

A Journal of a Bicultural, Bilingual Teen

by Carmen "China" Briceño

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Last night was sooo embarrassing! When mom dropped me off at the church for our youth night she wanted to speak to my youth minister, Kelly. I can still see it now! Mom was speaking her broken English and Kelly was speaking her broken Spanish. Then they tried using hand gestures, but they still couldn't understand each other. I saw people starting to stare and whisper so I stepped in and translated everything like I have to do a lot of the time. Sometimes I feel like even though I am her daughter, I am like a mother to my own mom since she depends on me to translate for her when she doesn't understand things in English. It was nice, though, that Kelly made an effort to speak Spanish. She told us a few weeks ago that she was listening to CDs so she could learn Spanish!!! She must really care about us...

I really like Kelly because I feel like she really tries to understand me. Most adults assume that just because I speak perfect English I must be American. But Kelly is great because she understands that my life is more complicated than others since I usually feel out of place, not completely American or Salvadorian. It's so frustrating sometimes because my Salvadorian family thinks I am too "American." Even my mom says that she doesn't understand my siblings and me at times since the culture we are growing up in is sooo different from what life was like back home. To top it off, every time I have to fill out a form, I'm reminded that I am "Hispanic" and not American.

I remember the first time I heard the word Hispanic. There was a new kid in school who had just moved from El Salvador. I wanted to welcome him so that he didn't feel left out. It turned out awful, another embarrassing moment! I walked up to the wrong boy and started speaking Spanish to him. He just stared at me and was like, "I don't speak Spanish, I'm white." I remember being confused by what he said so I looked at my skin and thought, "I'm white, too!" It wasn't until later that I realized that even though my skin was white, I was considered Hispanic.

Kelly has really helped me feel comfortable about being Hispanic. She's always telling me what a gift it is to be bilingual and bicultural. She helped me realize that others could learn from my unique experiences of the faith. Back home being Catholic is not only a part of who we are but it's a part of our culture, too. I know that just as I am a part of my immediate family, I also belong to an even larger Catholic family. I really don't think it was until I moved to the U.S. that I learned that being Christian didn't necessarily mean you being Catholic. When my uncle became Protestant my family really struggled with it since it felt like he had not only left the Catholic faith but the family, too.

I remember when I started public school. I realized right away that not all of my friends were going to be Catholic or even Christian for that matter. This made me want to have answers for all the questions people asked me about being Catholic. I tried to look for books in Spanish about the faith that would make sense to me as a teen but there weren't many out there. Once again, Kelly was such a great help. She realized that even though I had a strong faith, I didn't know very much about why I

believed what I did as a Catholic. She made sure that I was able to give answers to the questions my friends asked me and to understand why I believed what I did as a Catholic. I know that a lot of teens don't know about their religion or faith or whatever very well; but I still always felt like my American Catholic friends had a better idea and knew more than I did about being Catholic.

One of the things that Kelly has brought out in me is my leadership qualities. I think she sees that I am used to being an adult a lot of the time because of my family situation and that I could use those same skills to be a leader on our core team. She reminds me how much other teens can learn from me and how much I can learn by accepting more responsibility on the team. I help with planning our activities and I've even given some talks at retreats and stuff. She said she really enjoys how I use YouTube videos and popular music in my talks. Being a leader in the group has been important to me; it has helped my self-esteem and really made me want to keep coming back and being a part of the core team. It's also made me feel like I belong and I am appreciated. My mom is also happy because she feels like people in the group respect my Hispanic culture and don't just put up with me. Unlike school sometimes, at church I feel like I am part of a group and not just someone out of place on the sidelines. Kelly is always telling us about how the Church is one big family and that we share that family with people all over the world. I definitely feel that way about my church. I remember one time she had us pray the rosary in both English and Spanish, that way my Hispanic friends and I didn't feel so dumb when we didn't know how to respond in English. It wasn't that we didn't know the prayers; we knew them, but only in Spanish. It was nice because we all learned a lot from each other that day.

I feel that I have grown a lot in these past years at church, being on the core team and going to the events and stuff. I feel appreciated and valuable as a member of my core team. I have grown to love and embrace my culture, which for me means not only where I am from but also who I am.

~ Sofia

Carmen "China" Briceño is the Director of Youth Ministry for the Sol Vocational Institute of the Diocesan Laborer Priests in Washington. She is also a member of the mission of the Vocare Foundation, and also coordinates music ministry for the Ascendo Nights at the Sol Center. She has experience as a speaker and facilitator in the fields of youth ministry, young adult retreats, missionary camps, vocational seminars, evening prayers/vigils, formation for young adults in "Theology of the Body", and liturgies for young people among others. Carmen is the creator of "Sex and the City of God" workshops. She will become a Consecrated Virgin on August 22nd, 2009.