

Catholic wedding in Columbia unites 10 Hispanic couples

COLUMBIA - José Alberto Hernández and Ana Pleitez have considered themselves a couple for the last 19 years.

He moved from El Salvador to the United States 14 years ago. She followed eight years ago, seeking a more stable life and a higher standard of living.

They had never been married in the Catholic Church, so when Father Leandro Fazolini, associate pastor to the Hispanic community at St. John the Evangelist in Columbia, announced he would officially witness at a free wedding for the community, they were excited.

Hernández and Pleitez were among 10 Latino couples who received the sacrament of marriage Oct. 14 at the Wilde Lake Interfaith Center, one of the two worship sites utilized by St. John the Evangelist.

The six years Hernández and Pleitez spent apart, when he was in the U.S. and she was still in El Salvador, weren't easy.

"Yes, we were in communication," Pleitez said, "but it was difficult, and we suffered."

"They've spent years together, but today they become family," Father Fazolini said Oct. 14. "Family doesn't start with children. It starts here."

Half of the couples were from El Salvador; Father Fazolini said Mexico and Colombia were also represented among the newlyweds. The wedding was webcast

for their families across Latin America.

Father Fazolini, a Brazil native who has spent time in Colombia, celebrated Mass in Spanish. He spoke to the Review in English; the couples spoke to the Review in Spanish.

Father Fazolini said that for different reasons and obstacles, the couples, many of whom have been together 10 years and in some cases as long as 20, had never received the blessing of the church. For many, the cost of a conventional wedding was too high; others had put it off, hoping one day to receive the sacrament in their country of origin.

“Many of them use the excuse of not getting married,” Father Fazolini said, “because of the many years of life together, which in their culture would be a shame since (marriage is viewed positively for) young couples and not so much for older couples. The idea of having the community wedding is to break these walls and make it easier for them to receive the grace of the sacrament.”

He last celebrated a community wedding in 2014, when he also married 10 couples. He plans to do another next year.

The other couples talked of their bonds and the journeys that brought them to the U.S.

Santos Yanera Valles said that after nine years together, her favorite things about Walter Antonio Romero are “his smile, his eyes, everything.” Playing with his chin, she said, “but what I like best is his stubble.”

Liz Herrera, 10, whose mother is Santos’s cousin, was a bridesmaid.

“I feel excited and happy to be in their wedding,” she said.

José Saúl Menjívar and Rosa Vilma Zepeda decided to get married in the church “because of our love for each other and our love for our family.”

Together for 15 years, they have three daughters. They came to the U.S. from El Salvador 12 years ago for “a better life and a better future for our three little girls.”

The two like to read and write, and to turn those activities into educational activities for their children.

“I love everything about her, the way she carries herself,” Menjívar said of his wife.

Humberto Alexander and Roxana Yamileth, the youngest couple of the group, have been a couple for three years. The two met through her uncle, who works construction with Alexander.

Living in Columbia with their four-month-old baby, Josué, they married, Yamileth said, “because we wanted God’s blessing.”

She came to the U.S. from El Savador 13 years ago; he made that journey five years.

The other couples married were Octavio Castro and Hilda Luna, Neftalí Solis and María Dolores Orellana, Serafín Jiménez and Irma Flores, Jose Raúl Alas and Rosa Isabel Valles, Juan Antonio Hernández and María Elena García, and Esteban Natividad Valles and María Rosa Portillo.