

Accompanying families, reaching out to youth recurring encuentro themes

WASHINGTON — The Catholic Church needs to walk with and accompany Hispanic and immigrant families, reach out to youth and young adults, and strengthen faith and leadership formation.

These were the recurring themes voiced by participants of the episcopal Region IV encuentro held May 19, at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

As part of the National Fifth Encuentro process, nearly 100 regional participants — lay and religious leaders from seven dioceses — from Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia, Virginia and West Virginia, gathered for the day to “encounter,” as the word “encuentro” suggests, each other and listen to the voices from parish communities and organizations within the region.

They discerned priorities and strategies on Hispanic ministry and how to better answer Pope Francis’ call to become missionary disciples reaching out to those on the peripheries.

“It’s important for us to get to know the drama, the anxieties of our people to bring the peaceful presence of Jesus Christ into their lives,” said Auxiliary Bishop Mario E. Dorsonville of Washington and lead bishop for the Region IV encuentro.

“We have to be able to speak the same language from soul to soul in order to be able to connect them,” he said in an interview with Catholic News Service, noting that such accompaniment doesn’t change through the years.

Participants sharing in small groups and at-large, widely spoke about the ways Hispanic families need the Catholic church community to accompany them in their struggles, their desire for a better and more accessible faith formation, on outreach to youth and young adults, on family values and on keeping families together.

In a region with high numbers of recent immigrants, Central Americans who were Temporary Protected Status recipients and others covered by the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, many voiced fears of deportation that breaks families apart.

TPS was recently terminated by the Department of Homeland Security leaving over 300,000 Salvadorans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans and Haitians facing possible deportations. About 690,000 DACA recipients are in a similar immigration limbo.

“Over and over, we saw that specially youth are feeling overwhelmed with the many stresses that they have, stresses because of immigration issues that affect them directly, especially those with DACA, those under TPS, and those whose parents, relatives or friends are undocumented,” said Lia Salinas, director of Hispanic ministry for the Archdiocese of Baltimore and Region VI encuentro co-chair. “That is a voice that needs to be heard and that needs to be addressed.”

Proposed strategies to accompany families include: nurturing families through each stage, helping families integrate into their communities and following up with pastoral care. They also proposed to provide support for families who suffer separation and be involved in advocacy.

As part of advocacy efforts, many participants signed letters to their senators seeking a legislative solution for TPS recipients. The letters are part of the Catholics Confront Global Poverty initiative led by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services.

Throughout the day, participants shared priorities and strategies in the ministerial areas of evangelization and mission; vocations and leadership development; youth and young adult ministry; family ministry; immigration and social justice; faith formation and catechesis; intercultural competencies, stewardship and development; and Hispanics and public and professional life.

Priorities across the different areas of work included: the need to prepare catechists, priests, deacons and lay leaders to be multilingual and multicultural to reflect the universal church, placing greater emphasis on cultural integration and competencies.

“We have to develop the competencies, they’re very important, but I just want to stress the importance of developing an open heart,” noted Archbishop William E. Lori of Baltimore to participants. He noted that although more needs to be done in the different areas, the church is headed down the right path.

Other priorities addressed were: finding ways to strengthen Hispanic ministry by strengthening the formation of Hispanic leaders; making available training in Spanish and scholarships to assist those who want to further their formation but lack the resources to do it; supporting and build up leaders, particularly among youth and young adults; access to Catholic education for youth, and providing a greater support for families, single parents and women.

In the afternoon, a group of bishops or their representatives joined the small group conversations and later exchanged views and answered questions with the participants.

We’re called to proclaim and live the joy of the Gospel, we come here today very much aware of the real struggles that so many immigrants, people, families experience in their lives, and struggles are difficult,” said Father Thomas Ferguson,

vicar general of the Diocese of Arlington, who represented Bishop Michael Burbidge. “But even in the midst of carrying the cross or embracing the struggle and the sorrow and the suffering, it is radiated in this room joy, because we’ve been called by Jesus to carry out his work.”

Other panel participants were: Archbishop Lori; Bishop Dorsonville, Baltimore Auxiliary Bishop Mark E. Brennan and Msgr. John J.M. Foster, vicar general for the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, representing Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio.

Episcopal Region IV includes the dioceses of Arlington and Richmond, Virginia; Wilmington, Delaware; Wheeling-Charleston, West Virginia; and the Washington and Baltimore archdioceses; and the U.S. military archdiocese.

Participants came from all walks of life including immigrants and nonimmigrants; ministry leaders from city, suburbs and rural communities; and leaders of Catholic ecclesial movements, organizations and institutions.

“We want to in some way continue the encuentro process in the parishes and the diocesan teams to prepare and ignite that fire that it’s still there,” said Gabriel Garza, a delegate in the Archdiocese of Washington, voicing the desire of many to continue being engaged in the process of leadership, consultation and discernment that the Fifth Encuentro has begun.

Military spouses and active duty members stationed in Japan, Italy, Hawaii and the eastern and western U.S., also participated in the meeting as part of the delegation representing the U.S. military archdiocese, which is based in Washington.

The military archdiocese facilitated access to the encuentro process for Catholics in the military services who wished to participate.

Zack Mackeller is a senior airman in the Air Force and became involved after attending a Catholic conference in Chicago. He represents the voices of young Catholics in the military and embraces the call to be a missionary disciple.

“I try to engage people as they are, where they’re at. Just that very basic, person to person connection, that’s really all you can do. Then the Holy Spirit will unite people in its own way,” he said.

Recommendations will be included in a final report, which will form part of the working document for the National Fifth Encuentro, or V Encuentro, to be held in Grapevine, Texas, Sept. 20-24.

The Region IV participants will be part of over 3,000 delegates from across the country who are expected to convene during those four days to discern priorities and develop strategies for the “Pastoral Hispana,” or Hispanic ministry, in the United States, including seeking ways to better respond to the call to be missionary disciples.

“Evangelizacion y alegria,” or evangelization and joy, were the two words of encouragement that captured what Archbishop Lori wished for the delegates who will attend the National Fifth Encuentro.

The day concluded with a sending-off Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, with Washington Cardinal Donald W. Wuerl presiding and Bishop Burbidge, Archbishop Lori and Bishop Dorsonville concelebrating.

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