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Encuentro

Local Hispanic youth join together to strengthen faith

Joe Kohn of The Michigan Catholic
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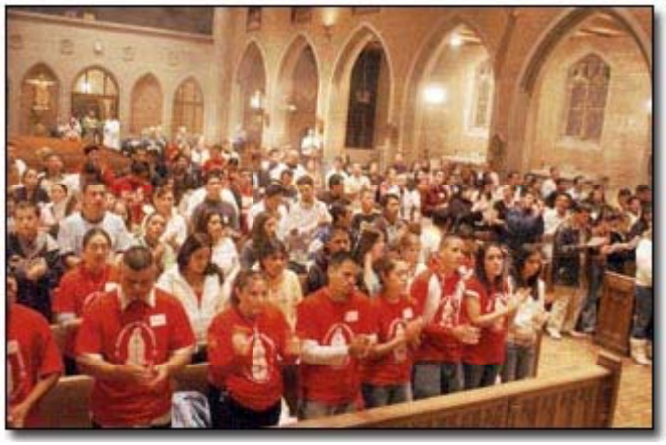

Young Hispanic Catholics from Pontiac, Southwest Detroit, Macomb Township and Farmington gather for Mass atSacred Heart Major Seminary's chapel as part of Encuentro, which aims to spark evangelization among the youngHispanic Catholic population.

Detroit – More than 150 Hispanic youths and young adults from throughout the Archdiocese of Detroit joined together to share both their faith and their ideas on how to strengthen the rapidly growing young Hispanic culture in the Church.

The daylong retreat, called Encuentro – which in English loosely translates to "Encounter" – took place last Sunday at Sacred Heart Major Seminary. Encuetro is meant to give Hispanic youths the support and encouragement they need to evangelize their peers.

Last Sunday's was the first archdiocesan-wide gathering of young Hispanics, age 14 to 30.

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10:00 PM EST
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45°F
W7
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"It's a call from God," said Rafael Velasquez, 25, a parishioner at St. Stephen/Mary Mother of the Church who took part in Encuentro. "I feel that it's truly a miracle how the youths are coming together here in the Archdiocese of Detroit. And for us to make that commitment, for us to say 'Yes' to God – it's a gift that we receive."

Valasquez is one of several youths and young adults who will represent the Archdiocese of Detroit in future Encuentro retreats. Next Spring there will be a state-wide retreat in Grand Rapids; later in 2006 a national Encuentro will take place in Indiana.

At last weekend's retreat, young Hispanic Catholics joined from four areas: Pontiac, Southwest Detroit, Macomb, and Farmington. They had been gathering in parishes in each of the regions since May. When they came together at the seminary, they spent the day praying, sharing ideas on how to spread God's word to their peers, and electing leaders from among them to represent the archdiocese at the state- and nation-wide Encuentro events.

"There's a lot of value in spending time getting together with other youths," said Salvadore Esquivel, 17, who came with his youth group from the Pontiac cluster of St. Michael, St. Vincent de Paul, and St. Joseph parishes. "I enjoyed having all the priests and bishops being with us."

Nidia Hernandez, 22, of St. Maximilian Kolbe Parish in Macomb Township, was one of many of the young Hispanics who said Archdiocese of Detroit's Encuentro was an historic event.

"This date means the beginning of a new leadership," said Hernandez, who was elected by her peers as an Encuentro representative. "I've always wanted to be a leader in Church and be able to do something to represent the Hispanic community."

Another main goal of the Encuentro was to create a document that would help Cardinal Adam Maida and bishops in the United States draft a plan for reaching out to the young Hispanic population. Detroit Auxiliary Bishop John Quinn, who was present to represent Cardinal Maida, thanked Encuentro attendees for their stellar input.

"I'm going to tell Cardinal Maida we've got a good start on this document right now," he said to the gathering after evening Mass.

The USCCB has supported Encuentro – first developed by the Latino lay apostolate called La Red – because of the Hispanic population's growing prominent in the Catholic Church in the United States. More than 37 percent of the country's population under the age of 18 is Hispanic – and most of them are Catholics.

Janet Diaz, coordinator of Encuentro for the Archdiocese of Detroit, says no one can reach out to young Hispanic Catholics to help strengthen the Church quite like young Hispanic Catholics can.

"We know from experience that the best evangelizers of youth are other young people," Diaz said. "We've really emphasized them seeing themselves in that role of missionaries, and I think many of them have really internalized that."

Fr. Chris Talbot, who celebrated Mass at the end of Encuentro, said the young Hispanics are undoubtedly seeing their role as missionaries.

"They're on fire for the Lord," said Fr. Talbot, who works with Hispanic ministry at St. Michael Parish, Pontiac, where he's associate pastor. "They give us that enthusiasm and fire that we all need to be rekindled. It's been awakened in Pontiac and Southwest Detroit and Pontiac and Farmington – and I believe through this process of Encuentro, it will continue to catch fire across the United States."

Velasquez, who is looking forward to representing the archdiocese at the state-wide gathering, says God will reach him and his peers through their response and their appeals to Him.

"God calls us all to be leaders," he says. "And through prayer He is going to form us. He is going to shape our hearts, and His guidance is what counts."

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General Information: infodesk@aod.org | Website Information: webmaster@aod.org

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