



Quinceañera: Interculturality and Pastoral Discernment

José Francisco Orozco Ortigosa, C.M.

CM Province of San Vicente de Paúl, Spain

josefranciscoorozcoortigosa@gmail.com

Abstract

The growing presence of migrant families in parishes raises significant pastoral questions, especially regarding the cultural and religious practices specific to their countries of origin. Do these traditions—whether religious or cultural—constitute an obstacle to ecclesial integration, or can they become a factor that fosters it? Practices such as the quinceañera are perceived by many pastoral workers as predominantly social celebrations, focused on the party rather than on faith, which sometimes makes them a pastoral challenge. This article proposes a theological-pastoral interpretation that understands the quinceañera, along with other paraliturgical expressions characteristic of Hispanic religiosity, as a privileged opportunity for the inculturation of the Gospel. From this perspective, such celebrations can act as catalysts for new forms of ecclesial life capable of strengthening intercultural communion and making visible the multifaceted and universal nature of the Kingdom of God.

La présence croissante de familles migrantes dans les paroisses soulève d'importantes questions pastorales, notamment en ce qui concerne les pratiques culturelles et religieuses propres à leurs pays d'origine. Ces traditions, qu'elles soient religieuses ou culturelles, constituent-elles un obstacle à l'intégration ecclésiale ou peuvent-elles, au contraire, en devenir un facteur de promotion ? Des pratiques telles que la *quinceañera* sont souvent perçues par de nombreux agents pastoraux comme de simples célébrations sociales, davantage centrées sur la fête que sur la foi, ce qui représente parfois un défi pastoral. Cet article propose une interprétation théologico-pastorale qui considère la *quinceañera*, ainsi que d'autres expressions paraliturgiques caractéristiques de la religiosité hispanique, comme une occasion privilégiée d'inculturation de l'Évangile. Dans cette perspective, ces célébrations peuvent devenir des catalyseurs de nouvelles formes de vie ecclésiale, capables de renforcer la communion interculturelle et de manifester le caractère pluriel et universel du Royaume de Dieu.

La creciente presencia de familias migrantes en las parroquias plantea importantes interrogantes pastorales, especialmente en relación con las prácticas culturales y religiosas propias de sus países de origen. ¿Constituyen estas tradiciones, ya sean religiosas o culturales, un obstáculo para la integración eclesial o pueden convertirse, por el contrario, en un factor que la favorezca? Prácticas como la *quinceañera* son percibidas por muchos agentes pastorales principalmente como celebraciones sociales, centradas más en la fiesta que en la fe, lo que en ocasiones representa un desafío pastoral. Este artículo propone una interpretación teológico-pastoral que comprende la *quinceañera*, junto con otras expresiones paralitúrgicas características de la religiosidad hispana, como una oportunidad privilegiada para la inculturación del Evangelio. Desde esta perspectiva, estas celebraciones pueden actuar como catalizadores de nuevas formas de vida eclesial, capaces de fortalecer la comunión intercultural y hacer visible el carácter plural y universal del Reino de Dios.

Keywords: Migration, Discernment, Interculturality, Quinceañera.



As the pastor of a simple neighborhood parish, during Christmas 2017 I received an unusual request from a Colombian family who had attended the Midnight Mass. During the gathering that followed the celebration, they asked me if I could officiate at their teenage daughter's quinceañera. I had heard of these celebrations, so dear to many Hispanic migrant families, but I had never had the opportunity to preside over one. I immediately saw this request as an excellent opportunity to be close to them during their sacred moments and to bring the message of the Gospel to illuminate their reality. After all, that is what evangelization is all about. So I replied that, of course, I could do it, and I asked them to come to my office to set the date for the celebration once Christmas was over.

Priests and members of the Parish Council with whom I shared the request were reluctant and asked me to be "pastorally prudent." At the same time, they warned me about the difficulties they believed Hispanic migrants would face in adapting to a new ecclesial reality; they thought that allowing such a celebration—so foreign to the local customs of the Church in Spain—would do them no good. I, however, could not have disagreed more.

Can a celebration so deeply rooted in the culture of many countries in Latin America be an obstacle to integration or, on the contrary, a facilitator to make it possible? Given the emphasis that families seem to put on the party rather than on the faith, could celebrating quinceañera become a trap for pastoral agents?

Our parishes deal with an increasing immigration that challenges both inward identity and outward mission. I believe that, along with other para-liturgical expressions of faith so typical among Hispanics, quinceañera can serve as a catalyst for new ways of gospel inculturation, to make the multicolored Kingdom of God in which we all believe not only possible but a reality.

