sadness in his eyes as he said, “How many more wars do we have to fight to be accepted as true Americans, without any questions?” The deacon was not so worried about himself having to answer endless questions, but about his ten children and the challenges they will have to face to prove that they belong as much as everybody else.

Despite a dubious track record in the past, the acceptance of Hispanic Americans as a bilingual and bicultural people is much better today than what it used to be forty years ago. Back then, the widespread belief was that it was better for the kids to forgo speaking and improving their Spanish, but to jump right into English so that they will not have to go through the same hardships their parents had to endure.

Today being bilingual is not a liability at all. On the contrary, it has become a big asset in practically every industry and service sector. Research shows that human beings are quite capable of mastering two languages or more. Our personal experience as a family corroborates this fact. Our three children are bilingual and

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they feel very comfortable in different cultural settings. Today the United States benefits from having the most bilingual Hispanic generation ever as Spanish is spoken to some degree in 85 percent of Hispanic homes.

Growing up as Hispanics/Latinos is often less challenging for children with well-established families than for those whose parents are not with them or who lack the proper documentation. Our kids have been able to travel to Mexico to visit family. That has been a real blessing for them as they have experienced the best of belonging to both worlds. They know very well that they don’t have to choose one over the other; they can love them both one hundred percent. However, as I told Renata when she came back from spending one semester with her cousins in Northern Mexico, “you cannot be in both countries at the same time and that requires sacrifice.” I didn’t realize the extent to which she knew what I meant until I read an essay she wrote in the summer of 2005 titled “The Best of Both Worlds,” which includes the following reflection:

I stopped short as I caught sight of the bronze plaque on the side of the walkway beside me, announcing the border between Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, and the United States of America. . . . The border seemed to cause a fissure going straight down the middle of my heart, separating my two worlds, as they existed within me. Each half of my heart yearned for the other to know the songs, people, places, language, and stories of a culture that it loved and held so dear. I knew it would be this way always. At this moment in time I was literally standing with a foot in each of my home cultures, a metaphor that will describe my existence for the rest of my life. . . . The bridge that I crossed over the Rio Grande symbolizes a physical separation between two nations . . . it is more than concrete and wire which stands between these two great loves of mine. It is the mentality of thousands of people that so strongly distinguishes “us” from “them,” which forms the real border . . .

III

Reflecting on Renata’s words and looking back at those years in parish ministry help me better understand who I am today and where I come from. My own experience as a young Mexican was marked by a culturally diverse parish community that welcomed me with open arms. Such a welcoming attitude set the tone for me in my own ministry. Moreover, it set the tone for me in my very family, in the way we understand ourselves and build relationships with people from different cultures and countries of origin.

How can the church provide a healthy environment and a sense of community for Hispanics and all Catholics growing up in culturally diverse parishes today and in the future? What kind of leadership will Hispanics provide in their homes and as the emerging majority in the Catholic Church at the beginning of the twenty-first century?
In my experience the answer to these questions is not only found in what we do, but who we are, and how we interact with one another. In the document *Encuentro & Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry* (2002), the U.S. bishops articulate a pastoral response calling for Hispanics and all ministers to be bridge people, to be faithful to the message of Christ and to the people they are called to serve on his behalf, and to be mindful that how we do things is as important as what we do.

First, parents and ministers need to become more aware and committed to their call to be “bridge people.” This involves welcoming others, embracing them, and journeying with them; leaving behind the “we–they” language and moving into the *all-of-us-together* language. We must make the church the home and the school of communion (*Novo Millennio Ineunte* 43).

Second, what we do as Catholic parents and as ministers should be rooted in the double commitment we have to the message of Christ and to the people with whom we live and minister. This requires solid knowledge of Christ and his message, as well as interpersonal knowledge of Hispanics and all Catholics in our parish, and the cultural, religious, social, and economic context in which they live. Such knowledge is born from our efforts to be good listeners, sensitive and authentically interested in people’s lives, needs, aspirations, and ideas.

Third, parents and ministers need to be effective communicators of the message of Christ among people speaking different languages. This includes knowing how different communities make decisions, how they learn, how they organize and come together with other groups. Such awareness and commitment help us welcome and empower all people to develop and exercise their leadership.

The concept of inculturation of the Gospel is pivotal in guiding Hispanic parents and ministers through the promising and yet challenging waters of racial and cultural ambiguity. It involves following Jesus’ example to become gracious hosts for one another, as we acknowledge and embrace our cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity and God’s unique presence in each of our lives, histories, and cultures (*Many Faces in God’s House*, 5).

In the context of a culturally diverse parish, inculturation comprises all the riches of the different cultural and ethnic communities that have been given to Christ as
an inheritance. It is a profound process that touches every culture deeply, going to the very center and roots of each culture, taking from each what is compatible with Gospel values while seeking to purify and transform beliefs, attitudes, and actions contrary to the reign of God. Our God-given human diversity challenges Hispanics and all Catholics to achieve ecclesial integration, to discover ways in which we, as Catholic communities, can be one church yet come from diverse cultures and ethnicities.

After more than twenty-three years of experience in Hispanic ministry and having raised three children with my wife Mary, I see myself as a bridge-builder in my personal life and in my ministry. I am convinced that we are a better people, a better church, and a better country when we avoid the trap of the “either-or,” the temptation of “loving-against:” loving my family against your family, my culture against your culture, my faith against your faith. Instead, we can, and I believe we need to choose very deliberately to love in an inclusive manner, to be able to recognize and embrace the best of both worlds and beyond. I believe this kind of love and understanding of the world is what helped Renata overcome the fear of racial differences she faced at the young age of eight. This kind of love and understanding still propelling her into the future is clearly expressed in the conclusion of her essay:

My own personal experience has been what I consider to be an ideal combination of the best each culture has to offer a young woman like myself. In my own personal life, I myself play the role of the bridge. My experience inspired me to think about a career in international relations and diplomacy, which might provide me the opportunity to help extend bridges between the United States and Latin American countries. Incorporating the respect I’ve learned for each individual culture into my professional life is a benefit I will take away from my upbringing as a Latina in the United States. I have been given the blessing of unwavering love for two different cultures and the ability to appreciate their gifts and challenge their flaws. My greatest hope is to be able to use that blessing in furthering understanding and compassion between these two cultures.

Renata is not alone in this noble quest. Two thousand Hispanic/Latino young adult Catholic leaders from all walks of life gathered at the University of Notre Dame this past June for the First National Encuentro for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry. They came as delegates representing one hundred and thirty dioceses in the United States. Their voices spoke of building bridges, of being a bicultural and a bilingual people that share common historical roots and traditions, common cultural values, and the Catholic faith. They spoke of themselves as young disciples of Christ on a mission to bring harmony and understanding among people of different cultures and races. From a big banner Our Lady of Guadalupe was gazing down on them. They were not afraid.