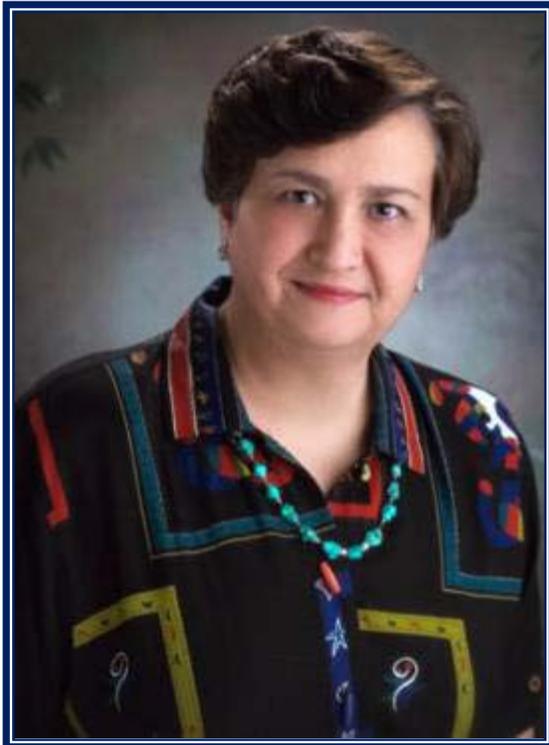


An Interview with Carmen Cervantes on Instituto Fe y Vida

By Tracy Schier



Dr. Carmen Maria Cervantes is Executive Director of the [Instituto Fe y Vida](#) (Institute for Faith & Life), a national institute based in Stockton, CA. The Institute is dedicated to empowering young Hispanics and parents for leadership in (the Catholic) Church and society through formation programs, biblical pastoral ministry, research and publications, and advocacy.

Dr. Cervantes is both a national leader and international speaker with extensive experience in Pastoral Juvenil (ministry with Hispanic youth and young adults), lay ministry, formation and organization, catechesis, biblical ministry, and pastoral publications. She is also a writer and general editor of *La Biblia Católica para Jovenes*, a study Bible for Latino youth and young adults, and the weekly *Diálogos Semanales con Jesús* series. She has

written more than 20 pastoral books, many of them published bilingually. *La Biblia* is also translated into Italian and soon will appear in Portuguese.

She is a member of the editorial team of *The Catholic Youth Bible*, published by Saint Mary's Press.

After coming to the U.S. from Mexico in 1979, Dr. Cervantes worked in diocesan and national pastoral positions at the directorship level. She serves on the faculty of the Hispanic Pastoral Program at Loyola Marymount University, Los

Angeles, and has taught courses in evangelization, catechesis, and youth ministry in several universities and in lay pastoral ministry programs throughout the country. She was a co-founder and president of the National Organization of Catechesis for Hispanics (NOCH) and of the National Catholic Council for Hispanic Ministry (NCCHM). She serves on the board of directors of the National Catholic Network de Pastoral Juvenil Hispana (La Red).

Dr. Cervantes' work has been widely recognized. She holds honorary doctorates from Catholic University of America and the University of San Francisco. The National Catholic Network de Pastoral Juvenil Hispana instituted an award in her name for distinguished young adult leaders in Pastoral Juvenil and the Bishops Committee on Hispanic Affairs recognized her with the Archbishop Patrick Flores Award for her service to the bishops and her leadership in ministry among Hispanics. The Jesuit Hispanic Ministry Conference awarded her the Fitzpatrick Award for outstanding leadership in Hispanic ministry, and the De La Salle Christian Brothers honored her with the Distinguished Lasallian Education Award for the development of religious education programs for young Latinos.

Dr. Cervantes holds her earned doctorate from University of the Pacific in education and has a master's degree in sociocultural anthropology. She is the mother of three grown children and has four grandchildren.

This conversation is edited.

Q. Please talk about why there is such a need in the American Catholic Church for your programs?

A. There are many reasons, but I would like to address two: First, the need to serve young Hispanics from the different Latino cultures in the U.S. including those born and raised in the United States. Second, the need to reach a large spectrum of ages within the Latino population with age-appropriate pastoral education and programming, especially for young people 14 to 30. We also must acknowledge that there is need for services in the Spanish language as well as in English.

