

What Catholics learned at V Encuentro, and what they hope their bishops heard

FORT WORTH (CNA) -- It's a difficult time for the Catholic Church, a fact much-discussed at the National V Encuentro conference, a gathering of Hispanic and Latino Catholics from throughout the U.S. that took place Sept. 20-23 in Grapevine.

The bishops have failed their people and ask for forgiveness, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Houston and president of the U.S. bishops' conference, said in his address at the V Encuentro.

But even at the close of this 'summer of scandals', the 3,000-some Hispanic and Latino Catholics present for the gathering seemed to relish their time with and attention from the leaders of the Church.

Selfies were snapped, hugs were exchanged, and chants of "We Love You!" were signs of support and appreciation shown to the bishops present for the conference.

Ruby Fuentes, a young adult delegate from the Diocese of Brownsville "in deep south Texas, right above the Mexican border," said she especially appreciated the bishops' dinner and encounter night with young people, where a bishop sat at every table to listen to the needs and concerns of the young delegates.

The issues discussed varied from table to table, Fuentes said, but her particular concerns included suicide and mental health in young people, and immigration issues.

"I thought it was a really good way to be transparent within the Church and try to understand what young people are thinking about, what their concerns are," Fuentes told CNA.

"It was really a pleasant surprise to see that bishops were the ones organizing the dinner and wanted to talk to us and see what we had to say, because oftentimes as young folks we're cast aside, we're not really taken seriously," she said.

Sr. Mary Johanna of the Nashville Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia told CNA that the closeness of the bishops was the thing most-remarked on by the delegates in her group.

"It's been great to have so many Hispanics and Anglos here together, and it's beautiful to see so many bishops here with us and to see the attention that they're giving, how deeply they're listening, and just coming together as a Church," she said.

Besides DiNardo, some of the bishops at the V Encuentro included Archbishop Gustavo García-Siller, MSpS of the Archdiocese of San Antonio, Archbishop José H. Gomez of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Archbishop William E. Lori of the Archdiocese of Baltimore, Archbishop Wilton Gregory of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, Cardinal Blase Cupich of the Archdiocese of Chicago, and Cardinal Sean O'Malley, O.F.M. Cap, of the Archdiocese of Boston.

Alfredo Portillo, a delegate from Las Vegas, told CNA that the Encuentro was a "heartwarming" experience and "for the bishops to reunite us, to bring us together, to celebrate our Hispanic inheritances, I think it's really great, I'm really proud to be here."

Guadalupe Alba, a delegate from St. Martha's Catholic Church in Huntington Park, California, told CNA that it was encouraging for him to see Catholic leaders, including bishops and non-Hispanic Catholics, attending the conference and listening to what the delegates had to say.

"Even though there's a lot of Hispanics in the United States, we're still a minority, you know?" he told CNA.

What the bishops are communicating to Hispanic and Latino Catholics through the Encuentro is that "we know that you're here, we accept you, and we're on the same team. Everything in the faith," Alba said.

Juan Carlos Reyes, a delegate from the Archdiocese of Denver, told CNA that hoped that the bishops have a renewal of a pastoral rather than a political spirit following the Encuentro.

"I feel like many times our Church, the conversation gets framed by the political aspects in the nation, and I think many of our bishops are worried about saying the right thing, being on the right side of things, they're worried about the politics and they are detached from the people," he said.

"And they are not congressmen, they're pastors, so if they could take from this a renewal of a pastoral approach that would be wonderful," he said. Another concern of Reyes was that there be a more holistic approach within the pro-life movement to the issue of immigration.

"The pro-life movement is all about the abortion issue, and that is urgent and continues to be needed," he said. "But we march and we pray outside of abortion clinics, but we don't march and we don't pray outside of detention centers."

Evangelization and bridging the cultural divide that exists in some parishes between Hispanic and Anglo Catholics were other frequently-discussed topics of conversation at the V Encuentro.

"We are failing our Church ourselves because we are not bringing people in," Carlos Mendez from Huntington Park, California told CNA. "But first we have to go and be taught by others how to do it, we have to find the love within us and go with the Holy Spirit and take charge and be there for the ones who feel marginalized."

Joanne Reinhardt, a delegate from Toledo Ohio, said she was leaving Encuentro with a renewed desire to "build bridges" between Hispanic and Anglo Catholics.

She said some things that her parish has done to help bridge the cultural divide is to host bilingual Masses, celebrations for Our Lady of Guadalupe's feast day, and food and diaper drives for immigrants in the parish.

"Sometimes we want to separate ourselves," she said. "But we're one people and when we come together, things will happen."