Ascension Parish Project: Service Learning

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Marriage and Family
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With the plethora of different ethnic minorities that immigrate to the United States each year, we are constantly being introduced to new cultures and heritages. One such culture is that of the Latinos. The Church of the Ascension in North Minneapolis serves many Latino families and youth by implementing programs for these youth to voice their opinions and even hold a mass in Spanish to further facilitate their culture. After listening to ministry directors and speaking with and observing Latino youth, we have found that Ascension parish is doing a great job of communicating and understanding their youth. We learned about common youth practices in relation to the dominant culture including family, marriage, dating, and gender and age differences. After learning all of this information we offer insight as to how Ascension could better serve their community of Latino families and youth.

We spent a lot of time working on this project and gaining as much information as possible. First, we all attended the service learning orientation with Ascension parish. We learned the basic facts about Ascension and the demographics of their neighborhood and members. Next, we attended a Saturday gathering, Dias Juveniles, on the University of St. Thomas campus. These events are held throughout the Archdiocese once a month and provide the youth with an opportunity to worship God, speak with others, spend time in the Word with peers, and pray. Some members attended Bible studies with Latinos; there was one male group and one female group. Both of these groups offer confidentiality and support for issues that each person is facing. We found these meetings extremely helpful in understanding their culture and expectations they face. We also tried to interview various people in the Archdiocese and specifically Ascension parish. However, after various tries and few responses, some people were unsuccessful. Nonetheless, we did get a lot of useful information from Anne Attea. She was very helpful and responded quickly with enthusiasm. On top of these learning venues, we each
attended and observed a Sunday mass. Many members of our group also had background knowledge on Latinos from journal articles, previous research, and relationships. This information was also helpful in learning about the culture of the Latino’s.

Anne Attea was able to present us with a lot of helpful information. She has worked with the Archdiocese for four and a half years. She noticed many differences between her own culture and that of the Latinos. Ms. Attea shared that Latinos are “very warm people and pay more attention to relationships than tasks.” While this cultural norm is a great gift in our individualistic society, there are difficulties with it, especially when there is conflict or a difference of opinion between the Latinos and others. Second, she shared that a sense of spirituality is a part of the culture. She observed that to be Latino is to believe in God and the Virgin Mary, and be devotional. Finally, she explained one last difference; we have different concepts of time and space. With time, it is much more fluid for Latinos while Anglos tend to be ruled by the clock. In regards to space, Latinos often crowd in cars, rooms and houses. Anglos generally like more personal and easily livable space.

Ms. Attea also shared some of the changes that have occurred within the Archdiocese and within Ascension parish since she has been with them. Within the Archdiocese, there has been a much greater presence of Latinos. Minnesota’s Latino population alone grew 166% in the last 10 years. Because 70% of Latinos are Catholic, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of people seeking out a parish in which to find a home, develop community, and seek assistance in meeting basic needs. In 1990, there were four parishes serving Latinos, five years ago there were nine. Today eighteen parishes in the Twin Cities serve Latinos. Programming wise, the Archdiocese has many more formational options available for Latinos, and an increasingly large number of parish and archdiocesan staff. This includes priests and
seminarians who are aware and paying attention to this trend by learning Spanish and taking an interest in the culture. Specifically at Ascension, the Latinos bring a new vitality to this traditional African American and Anglo parish. They see young Latino adults in leadership roles and the children as the future of the Church.

One thing that Ascension is doing well by promoting the religion and culture of the Latino’s in the Archdiocese, is hiring a bilingual, bicultural staff to address the needs of the people. This tells the people that their language and culture are valued. Another plus is that they have a team of staff that is very open to cultural diversity, yet respectful and demanding of all people to truly work towards being the Body of Christ. There are bilingual worship aids, joint community events and physical space given to cultural expressions of Latino spirituality (such as the Guadalupe shrine).