When I began this work I was hired in 1988 by St. Mary's Press in Minnesota and started working on catechetical publications for young Hispanics. For a while, our program at St. Mary's Press (operated by the Christian Brothers) was the only voice of Hispanic youth and young adult ministry in the country. We had to ask ourselves, do we publish at the popular, intermediate, or professional level and at what level do we write our books? Who do we want to be reading our books? We decided that we should be somewhere in a middle ground so that university students would be interested but at the same time we could be meeting the needs of young people with a high school level of education.

Q. *It seems you would have seen immense change in needs in the last two decades.*

A. These needs have only become stronger and more urgent as Hispanics, in all their diversity, now account for close to half of all young Catholics—and as much as 2/3 of practicing young adult Catholics according to one recent study.¹ Yet they continue to be underrepresented in Catholic high schools and universities, in theological and ministry formation programs, and among paid pastoral staff in parishes and dioceses. Instituto Fe y Vida’s programs and advocacy are important contributions toward bridging that gap.

The Church in America is changing rapidly, and this must be recognized. Fifty percent of young (under age 30) Catholics in the U.S. are Latinos. And yet, less than five percent of youth ministers or people who work with Latino youth are Latinos. The Church has to recognize this need. One thing that we have learned is that we need to train teams for leadership and not just individuals. Over and over you see that without a team, a leader will leave and then there is nobody to take her or his place.

Q. *You were really pioneering. How did you go about researching ways to meet all the complexities?*

A. Because of the social spectrum and language differences of all the Hispanic cultures it did take us a while. The Christian Brothers at St. Mary’s Press brought a Brother from Peru, and he put together 14 focus groups. With that information it was determined that there was a need for an editorial team and that is when I was hired. Our original idea was to do a small bilingual book for young Hispanics. But as we were learning, we came to know that translation was not the way to go, and so we adopted a bi-lingual and bi-cultural way of writing and ended up with four large books, two in English and two in Spanish. This is an extremely difficult process — to do explanations of concepts and articulate differences both to people in power as well as to English readers from the mainstream culture, Latinos of various generations in the U.S., and recent young immigrants. And you have to keep in mind there are political positions that influence understandings as well as national cultures and class differences that influence understandings.

Q. *How do you manage all of that in your writing?*

¹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 299-301.

A. We managed to create a didactic educational approach that can appeal to just about everyone — social class, nationality, educational level and so on. When people from Mexico and Latin America come to the U.S. they are moving from a classist society to a racist society. Our challenge, through our writing and teaching in programs and parishes, is to help people integrate into the mainstream when they don't feel they are comfortable. So our didactic approach meets the people who have internalized their oppression, whether that is classism or racism, offering ways to articulate their feelings and thinking, and engage in a liberating and mature human, social, and Christian journey.

Q. *It seems that you are really working on several levels with people—intellectual certainly, but also on emotional and relational levels.*

A. This is so true. Empowerment is our approach; as opposed to only social doctrine. Our didactic approach is circular rather than linear, in a spiral that gets broader and deeper. At the same time, we work with the various social and ecclesial levels to foster structural and paradigmatic changes, seeking a complementary dynamic: down to up and up to down. We designed what we call the “Prophets of Hope” model, with several elements that reinforce Christian values, self-esteem, and confidence as people go through our educational material. Reinforcement is key to empowerment. We pay attention to formation-in-action, which means that we want our young people to speak, articulate, and engage in productive action. To accomplish this, we had to change the tendency toward dictatorial leaders by fostering shared leadership approaches that are learned in small communities.

Q. *Are the youth ministers who work with Hispanic youth in all their cultural and linguistic variety really prepared to do this work effectively? And specifically, are the seminaries training their students for these populations?*

A. The challenges are very high. The Church simply doesn't have nearly enough youth ministers who are prepared for these challenges. One very obvious problem is when we have Spanish-speaking adults trying to teach and minister with English speaking Latino kids. And we need ministers who specialize in adolescent behaviors. The seminaries are not really training for ministry with Latino youth. Seminarians go to parishes for practicums, but these are not sufficient, and frankly you often see, among seminarians, a sense of superiority. It is still a fact that many pastors and parish leaders simply don't know how many Hispanics are living within their geographic areas. And, on a personal level, many Hispanic youth are still struggling with language and cultural differences,

and sometimes mainstream Catholic youth ministry is either not welcoming to Hispanic youth or not attractive to them since they might not feel comfortable in some parish youth groups. Back in 2003 Ken Johnson-Mondragon wrote that there seems to be a myth among Catholic youth ministers that Hispanic teens will be cared for by the Hispanic adults who are of their own culture and thus non-Hispanic ministers should not even bother to reach out to them.² But, Ken pointed out that the reality is that most Hispanic youth live between two cultures, neither of which is fully theirs. This means that adult youth ministers, whether they are Hispanic or not, must learn to do cross-cultural ministry. He emphasized that many youth ministers are not prepared for this challenge and thus a significant number of young Hispanic Catholics are at risk of being isolated and even alienated from the pastoral care that exists in their congregations.

