

Promoting vocations in the Hispanic Community

Too often we hear people saying that we are in a crisis of vocations, and that the number of priests is too small for the huge needs of the church. Is that true? Well, it depends how one sees reality.

I don't think it is a matter of a small number of vocations since God's call remains the same as in the beginning of the church. If that is so, the problem is not that God is not calling today, but that people are not answering his call. That's the real problem!

Having the privilege in working on the fields of vocations across the United States, I have realized that while the need of priests is great, the need of an intimate encounter with the Lord is even greater.

As a member of the Diocesan Laborer Priests, a priestly association devoted to vocations and young adults, and as a Latin American born priest living in the U.S., I realize that communities have to take ownership in regards to fostering their own vocations to the priesthood. The Hispanic community, as the fastest growing migrant group in the nation, needs priests; however, answering to this need is not the responsibility of bishops and vocations directors alone, rather it is the responsibility of the church as a whole.

As the late Pope John Paul II says in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, "Vocations are a gift of God and they are born in communities of faith (EA 40)."

If vocations are born in the communities, communities need to help people not only to truly discern their vocations but also to help them answer and pursue it. However, how will a person answer God's call if he or she does not have an intimate encounter with God who is calling him or her? It is impossible!

I remember that some years ago we had the Regional Encounter for Hispanic Youth and Young Adults in Gettysburg, Pa., and the organizers decided to offer eucharistic adoration throughout the entire night. While many at first were skeptical that

anyone would spend the night in adoration the room was packed! Around 3 a.m. as I was leaving the ad hoc Chapel, a young man told me: "Father, it is so powerful to be there!"

God is still calling. Our work is to offer opportunities for a real encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. That will lead to a stronger commitment in the faith and, of course, to an authentic Christian way of life.

The needs of the church, and those of the Hispanic community, must concern all Catholics since we form one people born from the same baptism. Therefore, we should work together praying for vocations and helping people discern and answer God's call. It is not about the language we speak or the country we come from, but about the church we belong to. If we don't have priests, who is going to celebrate Masses in our communities?

During the last five years of my ministry I have been part of the discernment process of many young people who have entered either the seminary or consecrated life. Nevertheless I can say that they were able to follow their vocation due to the support of their families and friends. Vocations do not fall from heaven; they are born in real families and communities. The questions we need to reflect on are: What am I doing to foster new vocations to the Church? How am I going to help my children (or grand children) to find God's will?

Father Juan A. Puigbó, originally from Venezuela, serves as major superior for the Diocesan Laborer Priests in the United States. Father Puigbó has coordinated many youth and young adult camps and retreats, and has directed conferences, workshops and talks about lay leadership and youth ministry. He also has experience in spiritual direction and vocational discernment. He is a former director of Hispanic Pastoral Affairs for the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C.