Ascension parish offers a variety of current programs for Latino Youth. One program that Ms. Attea has seen as successful is the monthly program, Dias Juveniles. Other local parishes are also trying to reach out to youth by investing in similar programs. Strong friendships are being built and the group at Ascension has really become “family” to many young men. Parish programs are helping people to get out of gangs or not even get involved in the first place. Anne specifically mentioned a good partnership that Hispanic Ministry has established with TEC organization (Teens Encounter Christ). Each year, there is a bilingual, bicultural TEC retreat that has been very life-giving for all involved. It gives young people, both Latinos and those from the dominant culture, the chance to live together for three days in a highly structured, faith-filled, and loving atmosphere. She strongly believes that the retreat helps people surround themselves in their Catholic faith.
Despite the programs and people Ascension has, there are still many concerns regarding Latinos within the archdiocese. Ms. Attea believes that reaching out to them, making them feel welcome, and being able to address their needs, are currently some of their most vital concerns. She also believes that Latinos are hungry, spirituality and physically. Everyday they must deal with racist attitudes, fear of being deported (for the undocumented), discrimination, and poverty. Addressing survival needs are vital in helping Latinos find a place in this city and country. By attending to these concerns, it is found that people grow tremendously in their faith life which opens them to participate in parish life and participate in faith formation and leadership development programs. With Anne Attea’s help, time, and patience, we gained a deeper understanding of what is currently available as resources for the Latinos in the Archdiocese.

To gain a better understanding of these Latino youth, we must look at their background and culture. Many young Latinos at Ascension are second and third generation children of Latin American immigrants. Their parents have often not received higher than a third grade education. Because of this, Latino youth at Ascension are in a different position than their parents would have been at their age with a greater opportunity to receive higher levels of education. Many parents highly encourage their students to excel educationally because of the opportunity it brings. However, some Latino parents do not view education as an important aspect of their children’s lives. There are various reasons for this lack of involvement. One such reason is the Latino cultural difference. They view the family and school as two different worlds. Additionally, being recent immigrants to the United States, certain obstacles are often preventing parents from becoming involved including economic constraints, time constraints, language barriers, and a lack of knowledge and information about American education and how to raise a child in the United States. A parent’s own lack of education may also prevent them from
becoming involved in their child’s education because of their inability to help the student with their school work.

It is important to recognize the level of involvement parents have in their children’s education because of the impact it has on the students’ success. When a parent’s knowledge is congruent with that of teachers and other staff, children are more likely to be successful in school and participate in post secondary education. There is a significant incidence of high school dropouts for Latinos. The reasons for the Latino dropout rate being greater than any other ethnic group include quitting for employment, gang involvement, lack of transportation, teenage pregnancy, and marriage. One of the most effective ways to keep a child in school is to create interest and need for involvement with the parents, families, and communities of the Latino students.

Each member of our team attended a Sunday mass given in Spanish at the Church of the Ascension. There was high attendance at the mass with the parishioners being primarily young families. It was interesting to see that the families all attend mass with their children, as compared to many other churches where young children often participate in Sunday school activities during mass. The service appeared to be an important family event for many people, with parents instructing their children to pay attention and children behaving quite well throughout mass. At one mass our group attended a young couple with an infant was brought up to the front of the church, and the baby was welcomed by the congregation. It was announced that this child was born out of wedlock to the young couple, but there was not any feelings of indignity towards this couple. The church appears to be concerned primarily with the well-being of the parishioners, and less concerned with holding up the strict traditions of the church. There was large number of babies in attendance at the Spanish masses. The church’s concern and care
for its attendees is also apparent in that many of the babies had the same fleece blankets as one another, possibly donated by the church as a welcoming or baptismal gift.