The bishops officially recognized cultural diversity as a priority in 2008 and they established a Secretariat of Cultural Diversity at the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) that was led by Father Allan F. Deck, SJ. One of their programs was the creation of guidelines for ministers that would become culturally competent, which included a national consultation in 2010 for the purpose of advising the Secretariat on the content and structure of workshops that would address issues of intercultural competence. Three pilot workshops have taken place in 2011—in San Bernardino, CA, Washington, DC and Des Moines, IA. We are expecting to see a 2012 workshop that will train trainers. These are all positive moves on the part of the USCCB.

Q. What are some of the least understood aspects of Hispanic religiosity in the U.S.?

A. For one thing, the pain and suffering of the older generation is not understood by the younger generation. The younger people simply have not experienced what their parents went through. So this can be an issue. What we know well about the young Latinos is that they like to pray, and so, in our training programs, we must put in more prayer time for them. The prayer part, I might add, is also important for the people who are doing the training.

Something else that is important to recognize when we are looking at Hispanic religiosity can be explained as the theory of “field dependence – field independence”: Hispanics are warm and holistic. They first take a hold of the whole and the community, and then extrapolate to the pieces. Think of this vis-à-vis Anglos who first take the pieces through analytic and technical processes and

² Ken Johnson-Mondragón, Welcoming Hispanic Youth/Jóvenes in Catholic Parishes and Dioceses. Report of the National Research and Resource Center for Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry (Instituto Fe y Vida, Stockton, CA, 2003), 3
(<http://www.feyvida.org/documents/Welcoming.pdf>)

then move to the whole by placing the pieces together. It is a different way of understanding the brain/heart connection.

Q. I would like you to describe the methodology you use in Fe y Vida’s leadership formation programs. But first, for our non-Spanish-speaking readers, please just say what Pastoral Juvenil encompasses.

A. Pastoral Juvenil includes ministry with adolescents and single young adults. Those are the primary audiences for whom we are educating our ministers, advisers, and young adult leaders to work with and to minister to. Our leadership formation programs are offered throughout the country in dioceses and in regions. Sometimes clusters of parishes get together and have us work with them.

We describe our programs as providing human, faith, and pastoral formation that is necessary for effective ministry with adolescents and young adults. Our goals are to collaborate with dioceses, parishes, universities and other church-related institutions to offer intensive and high quality pastoral formation programs for young Hispanics. We also assist dioceses as they establish a core group of young adult leaders and we equip them to become instructors for basic programs. We also offer young Hispanics a multilevel, continuous, and progressive set of programs that provides a holistic formation process as an alternative or complement to academic education. These programs are flexible. And I would also like to say that an overarching goal is to create mutual understanding between professional ministers and Hispanic youth and young adults in order to facilitate their integration in the Church as well as in U.S. culture and society.

Q. Can you describe the theological approach that these programs use?

A. We use the Prophets of Hope model as a framework that can engage both adolescents and young adults in ministry. This approach is communitarian, evangelizing and missionary. We say that it builds on the Reign of God and that it seeks, as I mentioned before, to integrate young Hispanics in the Church at the parish and diocesan levels.

There are six characteristics of a comprehensive ministry. These include the communitarian characteristic that has to do with community life, pastoral care, and shared leadership. Then there is the evangelizing characteristic that has to do with encounter with the Word of God and transformation of unjust structures.

The missionary characteristic means that we are advocates for the participation of the marginalized and also includes formation for leadership. The catechetical characteristic is encompassed in our efforts to deepen understanding and living a life of faith. Love and service of neighbors in need is the fifth characteristic of comprehensive ministry, and the sixth characteristic is liturgical, which includes offering of prayer and worship, especially in the Eucharist.

