

Melissa passes the final exam

Final exam of the semester. Melissa hands me her exam. Everyone else has left. She pauses, looks at me with glistening eyes, and blurts out “I don’t know how to thank you. Your class has changed me forever.”

She tells me she now speaks Spanish all she can. She tells everyone about Kelvin and Diana, Latino kids she helped at Food for Thought, the after-school tutoring program in Baltimore. Melissa loved learning about Latino culture through her Colombian conversation partner.

Melissa told her family about the films “The Visitor,” “Dying to Live” and “Bordertown” and how they have made real for her the pain and complexities of the immigration question.

“But my family doesn’t understand. They say that those people are probably illegal. They’re breaking the law. They say everyone should just speak English,” Melissa said as her eyes teared up. “They don’t even want to listen to me or see another side. It’s just so hard. Sister, I’ll never be the same. What do I do?”

As I listen to Melissa, I remember the words of our foundress, Mary Theresa Gerhardinger: “To educate women is to transform the world.” Mother Theresa also taught us SSNDs (School Sisters of Notre Dame) that “all the works of God proceed slowly and in pain, but then their roots are sturdier and their blossoms the lovelier.” Melissa’s roots are sturdy, and her blossoms will be lovely.

Change and growth often involve suffering and pain, but experiences of community can ease the process.

When I celebrated my silver jubilee, I was working in an almost entirely Latino

parish in Camden, N.J., one of the poorest cities in the United States. Many of my family from Baltimore planned to spend that day with me at my parish celebration. I was thrilled they were coming, but I was a little nervous wondering how they would experience my “Latino world.”

My family arrived at the church. Our ministers of hospitality and many others (since Los Americanos stood out!) greeted them with friendly, gentle “abrazos” (hugs). Smiles and handshakes warmed everyone who entered. Good feelings were contagious, and all my family was smiling away.

The liturgy was bilingual, but the music was all “en español.” No problema. The braver ones attempted the words on the sheet provided, and the rhythms and aliveness of the music lifted everyone’s hearts. Some of my German-American family even gently swayed to the beat!

Later everyone remarked about the joy and the sense of community they felt, especially at the extended sharing of peace (which they said they received from half the church!).

For many of my friends and family, the experience of celebrating liturgy while being in the “minority” was a first. That day no one questioned why we weren’t doing all of this in English. No one asked who was, and was not, documented. No one thought it was crazy that the sign of peace took five minutes. The spirit of Jesus who calls us all to the table, truly to be sisters and brothers of the same “Our Father,” was at work shaping and molding us, changing us and transforming us into who we are, the Body of Christ.

My family was changed that day. I hope Melissa’s family experiences a similar epiphany someday.

Indeed relationships and experiences make the difference and can change us. Attend

liturgy in a Hispanic parish. Volunteer to teach or tutor a Latino person in English. Read or watch films that broaden us. Read the Gospels. Study our bishops' letters on immigration. Smile and greet a Latino person you don't know. Sign up for a Pastoral Spanish course at College of Notre Dame.

Be willing to take a few risks. Go beyond your comfort zone. You'll be enriched, changed and more like the Jesus who reached out to the people on the borders, those marginalized and outcast. Choose what Jesus chooses: community and love.

School Sister of Notre Dame Linda Stilling teaches Pastoral Spanish at College of Notre Dame of Maryland and has worked with Latinos in the United States and Latin America for 35 years.