We also attended Dias Juveniles, a monthly youth gathering held at various locations throughout the Metro Area. Ascension has created a strong youth group that serves as a source of support for Latino youth in the Twin Cities area. The group’s focus is on Christian faith, but the meetings address a range of relating issues some of which include friendship, relationships, belonging, and education. Because the Latino culture has a broader definition of family than traditionally found in American society, Ascension’s youth group provides some of the educational support and involvement the Latino youth need that they are not getting at home. Our team observed Dias Juveniles at the St. Paul Seminary. Approximately seventy youth, primarily Latino from around the Twin Cities, spent the day together with activities including mass, prayer and reflection, group games, and small group discussions. At the beginning of the day the youth met seminarians who attend the University of St. Thomas and the St. Paul Seminary and learned about the seminary and attending UST. Some of the students in the group may have been interested in attending UST or joining the Seminary and this was an opportunity to expose them to the surroundings and to meet some of the people who are involved in the programs. The group also serves as an opportunity for Latino youth to meet other youth who have similar backgrounds and who may have educational goals like their own.

At the youth group meeting at the St. Paul Seminary, mass was held at the beginning of the day’s activities. At this mass and at the Sunday morning mass in Spanish at Ascension, music plays a big role in the service. The youth at the meeting and the parishioners at Ascension participate in singing along. The mass at Dias Juveniles, although shorter than a regular mass, is a way of bringing the Catholic faith tradition into a social setting where youth can share their
beliefs. Ascension parish does a good job of providing Latino youth with fun opportunities to practice and explore their faith.

Coming to the United States and receiving an education, the young Latinos of this community are experiencing a different life from back home in Mexico, Spain, and Latin American countries. Interviews were conducted with two groups: one of about 20 men, ages 14-40, and one with two Latino girls, ages 14 and 21. During two youth group sessions at Ascension Parish, statements were made concerning college ambition, dating styles, mate selection, married life, and family. A 14-year-old girl commented that most Latino youth plan on going to college today. Having this as a goal, often marriage and family is put off until a later date and older age.

The youth group members explained how in the United States most Latinos marry later in life, more around the age of 23 or within their 20s. Some of the men in the group explained that they will even wait until their 30s or 40s depending on what they want such as a true relationship or just fun times. This concept of marrying at a later age is a cultural change. Back in Mexico City, one young man noted, the average age for marriage is 18 years old. This is the case for a couple of reasons explained by the men in the group. First, they say there is nothing better to do; school is not an option, and the person wants a change, so he decides to get married. This may even occur as young as age 16. Second, in Mexico one must abstain from sex until 18-years-old. Only kissing during a relationship is allowed, not sex. This is one reason why when a man or woman turns 18, he or she gets married right away. The 21-year-old woman stated that in Chili, people are often engaged once they turn 18. The 14-year-old said that today in the United States, the usual marriage age is in the 20s or 30s, and often the man is still a bit older than the woman. One young man told a story about his cousin who just recently came to the United States and has
a 15-year-old wife. Many Latino men still marry women younger than themselves even in the United States.

As more Latino youth put off marriage and pursue an education, the act of dating takes on an important role for them. The ritual of dating has changed culturally for both these men and women. Many of the men explained that there are two types of women they date depending on what kind of relationship they are looking for. The girls they meet in bars, school, or work, are often those the men “have a good time with”. They enjoy dating them to have fun, but would not consider them marriage material. One young man commented, “In Mexico, people often get married at age 15, but here at that age we just want to hang out.” Another man said, “I am 19 years old, I plan to get married at 21 years old.” This means he has time to hang out and date for fun. The other kind of relationship these men are looking for is based on commitment. When a man is ready to get married he most likely will look for his future wife at church, church organizations or some other organization. One man stated that he is like most Latino men in that he wants his future wife to be a good, loving, Catholic woman who he meets at church. Another man noted that the dating and marriage path “…depends, if you are older you think about marriage, and want a relationship that will be a family in the future. If you are younger you want to have fun first, and then get married.”

