

Retreat reveals challenges for immigrant women

One of the joys of working in the Office of Hispanic Ministry is that I have the opportunity to offer special spiritual programs for Hispanic immigrants. Our goal is to nourish their dire need to reconnect with their roots, to offer relief for their feelings of alienation and have an experience of Christ and of a church which welcomes them. This past March, I had the opportunity to provide a retreat for 20 immigrant women from different countries. The office rented a minibus and took the women to a house on the beach in Ocean City, which a generous benefactor had lent us for the weekend.

The retreat was intended to be a time of prayer, relaxation, and reflection on the deep query of, "Where is God in our immigration stories? We looked at the sacred Scriptures for answers and we found that time after time, God elected people, gave them a mission and sent them ... somewhere else. Abraham left his land for the land that God would show to him. Moses took the people back to the land, involving in the process a great deal of walking. Would not it have been better, God, to use the local folks? Why did you want the foreigners to accomplish your mission? Then, Jesus came and said, go to ends of the world and announce the good news of salvation. Then he really put people on the move!

The women who came to the retreat responded to a simple invitation to come to participate in a free retreat for women to reflect on their immigrant stories in the light of faith and Scriptures. They were from a variety of countries of Latin America, and from different levels of education and social and economic backgrounds. There was one with a Ph.D. A few had one or two years of formal education, and the rest, everything in between. Some left their countries and got here walking through the desert. A couple came with special visas for their particular intellectual expertise, and others came as refugees. They came from the city and different counties of the archdiocese. We (myself and two other Hispanic women pastoral ministers) had a little apprehension that this diversity may hinder the familiarity that we wanted to create for the weekend. We had decorated the house with images of our countries

and phrases of Scripture. We had the help of a Puerto Rican woman, who was going to fill up the house with aromas of homeland cooking, but still we might just be too different and the common ground of being all immigrants could prove insufficient.

The “magic” of the weekend began in the bus, when it left the Catholic Center at 6 p.m. After they had finished the sandwiches and refreshments we had prepared for them, somebody opened up tamales and began sharing with others. People began laughing, singing and joking. By the time they got to the house in Ocean City, they were ready to start.

At the center of our immigrant stories, there was in us all a deep, mostly devastating story of suffering almost to death. Discounting our Ph.D., who came from success to more success, the stories were heartbreaking: We couldn’t feed our children. They would cry at night of hunger, and we did not have anything to give them. There were no jobs in our countries. The guerrillas displaced us. Drug traffickers were trying to kill my husband because he worked for the government. We went into hiding, but when we received threats against our children, we decided to leave ... with nothing. Our children traveled in the plane to America hugging their favorite toy throughout the flight. We took nothing and left behind the most precious of all our treasures, our families, our friends, our community.

From the 20 of us, (minus our dear Ph.D.) nobody was able to tell their story without sobbing, and yet we were not a weak, defenseless group. We were women who have risked everything for our families, for our own futures. We have survived rape, starvation and domestic violence. We are working here as lions to provide for our families here and for our families left behind. We work long hours, take care of our children and still are incredibly generous with our time to serve in the church. Some may feel compassion for us and would lovingly offer us support (you know, inspired by those words of “love your neighbor, as I love you, and be merciful because I have been merciful with you”). Others would like to throw at us the heavy book of the law (administrative law by the way, not criminal law) and say to us “you do not have proper documents, and you don’t belong here. I will make your life so miserable that you better go back by yourself where you come from.” May God in his great goodness not put the second group under the same circumstances as we, las mujeres, because I am pretty sure that if they were under the same circumstances

they would do just the same.

We, las mujeres, what we need most is the opportunity to develop our gifts, our desire to give of ourselves for others, beginning with our families and extending to the whole community and country. We have so much to give, and we want to give it freely as the Holy Father asked us to do this past April at the Nationals Park during his brief words in Spanish at the end of his homily: “Do not let yourselves be overcome by pessimism or inertia because of the problems. Rather, faithful to the commitments that you have acquired in your baptism, deepen each day in the knowledge of Christ and let your hearts be conquered by his love and forgiveness. Freely you have received it. Give it freely.”

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