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Four people, including two women on the ends, a man wearing a clerical collar and jacket and

Participants of the Oct. 18, 2023, Latino Leader Gathering at Georgetown University in Washington included, from left: Mirka Sosa, Georgetown alumna and immigration paralegal; Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjívar, moderator Christian Soenen, project manager for the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life; and Diana Dau David, part of the core leadership team for the ARK young adult community at St. Ann Catholic Church in Washington. (OSV News photo/courtesy Georgetown's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life)

Maria del Pilar Guzman

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When Washington Auxiliary Bishop Evelio Menjívar was 19 years old, he set out on a perilous journey from El Salvador to the United States, arriving at his destiny on the trunk of a car.

A native of Chalatenango, a Salvadoran department heavily impacted by the country's brutal civil war, Menjívar had left his village for another town at age 12. But by age 18, unable to complete high school and facing dire prospects for the future, he saw no other viable option than to emigrate north.

After arriving in the United States, Menjívar stayed in Los Angeles for seven years, having applied for political asylum and obtained a permit to work there. He then relocated to Maryland, where his vocation to the priesthood grew, embraced by the community of St. Mark Parish in Hyattsville.

The topic of community was at the heart of the Latino Leader Gathering the auxiliary bishop attended Oct. 18. Part of Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, the gathering was entitled "Strengthening Community and Resisting Individualism: Challenges for Young Latinos and Contributions from Latino Culture." Part of the event was live streamed.

Moderated by Christian Soenen, the initiative's projects manager, the night featured Menjívar as one of three Latino leaders who exemplify what it means to build community amid destructive individualism that contributes to polarization and civic disengagement. The initiative regularly explores issues involving faith and public life with community leaders.

Inspired by his experience and work as an immigrant, Menjívar -- before Pope Francis appointed him as auxiliary bishop in December 2022 -- focused much of his priestly ministry on helping workers and immigrants.

"I'm an immigrant, and I'm a worker, so I understand very much both. So, just to advocate for immigrants and workers is my passion ... But it's also my duty, I will say. So, I got involved with this, especially with the labor movement in 2014," Menjívar told the audience.

"I believe it is a privilege to walk with people, but at the same time, it's also a responsibility that we have," he said. "We have to -- it's an obligation -- to support people in their struggle for a better life."

Having found a family in his church community when he found himself alone after arriving in the United States, Menjívar told those gathered, "The church offers us opportunities to build up community, to build up solidarity, and that's how I experience church."

"Mass is coming together in community. The first aspect of a Mass, the Eucharist, is coming together. That's what Jesus said," he said.

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For speaker Diana Dau David, who works at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, growing up in Colombia alongside a large family and community of friends nurtured in her a "desire to connect and [a] desire to belong. That desire to have a purpose serving others beyond myself," she said.

When her family moved to the United States and settled in a rural town in South Carolina when David was a teenager, those became the pillars on which they built a new life.

"I saw my parents seek the community. They were an example to me of how to go about seeking community. How to not isolate yourself and seek the community through the church and through nonprofits and organizations that they were a part of," said David, who has a master's degree in intercultural and international communication from American University in Washington.

David is active in the young adult group at St. Ann Parish in Washington, witnessing the community grow. From talks and Masses with St. John's Society to events for The ARK -- a community of young adults whose activities include small groups on Tuesdays and First Friday Holy Hours followed by socialization -- "when you go to these events, you feel this joy that is very contagious and that it makes you feel like you belong," she said. "And it makes you want to come back."

The last speaker of the night, Mirka Sosa, experienced a culture clash while attending Georgetown University for her undergraduate studies, as the collectivism that had characterized her upbringing in a Latino household in Texas was in stark contrast with the hypercompetitive environment and individualism that reigned at the institution.

"It was something that took me a long time to really come to terms with," she said.

However, Sosa, who is now an immigration paralegal, embraced her sense of building community when most needed: during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also brought sheer isolation.

Sosa was proactive in seeking effective ways to help her community tackle the problems they were facing, including translating public health information for her family, as it was not readily available in Spanish, and working closely with elementary school students who were falling behind because they did not have

regular access to Wi-Fi.

"I think the pandemic allowed us to recognize that there are different avenues of connection," including Zoom and other forms of video chat, she said. "It's really important to think about how these things have helped us."

An advocate of connecting and building community with technology, she believes it all comes down to living a balanced life. "Yes, we are our own people, and we need to look after ourselves. But we also need to look after each other," she said.