When the male group was asked what is most important to them in a relationship one young man stated he wants “to be treated good.” He explained that ‘treat’ means that if you call a girl after you have met her in a bar or another casual social situation, often this is not grounds for a serious relationship, but for fun instead. The woman who would treat him well is one who is ‘solid’ and focused on the relationship. The more importance put on the relationship, the more likely it will lead to marriage.
Dating outside someone’s race and/or religion is not common within the Latino community. However, both the women said they would marry outside of their race, but would like similar religions. The men said that in America, Latino males may be in interracial relationships, but it depends on the family and the religious beliefs. One man explained, “Having two cultures like Mexican and American makes it more fun. If I, the Mexican male and an American female are together, I can teach her about my culture and she can teach me about hers.” A story was told about a man’s brother who speaks Spanish while his wife speaks English, but they are making it work.

During the interview with the young women, the 14 year old stated that the average age for a Latino girl to start dating is older than it is for boys, which is because these girls tend to date older men. She also commented that her parents think she is too young to date, yet her younger brother is allowed to date. So does this mean that these younger men are all dating older women? The 21-year-old woman believes men and boys can get away with much more.

The men of the youth group also talked about their parents’ influence on dating. “It’s part of the culture, grandparents and parents stay at home also, they (live) remain throughout their lives with the family,” the leader of the group explained. Therefore, one man also described, “There are deep things in our culture. Parents still live like they live in their own country (Mexico)” describing that parents tend to stay with the culture. “If we want to do something, but our parents say “no,” it is because it is against our culture. Friends even stop us because of our culture.” In other words, their parents still follow traditional ways of life and use these to guide their decisions in raising their children. The leader of the group commented on his own family experiences, “My sister and I may get different answers from our parents about going out. I go out and it is okay, but for my sister that is not okay.” Cultural values are still
strong. However, one man noted, “Some guys like girls who have been in America for awhile, because they have the American culture, not have parents like in Mexico.” As with any culture, the rules for children depend on the opinions of the parents.

Cultural conflicts do exist between how relationships are handled in America compared to Mexico. Having first, second, and third generations living together in a new country can bring forth clashes in understanding the roles of the household. In the Latino culture, men are the leaders and women are the followers. The mother provides the education, but the father is the leader. However, as one man described, it is intelligence and knowledge that makes someone the leader, not the motivation to dominate, that is weakness. A young man said he wants a woman who is intelligent, “I don’t want to ‘tell’ her what to do.” The leader in the family was explained as “the most intelligent person, one having wisdom that comes naturally from self or God,” as one man put it, “that is the leader in the relationship.” Another member noted, “We still have the macho culture but it is the mothers who educate people. Women struggle with everything.”

The men in the youth group believed the gender roles are changing. One member’s five sisters have college degrees and are working. Women have the same authority as men in today’s relationships. Also men are beginning to see things differently. A major topic of concern for the men was that Mexican men are usually stereotyped “Macho Men” or Machismos, but don’t believe it is true of today’s Latino men. Because of more education, changes are taking place in Mexico as more men are becoming open-minded. The men pointed out that there is a difference between being a ‘macho man’ and being the ‘leader.’ Equality exists in the relationships, but the man is still the leader. The man’s brother with the interracial marriage deals with different stereotypes as to the roles in the family, but the couple are working on the marriage together as partners. The leader provides security and knowledge, while the ‘macho man’ boosts his
authority and tells people what to do. However, the men also believe that Latino women today
do not understand that the macho image has changed. They do not understand this because as
one member put it, “in Mexico, the man is the leader, that’s it. The woman’s responsibility is to
take care of the children.” He also said that technology has changed and grown, therefore life
cannot be like that today. “We are created equal. Women can do anything.” Another member
blurted out, “not necessarily” to this statement. “In Mexico there is more rough work like cutting
and collecting wood. Women’s work is more intelligent, they need to be intelligent to work in
an office or hotel. In the United States, the type of work changes for men and women so they
can do the same things.” These men have varying views on gender roles, and will have to work
out conflicts that happen because of them.