It was Jesus who said: "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."¹ Perhaps our primary pastoral task is not to curb these expressions of faith, but rather to recognize in them the humble signs of the Reign and not to prevent God from continuing to make himself present in the daily lives of his people.

1. Coming from afar with full Saddlebags

*The challenge confronting us in today's migrations is not an easy one because many different spheres are involved: economics, sociology, politics, health, culture, and security. All Christians must respond to this challenge; it is not just a matter of goodwill or the personal charisma of a few.*²

When I travel, my luggage is simple: a few clothes, toiletries, a cell phone charger, ID, my e-book, and money. If it is a business trip, I also bring my laptop. Not much else. Nevertheless, there are always unnoticed immaterial things: my dreams and expectations, my culture, my vision of the world, and my previous experiences, among others. On a vacation trip, this immaterial baggage does not weigh much. This is not so in the case of emigration, whether for violence in the mother country, persecution for political reasons,

¹ Luke 17:20-21. NIV.

² Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi. N. 3.

poverty, sheer survival, or the pursuit of better living conditions. Along with practical things, the people who “are walking around the world trying to find a place to stay, to work, to find life,”³ also come to us with full saddlebags of this immaterial richness, seeds they hope to plant to bear fruit. Their very identity is based on this immaterial cargo they bring along, and traditions like quinceañera are part and parcel of it.

Migrants face highly complex emotional realities. On the one hand, they harbor the hope of improving their family’s living conditions—economically, professionally, and culturally. On the other hand, they suffer from a sense of uprootedness, loneliness, job insecurity, and the risk of marginalization. Although some are fortunate enough to be in a regular status, many others live in fragile or irregular administrative situations, which increases their sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The lack of the much-desired papers often results in unstable or poorly paid jobs, difficulties in fully accessing certain services, and, in many cases, inadequate housing conditions. Their situation constitutes, in the words of Pope Francis, “an urgent call to true fraternity,”⁴ which challenges not only social institutions but also our Christian communities, called to recognize in every migrant not a problem to avoid but a person to be welcomed, protected, supported, and integrated.

The presence of migrants in our parishes, with their cultural and religious traditions, is, above all, a source of richness and a gift that fills the local Church with joy. This was the case with the Christians who were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria in the face of the persecution unleashed against them following the death of Stephen (cf. Acts 8:1–8). The arrival of those Christians, who did not seek martyrdom or pointless suffering, was providential, for the faith in Christ they carried in their hearts transformed the face of the cities that welcomed them, flooding them with a new joy that would be difficult to experience otherwise.

Thus, a faith-based look at the global phenomenon of migration invites us to view our brothers and sisters who have come from afar not as strangers to be mistrusted, but as a gift to be welcomed, for their presence among us has the power to renew the life of our church communities. Just as the seed of the Gospel that those Christians carried in their hearts was a source of joy for the cities where they found refuge, so too the intangible treasure that our migrant brothers and sisters carry in their saddlebags can become a source of hope, renewal, and joy for our aging church communities.

Within that intangible treasure that migrants bring with them, traditions play a fundamental role as a source of meaning and belonging. For Juanita—let us call her that—and her family, the quinceañera was tied to their identity, their own history, and their way of being in the world, and I could not pass up the opportunity to make them feel at home: valued, welcomed, accepted, and supported in all their needs. They did not have to empty their saddlebags; on the contrary, their spirituality and particular traditions are “the path to the kind of ecclesial integration, which enriches the Church of God and which is the fruit of the dynamic realism of the Incarnation of the Son of God.”⁵ Thus the decisive question arises: are our parishes prepared to welcome that treasure without challenging their own norms, values, and pastoral practices?

³ Carvalhaes, Cláudio. 2011. “Communitas: Liturgy and Identity.” *International Review of Mission* 100 (1): 37–47. P. 37.

⁴ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*. N. 12.

⁵ Blume, Michael A. 2002. *Migration and the Social Doctrine of the Church*. In *People on the Move*. N. 88–89. April–December 2002. Ed. Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People.

2. Challenging Norms and Values

See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
Isaiah 43:19, NIV.

Richard R. Osmer (2008), explaining Don Browning's reflections about Gadamer's theories on ethical norms, draws attention to an oftentimes-underappreciated concept: application, a practical action that "does not merely occur at the end of interpretation [of any given practice] but is present from the beginning and influences it throughout." ⁶ To say more, "[t]he concept of application draws attention to the fact that our present practices are filled with values and norms."⁷ This means that there is no neutral practice in pastoral ministry; all of them carry an interpretation of reality. In this sense, the quinceañera is not only a family and social celebration; it is primarily a cultural, spiritual, and identity practice. It is also the way in which people who experience displacement and marginalization can express their identity and their belonging to a community.

