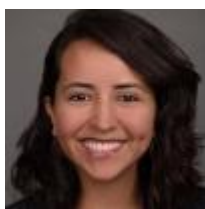


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Bishop Oscar Cantú of the Diocese of San Jose, California, is joined by a panel of young people during the celebration for the Region Eleven Commission for the Spanish Speaking on June 18 at the Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá in San Diego. (Yunuen Trujillo)



by Yunuen Trujillo

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They call us the "[sleeping giant](#)," in reference to the great potential in our awakening. The labels used to refer to us have changed over time: Hispanic, Latinos, Latinx, Latine. Regardless of the label, two things remain constant: Most of us are Spanish speakers, and we are not a monolith. Moreover, a great awakening has already been taking place, and according to [Harvard sociologist Robert Putnam](#), we are the leading indicators of the church's future.

Back in 1972, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops organized the "I Encuentro Nacional Hispano," [the first National Hispanic Encuentro](#) to address how to better serve the Spanish-speaking community. Two years later, after a regional encuentro was held, the Region Eleven Commission for the Spanish Speaking, or RECOSS, was born; an advisory commission consisting of diocesan and archdiocesan leaders in California, Hawaii and, formerly, Nevada.

This year, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of RECOSS. As part of the celebration, we asked ourselves: Where is the Holy Spirit leading Spanish-speaking ministry in the next 50 years?



Directors of young adult ministries from around the RECOSS dioceses gather for a photograph at the 50th anniversary celebration at the Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá in San Diego, California. (Courtesy of RECOSS)

The celebration was held at California's first-ever mission: the Mission Basilica San Diego de Alcalá in San Diego, founded in 1769. The programming was almost entirely in Spanish. The celebration started with a trip down memory lane, remembering its creation and its accomplishments through the years. Then it took a turn towards the future: what will the Region Eleven Commission for the Spanish Speaking focus on next? What are the areas of opportunity and need?

Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, assistant director of Hispanic affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, was in attendance. He reminded us that we are a prophetic presence, but also a missionary presence in the U.S.

Then, Bishop Oscar Cantú of the Diocese of San Jose, presented a challenge to all: "We are living a post-Christian reality." He reminded us that more and more people in the West are choosing not to identify as Christian, and this is a sign of the times. In reflecting on the signs of the times, we must open doors and windows so the breeze of the Holy Spirit can come in. But also, we must "go out" and proclaim the Gospel, so the Gospel can continue being part of our culture. Many things have changed, he said, "but what hasn't changed is the human heart ... we must lead with Christ's presence in our hearts."



Alejandro Aguilera-Titus, assistant director of the Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, reminded attendees that the Hispanic Catholics are a prophetic and missionary presence in the U.S. (Courtesy of RECOSS)

To deepen the reflection, a group of young adults from diocesan and archdiocesan Pastoral Juvenil teams ("young adult ministry" in Spanish) were invited to share their stories. The stories were inspiring and from different parts of the formerly tri-state region: a young man whose focus on social teaching and social justice led him to put his faith into action, and is now a city council member; a young woman of Indigenous roots concerned for the well-being of new migrant youth who speak Triqui, an Indigenous language, and for whom Spanish is a second language; a few young women involved at different levels of ministry, some of whom are church staff, advocating for leadership opportunities for youth; and me, an immigrant woman and an LGBTQ Catholic ministering in inclusive LGBTQ ministry in English and Spanish.

The attendees seemed surprised by the testimonies, with the type of curiosity that inspires action. How can we better serve the Spanish-speaking community and youth moving forward into the future?

Brilema Pérez, associate director for young adult ministry in the Diocese of San Diego, and Cantú co-led a Q&A panel with the young adults. Many questions were asked, ranging from the use of technology and artificial intelligence to advice for outreach towards LGBTQ youth.

"I went to a coffee shop with my daughter the other day and she said she did not want to be seen buying coffee from [a national franchise]," said a woman in the crowd. She continued explaining that her daughter's Instagram algorithm is very social justice-oriented and against the particular coffee franchise. "I had no idea!" she said. "How can I possibly communicate with my daughter when her algorithm and mine are completely different?" Continuing the theme of how to communicate with youth, another person asked, "What are three things we can do for young adults who are LGBTQ? What about those who have considered suicide?"

We had a fruitful conversation about the fact that young adults are more aware of social justice issues than previous generations because instant information is brought to the palm of their hands through their cellphones and other devices, and that brings a sense of urgency to act.

"That is a good thing," said a participant, "it is a good opportunity to engage in conversation ... and learn about the issues that matter to [them]." We also reflected on the continued influx of migration and social justice issues that affect migrant worker youth, as well as the need to open doors for young adults to lead the church.

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As for LGBTQ youth, I reminded the audience that this is also a social justice issue, and the most important thing is to be welcoming and loving, because love brings hope. Among other factors, suicidal ideation can result from a lack of hope; our Christ-given mission is to bring unconditional hope and love to all corners of the earth.

It is also important, especially in Spanish-speaking circles that are family-centered, to focus on family and to help parents process the coming out of their children in a

healthy way that keeps the family together; as well as providing adequate religious formation to our parish and ministry leaders so they can be welcoming and inclusive. Finally, I invited all to help create safe spaces of discernment for LGBTQ Catholics and to respect their conclusions in that process; to welcome all, or [as Pope Francis has said](#): "Todos, todos, todos."

"We are bridge people, we walk together, we stand on the shoulders of giants," said Edgardo Juarez, director of the Office of Ministry with Young Catholics in the San Bernardino Diocese. "[As Latinos] we have fought to have a space in the church. We must create lasting structures, and lead with passion, faith, and the power of direct contact, the power of encounter ... con el poder del encuentro."

A version of this story appeared in the **July 19-August 1, 2024** print issue under the headline: What's next for Spanish-speaking Catholic ministry in the US?.