After coming to the United States, the young men have begun to alter their views on
gender roles within the family. The men were frustrated at the fact that they believed they were
changing the stereotype, but the women reinforced it. A man described a situation where he was
planning a date with a woman, “If I say I want to see you again, what should I do? The girl tells
me I should choose.” He wanted to have an equal partnership, but felt the girl believed he was
responsible for making all of the decisions. Another comment was made, “I want equality, if the
woman has the idea then she should do it,” referring to making plans for the date. With good
communication skills these young Latinos can overcome problems dealing with gender role
expectations.

Other cultural conflicts exist between being Latino and living in the United States.
Religion is very important to the Latino culture. The act of marriage is sacred within the Latino
culture, and while divorce is an option, it is considered a very bad option and is frowned upon.
The male group described what happens after a couple divorces. “The church, community,
friends and family look down on you for doing it. You get labeled bad.” One man said, “Women are afraid to get divorced in our culture because they worry about their children, they do not know what to do with the children.” The 14-year-old girl said she would consider getting a divorce if it is necessary. She thinks it is okay to do so in the United States because “women are not stigmatized here.” They believe having children is also very important, “there are no abortions either,” as one boy explained, “the couple must marry.” One member noted that “when a couple, no matter what age, has sex and the woman gets pregnant, the parents compel the couple to get married.” These cultural norms and expectation guide the Latino youth with regards to marriage and family.

Through the cultural changes and struggles, these Latino men and women differ among each other while still experiencing the same emotions towards marriage and family as the rest of the world. Two members of the male group explained their thoughts for the future. The first being a 19-year-old man who said, “I want to raise kids when I am young, 40 year old dad, 20 year old kids. It depends on your knowledge and what you want.” The other man said, “I am older, I want to get married and give everything to my kids. I am looking towards the future rather than having fun now.” The 14 year old girl would like to work by being a housewife and having three children. However, she is dating for fun at the moment. The 21-year-old woman is kind of looking for marriage in her dating, but is hoping to continue her education and work as well. She too said she would like about three or four children. There are correlating family patterns within the Latino culture through speaking to individuals from Ascension parish. Though their culture is a bit different, it is hard to relate to the new surroundings and expectations of our society and how it still coincides with the American way of life. These youth
feel comfortable speaking in the groups available to them through Ascension, showing the leaders of the groups’ accomplishment in helping these kids to communicate.

Our team has several suggestions for the Church of the Ascension. First it could be helpful to utilize the youth group forum as an opportunity to involve the Latino youths’ parents and families in the students’ educations and lives. Another idea is to have dinners or banquets around the holidays so that the parents can be encouraged to participate and so they are aware of how their child is doing. The new language may also be a barrier these immigrants are facing. Ascension could hold English as a second language classes in order to help these parishioners learn English. We believe it would be easier if more bilingual or bicultural staff were hired in order to help converse with the youth. Ascension could attempt to completely mix the ages and races of its congregants in an effort to become accustomed to everyone’s culture as most of the children that go to school at Ascension are not Latino. Along with this idea they could offer a program in which all of the ethnic backgrounds get together and share their culture by preparing food and customs on a monthly basis. Finally, the students at the youth group meeting opened up to one another and the leaders as youth shared their thoughts and feelings about a variety of topics. If Ascension were able to create a similar atmosphere involving both the youth and their families, parents may become more involved in their children’s educational lives as well as other aspects of their lives.

With the young men and women at these events, as well as Anne Attea’s help, time, and patience, we gained a deeper understanding of what is currently available as resources for the Latinos in the Archdiocese. One of the most effective ways to keep children in school is to create interest and a need for parental involvement. Although Ascension has many strong programs, there are still many concerns affecting the Latinos in the Metro Area. Everyday
Latinos are forced to deal with racism, discrimination, poverty, and for some the fear of being deported. Ascension should not only focus on the spiritual needs of these people, but also basic survival needs. By having leaders in the church who understand the Catholic faith, traits of leadership, and understand the Latino culture, Ascension and the Archdiocese can help the Latinos grow spiritually, emotionally, and as United States citizens.