The catechetical and pastoral approach of the Church in Spain during my childhood and youth was eminently sacramental (Eucharist and Confirmation). Unlike the official Roman Catholic celebration of the sacrament of confirmation, the largely para-liturgical celebration of quinceañera in Hispanic communities, as a coming-of-age ritual for young teen girls, is not a sacrament in itself. Nevertheless, it contains symbolic elements of high religious value. Celebrated in the context of a mass, is also a celebration of gratitude to God for the gift of life, the moment where young teen girls stand before God and the community, promising to honor their faith and their families. But quinceañera is a strange practice in many Spanish parishes, and this "otherness" always challenges norms, values, and pastoral actions.

Pope Benedict XVI (2005) affirms that the most intimate nature of the Church "is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (diakonia). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable."⁸ These three-fold responsibilities determine three different models of the Church,⁹ each model with its very distinctive norms, values, and pastoral actions. The liturgical model (some call it traditional) will emphasize the celebration of the sacraments. The communitarian model will prioritize the activities and relationships between different communities. And the

⁶ Osmer, Richard Robert. 2008. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. P. 155. Italics added.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Deus Caritas Est. N. 25.

⁹ We can also refer to three distinct models of migrant integration: assimilation, multiculturalism, and interculturalism. The assimilationist model assumes that migrants must abandon their culture and traditions to automatically and uncritically adopt the culture and traditions of the host society/church. In contrast, the multicultural model presupposes scrupulous respect for diversity, allowing different traditions and cultures to coexist in the same space and time without influencing or mixing with one another. However, the intercultural model strives to achieve a synthesis, a cross-fertilization between both worlds where, by preserving the best of each, a new reality is born, a mestizo church that walks in communion and synodality.

evangelizing model will envision a Church that goes forth, to the ‘peripheries’ “in need of the light of the Gospel.”¹⁰

Needless to say that the inseparable character of these dimensions does not prevent one from taking precedence over the others. Thus, for example, when the liturgy takes precedence over the other functions, the celebration of sacraments –and other activities related to those moments- will be the cornerstone on which all the pastoral action of that parish rests. Priests serving there are in danger of becoming city employees with fixed schedules and unchangeable responsibilities, and the services offered will be always the same. The newness will experience a hard time finding its way in. There is no explicit rejection of the novelty, only a certain stiffness when it comes to incorporating it. It is hard to change a model so deeply ingrained.

I was not surprised by the Pastoral Council's reluctance to approve the quinceañera celebration. Among them, there were two priests who had spent several decades of their priestly ministry in mission countries. They were called to leave behind the local religious customs and traditions that had shaped them and helped them build their image of the world to embrace a new reality as their own. The issue of whether the newcomers should do the same or not was a legit one. Besides, both of them knew that the local hierarchy, rather than establishing specific chaplaincies to serve the migrants, invited migrants to integrate into the parishes where they live. In their understanding of the Church, they were right.

Ultimately, what that quinceañera really brought to the table was the different ways of understanding what it means to be the Church in a context marked by cultural diversity. That simple request from a migrant family was then—and remains today—a call to reexamine our own pastoral certainties and to ask ourselves if we are willing to let the Gospel expand our horizons. Because it was not just about celebrating a feast, but about discerning whether our communities are prepared to welcome the new signs through which God makes himself present in history.

A Vincentian parish should be characterized as a welcoming place for those arriving from distant lands, not merely as a source of social assistance but as a community of faith and Christian life where all—migrants and locals alike—walk as brothers and sisters in Christ toward the Kingdom of God.

3. Some Questions under the Light of the Scriptures

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.

Mathew 25:35. NIV.

Obedying God, Abraham left his land. A devastating famine forced Jacob’s sons to leave Israel and settle in more fertile lands. Moses fled to Midian to save his life. Ruth left her land for the love of Noemi. The Holy Family, persecuted by Herod, found refuge in Egypt. Jesus’ disciples became migrants to carry the gospel everywhere. The history of the Church is no stranger to the global phenomenon of migration. Precisely because of this and in fidelity to Jesus’ gospel, the attitude toward those who have to leave their land must be one of open doors, welcoming and hospitable, knowing that salvation is at stake.

¹⁰ Evangelii Gaudium. N. 20.

The response to immigration on the part of society is very diverse and ranges from positive reception and solidarity to outright rejection, tinged with xenophobia and racism. The public administrations also swim in ambiguity, and alongside integration policies coexist many difficulties that make integration difficult, if not impossible. The attitude of the Church toward migrants must be different and guided by Jesus's challenging words: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."¹¹

Does everything seem strange to them? The Church must be a familiar face.

