

Sharing Your Faith with the Hispanics

by *Beatriz Hoppe*
Outreach Consultant/Hispanic Ministries Specialist
Lutheran Hour Ministries

Jesus had just been arrested. His disciples had deserted him and fled. But Peter was still there, sitting out in the courtyard, watching from the distance. Twice he was recognized as one of the followers of Jesus of Galilee, but twice he denied it. Matthew 26:73 goes on saying, “Surely you are one of them, **for your accent gives you away**” (emphasis mine).

With an estimated 42.7 million Hispanics as of July 1st, 2005, the United States has become the 5th largest Spanish-speaking nation in the world. 64% of those are of Mexican background, 10% have come from Puerto Rico, and about 3% each are of Cuban, Salvadorian and Dominican origins. The remaining 17% encompasses all of the other 15 Latin American countries and Spain. Talk about diversity, and talk about accents!

Our God is a dynamic one. He’s always in motion. At the very beginning of the times, Genesis 1 says, “... *the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters*”, Creation was taking place, God was moving. Our lives are dynamic too. We’re born to grow and to live our lives in ways that fulfill the purpose for which we’ve been created.

The next time you see an immigrant, look beyond the image captured by your human eyes, and try to see what God sees... one of His creatures that has traveled a long way and made many sacrifices to give **you** the opportunity to share Christ with him.

They have an accent... more accurate yet, they speak a language that you probably don’t understand. Nevertheless, we have all been called to speak with a very peculiar accent, the accent of our Lord, and Savior... the accent of love, grace and mercy that brings good news and reunites the created with their Creator. An accent that knows no borders, languages, or cultures, but that covers every division that separates us and makes us one.

By now you may be wondering, “How can I share the Gospel with a person that is so different from me?” Well, before we go into that, I want to share with you some insights about the Hispanic culture that will hopefully help you get closer to the Hispanics by understanding where they come from.

Tips:

Some cultural and social facts inherent to the Hispanic culture

- “Hispanic” is a US marketing term... there are no Hispanics in Latin America and Spain. In their own countries, they are Colombian, Venezuelan, Mexican, Spaniards, etc.
- “Hispanic” is not a race (we come in all colors, heights, and shapes), but an “ethnic” classification... we share a continent, a history, a language, and a similar lifestyle, but we have our differences too. Just because we speak the same language it doesn’t mean that we’re all the same.

- Hispanics have different heritages. Some can trace their ancestors to the pre-Columbus America, others are of Spanish, Italian, German or Jewish descent, and still others have African blood running through their veins. Thus, our foods, our music, our cultures, and our worldviews, although generally similar, are different.
- Not all Hispanics speak Spanish. Almost half of the Hispanics in the US don't use Spanish as their primary language, and about one third cannot speak fluent Spanish. These are usually the second and third generations of immigrants. Most Hispanic homes are already bilingual, since the parents and/or grandparents speak Spanish, but their children already speak English (and very frequently serve as translators).
- Hispanics have come –and still do- to this country for many reasons, and at many different times. For this reason, it's not the same to relate to a Puerto Rican than it is to relate to a migrant Mexican worker, or to a Cuban that has lived in Miami for 40 years.
- Not all Hispanics are uneducated and poor. According to the last Census, there are over 36,00 Hispanic physicians and surgeons, over 51,000 post-secondary teachers, over 28,000 lawyers, and over 650 legislators. But, on the other hand, between 20% and 30% of the Hispanics in this country are here illegally.
- The most important value that identifies and unifies the Latino community is the family, which is the center of their life. And by family we mean not only the nuclear family, but also the extended one that can be here with them, or in their country of origin.
- 73% of the Hispanic immigrants send an average of \$300 a month to their families back in their countries. The majority are those who average less than \$30,000 a year. In 2006 Latin America and the Caribbean received over \$60 billion from its expatriates. This is an expression of the profound bond between those who come to the US to work for long hours at low wages and the families they left behind.
- Being well aware that generalizations are always dangerous, I'll risk saying that the vast majority of the Hispanics that come to this country identify themselves in one way or another with the Roman Catholic Church. Research shows that the younger generations and the new immigrants are particularly “unchurched”. Nevertheless, lack of belonging to a church, in the Hispanic culture, does not mean lack of belief or lack of a “religious outlook”.

Resources:

Here are some resources you may want to check out or even have at hand:

From **Concordia Publishing House 1-877-450-8694** or online www.editorial.cph.org

- **Models of Ethnic Ministry, edited by Rev. Dr. Robert H. King, 2006**
This anthology provides models of ethnic ministry within a Lutheran theological perspective for use by church leaders in planning their own programs. The eight leader offer insights, techniques, and strategies for ethnic ministries, and two final chapters provide practical application.

- ***Luther's Small Catechism with Explanations – Bilingual version***
- **Tracts (in Spanish) to give out**
 - ***“About Our Faith” Series*** - Explains the principal beliefs of the Lutheran Church.
 - ***“Experiences of an Immigrant” Series*** – Describes the experiences of one immigrant who found in Christ the answers to his most distressing questions.
 - ***“The Lutheran Church Welcomes You”*** – Explains the teachings of the Lutheran Church, the Reformation Movement, the liturgy and the Sacraments.

Sharing the Gospel: ---

Before we dive into it, I need to make sure that we're all at the same starting point, meaning that:

- You've asked God to guide you,
- You've prayed for wisdom, discernment, courage and opportunities,
- You've asked God to prepare the hearts of those He'll bring to you,
- You've opened your heart to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, knowing that you “go” in God's name, and that His promises *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* are always true, here are some practical ways that can help you reach out to the Hispanics in your community.

- Giving out brochures, booklets, etc., although not the most effective way to reach the Hispanic culture that values relationships above all, it's still a non-threatening way of sharing your faith, especially if you don't speak the same language.
- If language is a barrier but you have the bilingual version of *Luther's Small Catechism*, you can read together the Apostles' Creed, and complement that with the *“About our Faith”* series tracts that explain the principal beliefs of our Church. You can finish the conversation by praying together the Lord's Prayer off the Small Catechism.
- If the circumstances allow for it, do all you can to build a relationship with the person/s you want to reach. Usually the most natural way to do it is by tending to their needs... *“For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me”* (Matthew 25:35-36). Just remember that tending to their physical needs is not the end goal, but a way to open the door to their hearts so that Christ may enter in.
- If language is not a barrier, then start by following the three “r's” that are at the core of the Hispanic culture... relationships, relationships, relationships. Once you've developed a relationship, you're ready to share the Good News of Jesus, and a great way to start is by doing what David says in Psalm 66:16, *“Come and listen... let me tell you what God has done for me”*.