Faith formation program for Latinos a huge success

In his apostolic exhortation, Ecclesia in America, Saint John Paul II says, “It is more necessary than ever for all the faithful to move from a faith of habit, sustained perhaps by social context alone, to a faith which is conscious and personally lived.” Ken Gleason, recently retired director of Evangelization and Catechesis for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati, sees the Catholics among the estimated 70-80,000 Latinos in the archdiocesan demographic area as very much a part of “all the faithful.” The problem is that the majority among this large population are such by “social context alone.” Spanish missionaries converted indigenous peoples in South and Latin America and Mexico, but through the years, economic and academic poverty and political oppression in their home countries have deprived Latin American Catholics of the kind of rich catechesis available to U.S. Catholics.

While Latino life includes deep devotion to Jesus, Mary, the saints, and the sacraments, many lack a solid grasp of the basic tenets of the Church. “Their faith is deep but an understanding of it isn’t,” said Fr. Louis Gasparini, Director of Hispanic Ministry for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati.

Fr. Louis and Ken found they were both of the same frame of thought during a lunch meeting they had about a year ago. After discussing the impressive numbers of Latinos in the archdiocese, their loyalty to Sunday obligations and feast day celebrations, and their desperate need for faith formation, both agreed that serious steps needed to be taken in the area of Latino catechesis. “We had tried some internet courses offered through the University of Dayton, but there were too many obstacles to allow it to succeed, for the general parishioner,” Fr. Louis said. Schedule conflicts, lack of technology in the home, and struggles with reading and writing were the biggest problems. “I knew we had to be creative, and I knew we needed to coordinate a plan. I am deeply appreciative to Ken for taking the initiative.”

Within a month, the Evangelization and Catechesis Office advertised for an Assistant Director for Latino Catechesis. In August 2014, Dina Beach took the position and set to work immediately. “She comes highly qualified,” said Ken. “Being a native of Mexico, she speaks Spanish. Having been in parish ministry to Latino adults for several years, she knows the catechetical needs. Being a Comboni lay missionary, she comes with a spirit of evangelization already afire.”
By spring 2015, Dina, in collaboration with the Office of Hispanic Ministry, had a program of catechesis in place. A series of eight classes for adults offered in four different locations – Dayton, Springfield, Hamilton and Cincinnati – has drawn an enrollment of 250 participants. The program Formación Cristiana para Adultos opened with its first session on April 11th and concluded on August 1st. Bishop Joe Binzer celebrated a closing Mass at Holy Family Church in Price Hill on August 9th.

Designed in Venezuela, it works very well for the population of Latinos here. “We needed a program that would meet participants where they are,” said Dina, “and take them through the basics of the Catholic faith in a way that is not threatening. The content meets the requirements set forth by the archdiocese; it is not watered down in any way.”

Two priests from Venezuela served as presenters, Fathers Antonio La Rocca, SMC and Javier Alson, SMC. They brought with them a familiarity with the program, an understanding of the language, customs, and needs of the people, and personalities that put participants at ease. “What a gift to have these two priests on board,” said Ken Gleason. “They know that even though people have books in front of them, many struggle with reading, and they gear their presentations to address that situation.”

“We didn’t work in a vacuum,” Father Louis explained. “There was collaboration from many along the way.” Karla Eysoldt, Coordinator of Hispanic Ministry for the archdiocese, took care of the many organizational responsibilities such as child care, food, and registrations. Father Jim Schutte, pastor of St. Leo church, gave his support by offering space for the program free of charge. Leaders of charismatic groups met with Father Louis to get an understanding of the content of the catechetical program so they would be correctly informed before disseminating information to their members, many of whom became participants. Numerous volunteers served faithfully to provide child care, lead learning activities, and prepare and serve food.

Each session was well attended, and when someone had to miss a class because of sickness or a schedule conflict, they would call Dina and ask if they could go to that session in a different location. “They have been so faithful, so animated,” said Dina. “And from this group, we are sure to harvest people for the leadership program, which is in its final stages of development.”
“Testimonies from participants of this adult formation program could not define more clearly the essence of the New Evangelization,” said Father Louis Gasparini.

Jorge: The course covers the basics but in every class I am taken to a deeper level of understanding, I see things in a different light, I learn something in a new way.

Lourdes: I know this course covers the basic Catholic beliefs I was exposed to in my younger years, but I’m so happy I signed up because there are things I didn’t know or I heard before but not in depth and not with the opportunity this course gives to reflect within myself and to discuss with others. I’m finding answers to questions I’ve never had answered, and that means a lot. I will get a certificate for participation, and that will allow me to take part in the next course to be offered.

Olga: I had some very low spots in my life, and I signed up for this course because I want to learn more about the Jesus who picked me up from the dirt two years ago and put me back on my feet. I was raised Catholic in name only. I never had the chance to really learn what it means to be Catholic. Now I do. A program like this that will help me to learn about the living God – I’m there!

Flor: I want to learn more about Jesus, and I want the same for my three children. The public school doesn’t teach anything about God. There are religion classes that take place here for the kids while our adult class is going on. I hope these children will grow up and step into the adult programs. They are the future of the Church.