Are they afraid of forgetting who they are and where they have come from? The church must be the first to acknowledge and support their identity.

Do they feel out of place and uncomfortable in European cold liturgical celebrations? The Church must make every possible effort to ensure that the celebrations of God's people, both native and foreign, are vibrant, meaningful, and enriching, responding to the affective and spiritual needs of both.

As my team tried to discourage me from accepting the quinceañera, I questioned myself: What impact—positive or negative—would incorporating the quinceañera, as well as other traditions from abroad, have on our parishes? Would not Juanita and her family feel more at home if they could connect with familiar celebrations? Can we ignore the positive aspects of that celebration—or of any other celebration—that is deeply rooted in the culture of our brothers and sisters who have come from abroad? Could it be that the rejection of the quinceañera is a reason why Hispanic Catholic migrants are leaving the Catholic Church in search of a Christian denomination that is more welcoming to their practices? And on top of those, could we legitimately demand that Juanita and her family abandon their identity when they need it more?

I don't think so, since, as the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People maintains, among the primary tasks of any pastor with the "smell of the sheep" who wishes to live alongside migrants and share their circumstances, walking with them in a missionary and evangelizing spirit, the most important is "safeguarding the migrants' ethnic, cultural, linguistic and ritual identity since effective pastoral activity is unthinkable if it does not respect and value their cultural heritage."¹² Any pastoral initiative—with and for migrants—will only be effective to the extent that it respects and highlights their rich cultural and religious heritage, which must, of course, engage in dialogue with the local culture. Just as it would be absurd to impose on young Spaniards the liturgical practices of their grandparents, so too is it absurd to impose on the Hispanic population a way of celebrating and expressing their faith that does not connect with their culture and identity.

Even so, there is a tension between accepting other traditions and preserving one's own, a tension that must be resolved in the light of the Spirit. The history of the Church shows that this tension between the old and the new is not unprecedented. Even in its early days, when the encounter between Jewish culture and the pagan world sparked a fierce conflict, the community of believers had to discern whether to impose on the Gentiles practices belonging to another tradition. The apostles' response to that first conflict, which threatened the very existence of the Church, avoided falling into the temptation of assimilationism—the Gentile minority would simply have to accept the norms, ways, and customs of the Judaizing majority—and sidestepped the trap of

¹¹ Mathew 25:40. NIV.

¹² *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 78.

multiculturalism—where Gentiles and Judaizers retain their own traditions and norms, living on the margins of one another without ever interacting—by opting for an intercultural response that, without imposing unnecessary burdens, opened new paths that made communion in diversity possible.

That apostolic decision continues to remind us today that, in the face of the growing presence of Catholic migrants from abroad, fidelity to the Gospel demands the courage to abandon the old wineskins—those cultural models, pastoral structures, and inherited ways of living the faith that shape how the host community expresses its faith—and the creativity to prepare new wineskins so that communion may be genuine and neither the new wine that the Lord wishes to pour out upon his Church nor the wineskins meant to receive it may be lost.¹³

If our parishes are to be authentically Vincentian, they are called to strive toward true interculturality—understood not merely as peaceful coexistence between migrants and the local population, but as a fruitful encounter that transforms all who take part in it. On the one hand, those who arrive must strive to integrate into the local culture, learning about and respecting its customs and traditions while also bringing their own traditions and ways of life. On the other hand, those who welcome them are called to humbly recognize the richness of the customs and values of the newcomers. Only in this way can something new and different emerge that embodies the best of both traditions.

Being open to the phenomenon of migration, strengthening bonds of fraternal coexistence, and recognizing the rights of those who belong to cultural minorities is not only a social imperative but also a concrete expression of the Gospel lived out in community.

4. The presence of Migrants, a True Catalyst for a New Pentecost

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying,
“This cup is the new covenant in my blood;
do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

1 Corinthians 11:25. NIV.

Whether Jesus’ last supper was a Passover meal or not is still a thorny scholarly discussion.¹⁴ What is clear is that Jesus was intentional in giving new meaning to the old symbols of bread and wine of the Passover meal. Such was the impact of this newness that, while maintaining the Jewish prayer in the Temple, his disciples also broke the bread in their homes.¹⁵ Eventually, prayer in the Temple lost importance to the centrality of the Eucharist. Therefore, if the Christian way of recognizing and worshiping the real presence of God among his people emerged from the ancient Jewish rite, might we not be called today to discern how certain traditions of migrants can also open new paths for the life of our communities?

