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## US & World

# Why we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month

September 15, 2016 - By Alicia Morandi



Quinceañeras introduce girls both into society and the Church. (photo/Victor Aleman)

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- The celebration began in 1968 when Congress authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to proclaim the National Week of Hispanic Heritage. Twenty years later a law extending the celebration to 31 days, and naming it “Month of Hispanic Heritage,” was approved.

Hispanics feel a deep love for the Virgin Mary and her Guadalupe image, she said. "We believe that God leaves us his mother to continue to embrace us.

- "The Hispanic culture is rich and vibrant, filled with traditions, celebrations and solid relations. It's our way of life. It's who we are as Latinos," said Dr. Gloria Rodríguez.



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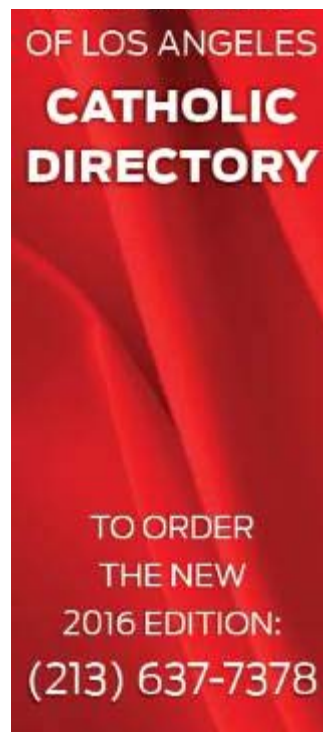
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With its variety of music, flavors, traditions and language, the Hispanic culture is an integral part of this nation. Hispanic Heritage Month, celebrated each year from Sept. 15 to Oct. 15, honors the contributions made by Hispanics to the United States.

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Part of Hispanic heritage is inarguably Catholic.

Sister María Guadalupe Malvais, from the Congregación Misioneras Guadalupanas del Espíritu Santo (Congregation of Guadalupe Missionaries of the Holy Spirit), entered religious life in 1999 in Los Angeles. Her congregation works with migrants from all countries. In Los Angeles she works in evangelization and catechesis at the parish level.

“I think that if the Church has remained alive, it has been mainly due to the work Hispanics have done through expressing their religiosity and their devotions and, most importantly, by expressing their love of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” she said.

“They give life to their parishes through initiatives and requests that aim at reviving their faith. ‘We want a Cursillo.’ ‘We want to have a marriage group or meeting groups for young people...’ They are always searching and this improves the spiritual life of the parish,” she said.

According to Sister Maria Guadalupe, family is not limited to mother and father for Hispanics. There are grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, often all living under the same roof. This sense of family is what makes them have so many celebrations. “Thanksgiving Day, for example. Although we don’t celebrate it in our countries, here we welcome the holiday because it is a way to stay together.”

That familiar union, she added, helps Hispanics grow, not only personally, but in solidarity with everyone else. “There is always a sensitivity towards the other, even if someone does not belong to the family. What happens to you, happens to me.”

The typical celebration of the quinceañera (girls’ 15th birthday) goes further than introducing a young girl into society. It is a time to introduce and present her to the Church.

“Hispanics are not so concerned with the expense of the party, even though they might not have the money. What they wish is to give thanks to God for the life of the daughter or the son, because, lately, they are beginning to also have these celebrations for boys that turn 15,” Sister Maria Guadalupe said. She added that in the parish classes designed to prepare the quinceañeras, they are taught that they need to serve their fellow human beings. “The message is: we are presenting you because you are the daughter that is being called to serve the Church and society.”

Hispanics feel a deep love for the Virgin Mary and her Guadalupana image, she said. “We believe that God leaves us his mother to continue to embrace us. Hispanics cannot understand Jesus without Mary, nor Mary without Jesus. It’s impossible to understand one without the other.”

Recalling the great challenges that the Catholic Church faces today, she said that “some things have happened that have perhaps distanced some Catholics.” But she has seen how the majority of the Hispanic faithful have strengthened their faith and are more committed, because the Church herself defends those who are more vulnerable.

Another great challenge for Hispanic Catholics, according to the religious, is remaining informed and active, “because we cannot continue to be ‘pew-warming’ Catholics or call ourselves Catholics only because we have been baptized, but never get involved in the Church nor in society,” she said.

“The pope himself is calling us to maintain our values, to remain active, to be a Church that goes out to encounter others. We contribute with the richness of our culture, which we do not want to force onto anyone, but rather share it while we become enriched by the Church in the United States.”

To the rhythm of guitars, xylophones, maracas, drums, accordions, trumpets and other musical instruments, Hispanics create melodies from cumbias to polkas, salsa to merengue and more. In that way they celebrate and reach the world.

“The Hispanic culture is rich and vibrant, filled with traditions, celebrations and solid relations. It’s our way of life. It’s who we are as Latinos,” said Dr. Gloria Rodríguez, a leader for health and education affairs for parents and children, founder of AVANCE, a national organization with headquarters in San Antonio, Texas, and author of, among other books, “Criando a nuestros niños,” (Raising our children).

“From baptism to quinceañera, Hispanic parents have celebrated events that unite family and friends with lots of food, music, joy and spirituality. Hispanics believe in celebrating life.”

Each celebration is decked out with its own songs, like when “Las Mañanitas” is sung at birthdays, or accompanied by music and acting. Las Posadas are an annual Christmas tradition recalling the Holy Family’s search for lodging. The “Day of the Dead,” or “Dia de los Muertos,” is a cultural

celebration of All Souls' Day.

