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Vicente Del Real, left, Sheila Cruz-Morales, Christian Soenen and Carlota Ocampo were participants in the Jan. 29, 2024, Georgetown University Latino Leader Gathering on "Breaking Barriers: Latinos and Education, Economic Mobility, and the Catholic Church." (OSV News/Courtesy of Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University)

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February 5, 2024
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Breaking barriers to access to quality education is key to preventing economic disparities and ensuring generations of Latinos fully contribute to society, said panelists at a Jan. 29 dialogue at Georgetown University.

At the Latino Leader Gathering, panelists discussed ways U.S. policies can "address disparities that hold back Latinos and diminish all of society." They also looked into how the Catholic community, with its institutional, pastoral and social resources, responds to these realities — and how young Latinos who have broken barriers in their own lives and education can work to help those who come behind them.

"Our Catholic teachings tell us everyone deserves certain rights of dignity to live and a right to what I call livelihood. Education is the basis of that," said panelist Carlota Ocampo, provost, vice president of academic affairs and an associate professor of psychology at Trinity Washington University. "So, in order for all of us to live in a healthy, functioning society, Latinos must be educated and have access and pathways and specialized curricula that make it possible for them to succeed."

The discussion part of the gathering, titled "Breaking Barriers: Latinos and Education, Economic Mobility, and the Catholic Church," was held inside Georgetown's Maguire Hall, and was sponsored by the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, a Georgetown organization. Organizers said more than 500 people attended in person and online.

Panel moderator Christian Soenen, projects manager of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life, said many Latinos in the United States are left behind in education, economic life and political life. With an expansive network of high schools, colleges and universities, along with extensive ministry programs for youth and young adults, they said, the Catholic Church in the United States is uniquely positioned to address these challenges and respond holistically to Latinos' social, economic and pastoral needs.

"Nearly half of all U.S. Catholics are Latino, including more than 60% of Catholics under the age of 18," said Soenen, yet far too few Latino Catholic children attend Catholic elementary schools, high schools or universities.

"How did I get here? The simple answer is: God, the resilience of my ancestors; my mom and dad," Sheila Cruz-Morales, one of the three panelists and a DACA recipient, said during the webinar.

The DACA program — Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals — was created in 2012 under the Obama administration to offer protection from deportation to certain immigrants brought to the country as children. In October 2022, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit Court ruled DACA unlawful, but allowed the program to remain in place for current recipients and for those processing renewals, as the case continues in the courts. The Biden administration issued a final rule in August 2022 to codify the program. The rule was to have taken effect Oct. 31, 2022, but its implementation was delayed by the 5th Circuit ruling.

On Sept. 13, 2023, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas ruled against DACA, holding that the program was unlawful. The judge also found the new rule intended to codify DACA was unlawful but, like the 5th Circuit, maintained a partial stay of the order for "all DACA recipients who received their initial DACA status prior to July 16, 2021."

"Yeah, it was very difficult as an undocumented student. Not only do we face a broken public school system, but we also face a broken, an intentionally designed broken immigration system," said Cruz-Morales. "I am Indigenous, I am from Oaxaca, Mexico. ... There are struggles, and there are connected struggles."

A 2023 Georgetown University graduate, she is a dedicated activist and community organizer. Along with her twin sister, Melanie, she established the nonprofit College Access for Non-Citizens, which helps first-generation, low-income students of color who are in the country without legal documents attain access to higher education.

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Another panelist, Vicente Del Real, said that "we have a lot of work to do" to overcome barriers to education. And change will have to involve people in small communities, including those in the room, he added.

"We all know an undocumented immigrant; we all know a DACA recipient. We all know somebody who is maybe discouraged about studying. We can all be mentors — we can all pitch in five, 10 dollars to create a scholarship fund. We must be part of the solution," he said. "The best way to fight these political and economical barriers is by taking action, community by community."

Del Real, a Mexican immigrant, is the founder of Iskali, a nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering and supporting young Latinos through faith formation, mentorship and scholarships. Iskali supports first-, second- and third-generation immigrants and helps young Latinos pursue higher education. Del Real also teaches part time at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago.

"One of the ways that we accomplish this great mission is by partnering with organizations, like both of your organizations (Cruz-Morales' and Del Real's), so I'm going to be talking with you after this meeting," said Ocampo, who also talked about the impact of working with students facing different challenges. "Because that's how we do it — we gather that community together and we figure out how could we do this together. … We really have to study how we can create a curriculum that can support them and make sure that they're successful."

Trinity, which was founded as Trinity College by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in 1897, has gained prominence in recent years for success in the education of low-income students of color, according to the university's website.

The panelists agreed that among viable ways to help break barriers for young Latinos is to advocate for the creation of scholarship funds and for significant increases in social support and community support to help young Latinos apply to college, find money for college, apply for scholarships — to help them navigate the various processes. This all has to start, they agreed, with individuals and then organizations, communities and the church — at the diocesan and parish levels.

The dialogue opened with a special remembrance of Bishop Mario Dorsonville, who passed away Jan. 19. Dorsonville was the bishop of the Diocese of Houma-Thibodaux, Louisiana, and previously served as an auxiliary bishop for the Archdiocese of Washington, 2015-2023. He was remembered as "a joyful, warm, and much-loved person," said Kim Daniels, the director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University. The bishop supported Latinos around the archdiocese and young Hispanic students in different ways, including

empowering them to pursue their dreams, added Fatima Vasquez-Molina, a Catholic University of America graduate.

After the webinar, Soenen told OSV News that young Latinos are the future and present of the church. "They make up such an important part of the church that will only get more important," he said. "So mobilizing those resources to ensure that that population is educated and ready to contribute as much as possible to their communities is super important."