Jesus’ call to put new wine into new wineskins, when applied to the presence of Catholic migrants in our communities, presents the challenge of a sincere welcome and, at the same time, invites everyone—both newcomers and long-time residents—to engage

¹³ Cf. Mathew 9:17. NIV.

¹⁴ For further information on the issue, read Throntveit, Mark A. 1997. *The Lord’s Supper as New Testament, Not New Passover*. Lutheran Quarterly 11 (3): 271–89.

¹⁵ *They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts*. Acts 2:46. NIV.

in humble discernment capable of giving rise to new structures that are truly suited to express the ever-renewing richness of the Gospel.

The Catholic Church, as a multicultural community comprised of people of different nationalities, with different accents and skin colors, stands today at a decisive crossroads: if it wishes to be a reflection of the universal Church born at Pentecost, it must foster and integrate the cultural diversity of the parishioners—“from the east and the west, from the north and the south”¹⁶—who attend Mass. The very identity of the Church is at stake in the welcoming or rejection of migrants.

The presence of migrants in our communities represents a great missionary opportunity that must not be missed. Pope Francis, in his address to the participants at the meeting of national leaders responsible for pastoral care for migrants, organized by the Council of European Episcopal Conferences in September 2017, stated that from a missionary perspective, “the current influx of migrants can be seen as a new frontier for mission, a privileged opportunity to proclaim Jesus Christ and the Gospel message at home, and to bear concrete witness to the Christian faith in a spirit of charity and profound esteem for other religious communities.”¹⁷ In welcoming and integrating migrants, the Church has the opportunity to demonstrate—through actions, not just words—what it means to be truly Catholic and to renew the life of our communities in a spirit of communion.

This call for integration is emphasized in *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, an Instruction of the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People published on May 3, 2004. Speaking of missionary structures that aspire to express unity in diversity, it affirms that “each host Church is called upon to integrate the concrete reality of the persons and groups that compose it, bringing the values of each one into communion, as all are called upon to build a Church that is concretely Catholic. “In this way there is brought about a unity in plurality in the local Church, a unity that is not uniformity but harmony, in which every legitimate diversity plays its part in the common and unifying effort.”¹⁸

Pentecost cannot be just the liturgical feast that marks the end of the Easter season, it is the reality that the Universal Church lives, and it must be the reality that our particular church lives every day. Pentecost invites us to live in an open-door Church and to be open-minded Christians, ready to embrace those we see as strangers, and ready to accept other people’s values and culture. As the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People declares, “Inculturation begins by listening, which means getting to know those to whom we proclaim the gospel. Listening and knowing lead to a more adequate discernment of the values and countervalues of their cultures in the light of the Paschal Mystery of death and life. Tolerance is not enough; needed is a certain feeling for the other, respect as far as possible for the cultural identity of one’s dialogue partners. To recognize and appreciate their positive aspects, which prepare them to accept the gospel, is a necessary prelude to its successful proclamation. This is the only way to create dialogue, understanding and trust.”¹⁹

¹⁶ Luke 13:29. NIV.

¹⁷ Address of his holiness pope Francis to the national directors of Pastoral Care for Migrants of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE). Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170922_direttori-pastoralimigranti.html

¹⁸ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 89.

¹⁹ *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 36.

In Conclusion

The global phenomenon of migration that characterizes our times can be read, from a faith-based perspective, as a true sign of the times through which, if we know how to listen attentively, we can discover the pilgrim God who continues to act in the history of peoples and understand his message of universal salvation. No one is so poor that he/she cannot give, nor so rich that she/he cannot receive. The pilgrim Church in any country and migrants have much to offer one another. The real challenge is to find the formula that makes inculturation possible in the host country, without ceasing to be loyal and faithful to one's own identity. This formula will make possible the emergence of a new holistic cultural reality, a mestizo Church that reflects the best of both worlds—something that is unlikely to happen if we do not listen to one another and learn from one another.

Bibliography

- Benedict XVI. *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love): Encyclical Letter*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005.. Available at: https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html
- Blume, Michael A. 2002. *Migration and the Social Doctrine of the Church*. In *People on the Move*. N. 88-89. April-December 2002. Ed. Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People.
- Carvalhoes, Cláudio. 2011. "Communitas: Liturgy and Identity." *International Review of Mission* 100 (1).
- Francisco. *Evangelii Gaudium*. Exhortación apostólica, 24 de noviembre de 2013. Roma: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013.
- Osmer, Richard Robert. 2008. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.
- Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People. *Erga migrantes caritas Christi (The love of Christ towards migrants)*. Instruction. May 14, 2004. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/documents/rc_pc_migrants_doc_20040514_erga-migrantes-caritas-christi_en.html.