“That day marks one of the many Hispanic traditions that help us face death in a positive manner. It helps us cope with life’s heavy loads. Ceremonial rites unite us to God, to family and to friends,” adds Rodríguez.

The expert stresses how essential it is for Hispanics in the United States to teach their children to appreciate their culture. “If we don’t introduce our children to our cultural traditions, these traditions will surely die along with the benefits that they offer.”

In the same way, the Hispanic Heritage Month offers an opportunity to recognize the social and economic contributions that the Hispanic community brings to the United States.

“Latinos or Hispanics form the ethnic group which presents the most positive behavior about family, work, health and community,” according to David Hayes-Bautista, director of the Center for the Study of Latino Health and Culture at the School of Medicine at UCLA.

A study done a few years ago titled “California Identity Project,” published by the UCLA Research Center of Chicano Studies, found that Latino immigrants receive the least amount of money from government programs, demonstrate a strong dedication to their work and exhibit a low drop-out rate.

“In spite of having an economic and an educational disadvantage, as well as poor access to medical care, their mortality rate is one-third lower than non-Latino Caucasians, and Latino women give birth to the healthiest babies,” Hayes-Bautista said.

In reference to family relations, he stressed the important role of women. “The Hispanic woman is the one that forms the values in society, achieving surprising results in spite of obstacles. The value of this feminine contribution is what makes Latinos have a tendency to form families that are united.”

Speaking of their economic contribution, he stated that the number of Hispanic companies in the United States grew 43.7 percent between 2002 and 2007, as reported by the 2010 Census. The growth rate doubled in comparison to the rest of the population.

There are 1.3 million Hispanics registered in the military in the country, and approximately 1.1 million of Hispanics, 18 years or older, are Armed Forces veterans.

This census also showed that the Hispanic population is now the largest minority in the country, and that it is projected that by the middle of 2050, it will grow to more than 130 million — 30 percent of the country’s total population.



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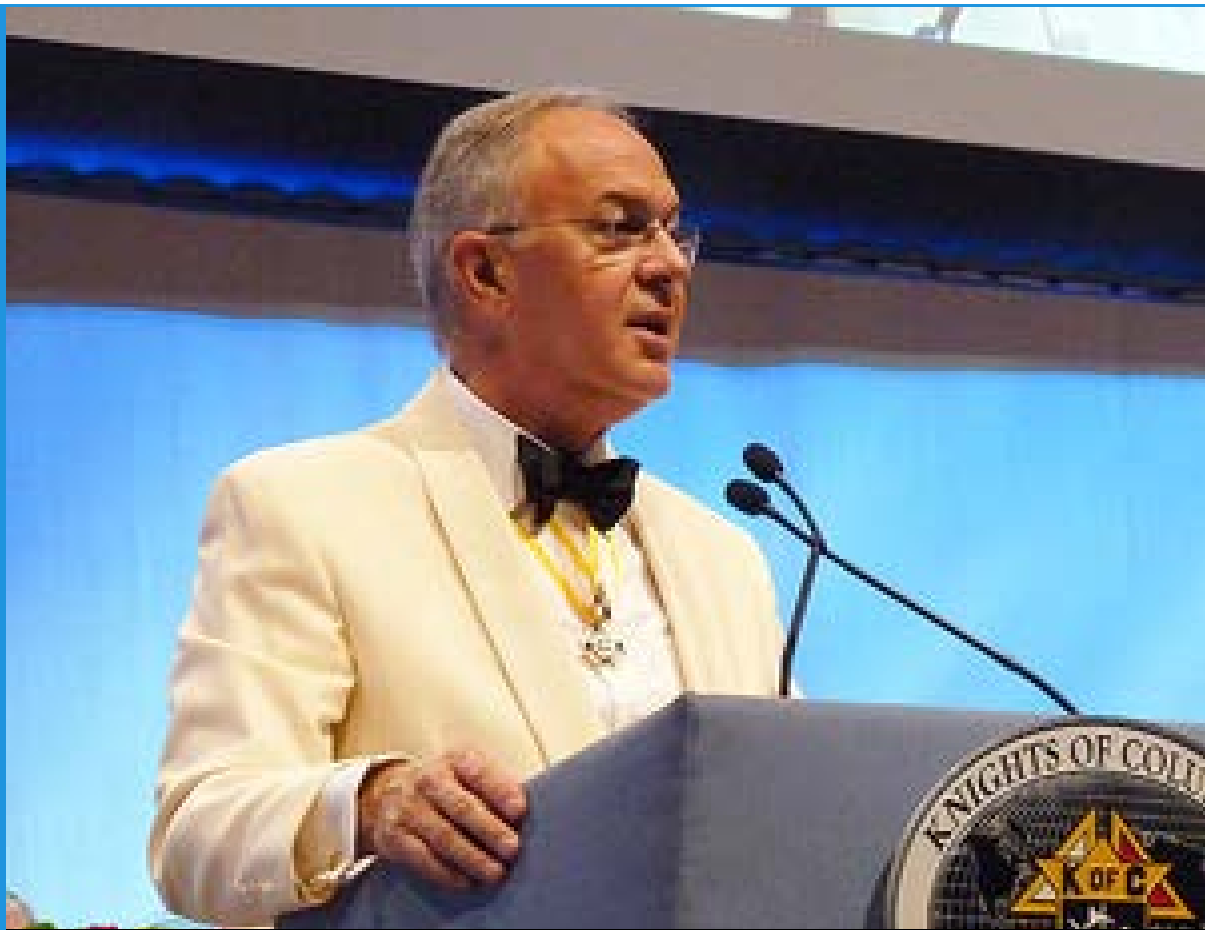
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