News

A group of brown people, many wearing crosses, assume prayerful postures

Participants pray during Mass at the Labor Day Encuentro gathering at Immaculate Conception Seminary in Huntington, N.Y., Sept. 3, 2018. Sponsored by the Office of Hispanic Ministry of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., the annual event -- which also includes a picnic and outdoor activities -- offers Latino youth and young adults an opportunity to celebrate their faith and heritage in a communal setting. (OSV News photo/CNS file/ Gregory A. Shemitz)

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Throughout the last few years, Hispanics Catholics have been recognized as the largest growing population in the U.S. Catholic Church -- accounting for nearly 71% of the growth of the Catholic population in the United States since 1960. The Pew Research Center estimates that there are 63.7 million Hispanics living in the United States, about 31 million of them self-identify as Roman Catholic.

But, even though Hispanics account for more than 42% of U.S. Catholics, the number of U.S. born Hispanics serving the church -- as lay ministers, women and men religious, seminarians, priests and deacons -- has remained relatively low. Looking to

increase the number of young Hispanic Catholics serving the church, diocesan offices, theologians and educators are exploring ways to invest in this population, with a renewed hope of revitalizing ministries and faithful engagement throughout the U.S. Catholic Church.

One such program is Haciendo Caminos, a five-year initiative that helps to support the graduate ministerial education of young Hispanic Catholics born or raised in the U.S. by allocating resources to instill a profound sense of ecclesial vocation.

"The idea will be to model what other universities and what other dioceses and organizations could be doing," said co-founder Hosffman Ospino, theology and religious educator at Boston College and chair of its department of religious education and pastoral ministry. "We need to create a culture of vocation within the Latino community, and this is one way of doing it."

The vision of Ospino and Timothy Matovina, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, Haciendo Caminos -- which translates to building paths -- is a partnership between 18 Catholic institutions made a reality thanks to a $7.9 million grant awarded by Lilly Endowment Inc., a private philanthropic foundation.

Ospino told OSV News that Haciendo Caminos developed a system of awarding fellowships to students accepted into the graduate theological or pastoral ministry programs of its partner institutions.

In addition to Boston College and the University of Notre Dame, these institutions are: The Catholic University of America in Washington; Fordham University in New York City; Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis; the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago; Loyola University Chicago; Barry University in Miami; the Franciscan School of Theology at the University of San Diego; the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University in California and the university's graduate programs in pastoral ministries; Loyola Marymount University and Mount St. Mary’s University in Los Angeles; St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, California; Loyola University New Orleans; and the University of the Incarnate Word, the Mexican American Catholic College and the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio.

With one of the program's goals being reducing barriers and increasing financial support for Hispanic graduate students, a fellowship of up to $30,000 enables beneficiaries to use the funds to pay tuition and other essential needs such as

housing, child care and health-related expenses.

"In that way, we pave the way for these students to focus on their studies to eventually join the life of the church, serving ministerially and, ideally, without debt," Ospino said.

While about half of the funding will go to fellowships, the rest will go to foster a culture of ministerial vocation through a series of programming and initiatives. For instance, Haciendo Caminos invited every partner institution to create a small network of organizations, schools, and parishes to support students in their programs.

In addition to financial support while completing their master's degree in a partner institution, fellows will develop pastoral leadership skills, meet other Latino/a young adult Catholic leaders from around the country and connect with local mentors and ministerial partners.

Additionally, the initiative is planning national vocation summits to welcome people finishing their undergraduate studies or people considering a graduate formation in ministry to talk about what it means to be a minister in the Catholic Church. Lastly, Ospino said that bringing Latino/Latina theologians and pastoral leaders as visitors to classes would be invaluable in the formation of students, as they can get a feel of the dialogue about ministry and theology from a Latino perspective.

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A young Latino who embodies the type of leader Haciendo Caminos aims to cultivate is Juan Miguel Alvarez, the director of the program.

During his childhood, up until age 5, Alvarez remembers his parents packing him and his five siblings into a large van and hitting the road north from his native Jalisco, Mexico, to the United States. Once there, the family would spend the summers picking cucumbers and cherries in California and Washington state fields. "I was the only one not to work because I'm the youngest of six, so I was the baby in the family," Alvarez told OSV News.

Afterward, Alvarez's family settled in Colorado Springs, Colorado, bringing much change into his life, but one thing remained constant: his living and practicing the

Catholic faith.

"It was non-negotiable that we were at Mass every Sunday," he said. "It was just the way of life. It was what my siblings did, what my family did, and I felt at home in church."

When Alvarez was a teenager, he began reading about theology, prompted by a desire to find out "why we did what we did and to explain myself to friends who questioned me about the faith," he said.

Soon, this interest blossomed into a passion for the study of theology, and, wanting to get involved in ministry, he pursued undergraduate studies at the University of Notre Dame. He graduated in 2014 and then moved to Chicago, where he did youth ministry work in parishes and schools for six years.

But, Alvarez recounted, unlike his experience growing up in Colorado Springs, "where there were Hispanics, but not a ton," the communities to which he ministered in Chicago were "mostly Mexican American, mostly Hispanic," and he saw the bilingual, bicultural experience up close.

"I realized there were a lot of Latinos here in the United States who grow up in this world," he said. "It's almost like they took a piece of Mexico with them when they came to the United States and, culturally, they very much live a lot of Mexican traditions while also speaking English and practicing the American traditions."

Chicago acted as a catalyst, as Alvarez realized that, with adequate formation, Latinos could go on to serve ministerially in parishes, hospitals, and schools, among others, leading to his return to the University of Notre Dame. There, he enrolled in the master of divinity program, completing his degree in 2023.

A day after graduation, he was named the director of Haciendo Caminos.

Alvarez said the program, which resonated with him not only ministerially but personally, "offers training leaders for tomorrow not for the U.S. Hispanic Catholic Church but the U.S. Catholic Church in general."

"We have so many talented (Hispanic) young men and women growing up in this country. … They bring so much to the table, and yet they don't always have access to become the leaders they can be," Alvarez said. "With Haciendo Caminos, we take talented, mission-oriented people within the Catholic faith and give them the tools to

go out there and lead."

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