Q. For those who might not be familiar with the Prophets of Hope model, please describe it briefly.

A. Christocentric spirituality is at the heart of the Prophets of Hope model. It is founded on the Word of God which animates and guides all pastoral and formative actions. We follow a Pastoral Circle that includes a process guided by six movements or moments, dedicated to the person’s being, seeing, judging, acting, evaluating, and celebrating, as individuals and in community. Our methodology is one of formation-in-action, meaning that the model encourages the development of faith communities, in a church that can be seen as a community of communities. We work at eliciting a Christocentric spirituality among our young people, one that is based on prayer and the Word of God which can guide youth to lead a moral life in friendship with Jesus, embrace the mission of Christ as priest, prophet, and servant-king, and finally, to help them discover their own vocation while building a civilization of love based on gospel values.

Q. Does progress at times seem slow to you?

A. I would say yes and no. After sixteen years of trying to explain the advantages of “Pastoral Juvenil” for Hispanic young Catholics we have had some fine successes of late. Pastoral Juvenil is now recognized as an official ministry of the Church at the parish and diocesan level as stated in the Standards for the Certification of Lay Ecclesial Ministers, set forth by an Alliance of five major ministerial organizations and approved by the USCCB.

But we need to point out that there is a very long way to go for adequate meeting of the needs of Hispanics in general and young Hispanics in particular. The historic neglect and, in some cases, racism when it came to responding to Latino needs in the Church have consequences that we see in Church statistics. For example, only six percent of American Catholic priests are Hispanic, and 83 percent of them are foreign-born; and only four percent of U.S. lay ministers are Hispanic. Another way to look at the situation is to consider that there are roughly 1,900 Catholic lay people for every priest in the U.S. Contrast that to the fact that there are roughly 10,000 lay Hispanic Catholics for every Hispanic priest.

We have determined four distinct pastoral categories of young Hispanics, segments of community that youth ministers must acknowledge and learn how to work with. These include immigrant workers, identity seekers, mainstream movers, and gang members/high-risk youth. Addressing the needs of such diverse populations, not to mention regional and other differences, are very challenging because the distinctions among the groups preclude simple one-size-fits-all responses. We need diverse programs and events. And note, I have not even touched upon the challenges presented by the fact that these young Latinos live in American society with all of its materialistic values, peer pressures, individualism, secularism, and temptations to indulge in risky behaviors.

Q. What approaches seem to work most effectively?

A. There are important differences in pastoral approaches to mainstream youth and Pastoral Juvenil for Latino youth. The way that mainstream youth ministries are typically conducted in the U.S. is with adult leaders, sometimes paid, sometimes volunteer, who are responsible for all of the programming. In contrast, our Pastoral Juvenil methodology uses a typical Latin American approach of peer ministry in which all participants have opportunities to develop leadership skills, and leadership roles are rotated based on individual gifts. There are young adult leadership teams that oftentimes but not always are supported or guided by a priest, a lay volunteer adviser, or a member of the parish pastoral staff. It is important that there are trained professional directors or coordinators of Pastoral Juvenil at the diocesan level, able to recognize and nurture the strong communitarian characteristic of Hispanic cultures, with an emphasis on networking, collaboration among groups at any number of levels—parish, diocesan, regional, or even national and international.

Q. What do you want our readers to take away?

A. I would say that it is hard, in a conversation, to fully explain how our methods work. So, let me recommend that readers of this interview who might want to learn more could contact us. A lot of our information is on our website: www.feyvida.org. We also have a variety of publications. One that specifically explains our pastoral approaches with youth was written by Ken Johnson-Mondragón, from our staff, and is Publication Number 6 of our series entitled [“Perspectives on Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry.”](#)³ Our address is

³ Ken Johnson-Mondragón, “Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry in the United States: Bridging Hispanic and Mainstream Ministry to Forge the Church Anew in 21st Century America,” *Perspectives on Hispanic Youth and Young Adult Ministry* (Insituto Fe y Vida, Stockton, CA) (<http://www.feyvida.org/documents/Perspectives6.pdf>)

“A Conversation with Carmen Cervantes”
from the website
Resources for American Christianity
<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/>

1737 West Benjamin Holt Dr., Stockton, CA 95207. Or, to request publications, a reader could call us at 209-951-3483.

I would also like to remind readers of the invaluable research on all American youth, not just Hispanic, presented in the National Study of Youth and Religion. Christian Smith at Notre Dame is the principal investigator of that most important study. Readers can find more on the [National Study of Youth and Religion](#) website. I think it is critical that we always keep in mind where Latino youth fit into the overall picture of young American Catholics. We are doing much, but the reality is that there must be a coordinated effort on the part of the entire American Catholic Church to adequately meet the needs of faith formation, pastoral care, and leadership formation of our Latino youth.