



# Message of Bishop Conlon at the Celebration of the Diocesan V ENCUENTRO

One of the greatest joys I experience as the Bishop of Joliet is the cultural diversity of the local church. Ours is a complex patchwork of European, African, Asian and Latin American peoples. Some of our ancestors came to this country generations ago. Some of us are newly arrived. Each group contributes something of great value, and each group has its distinctive needs. Yet, we are united in our faith. Jesus is our common Lord, and he has promised eternal life to all who live as his disciples.

The V Encuentro has given us a marvelous insight into the unique circumstances of the Hispanic community within our diocese. Like any cultural group, you, our Latino brothers and sisters, bring your special gifts that enrich the rest of us. We are blessed to have you as part of us.

Of course, Hispanic Catholics, who are generally among the most recently arrived members of the local church, also have special needs. You may sometimes feel like outsiders. You experience the discomfort of your children adapting to the local language and culture. You may even experience prejudice, or at least a lack of understanding, from members of the English-speaking majority.

All newcomers deserve respect for themselves and for their culture. They deserve special services that help them to adapt to the local circumstances and promote their integration into the local faith community, while at the same time preserving their own traditions.

I can say with deep sincerity that I take seriously the Encuentro process and the many insights that have been gained through the process. It will take time to translate those insights into concrete action. Everyone, not just the Latino community, will need to engage in this process. The larger community will need assistance in viewing the recommendations of the Encuentro as opportunities to create a richer, more effective pastoral ministry and a stronger local church.

There is not an opportunity for me today to respond to the individual priorities defined through the consultation process. However, it is clear that most of the recommendations will be fulfilled through our parishes, those communities in which people experience the life of the Church in its most ordinary and deepest ways. So, I would like to raise one issue related to parishes that is not addressed directly in the Encuentro report but one that can have an impact on much of what the Encuentro process did address. A decision was made some years ago generally not to have exclusively Hispanic parishes. The concept instead was to allow Latino Catholics to find a place in the ordinary neighborhood parish alongside Anglos and Catholics of other ethnicities. I think that was a wise decision. On the other hand, experience has shown that, for a number of reasons, not every parish can provide adequate ministry in Spanish and inclusive of the Hispanic culture, even with the best of intentions. So, I ask with complete openness, has the time come for us to designate specific parishes that will provide an intentional environment for Hispanic ministry as part of their ecclesial life?

Having thrown out that provocative question, I wish to conclude by thanking the staff of our Hispanic Ministry Office, especially Jorge Rivera and William Becerra, and all those who helped to organize and facilitate the V Encuentro in the Diocese of Joliet. It has been an important and valuable experience. May the Holy Spirit bring forth much fruit from it.

*God bless all of you.*