



COMMUNITY CARE

## Hispanic Heritage and Three Urgent Needs

By Mario J. Paredes

AT THIS TIME each year, thanks to an Act of Congress, we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month. Amidst the revelry, the festivities, parades, and all the public cultural events, this month should first and foremost be a time for all members of the Hispanic community to reflect on our presence in the US, both on a personal and a communal level.

We all know that, within a short period of time, we have built up a considerable Hispanic presence in this country, one that continues to grow rapidly. However, the large number of Hispanics in the US has little meaning if, despite the growth of our community, we fail to achieve the cohesion, unity, solidarity, strength and impact characteristic of much smaller immigrant communities. These communities, though much smaller in number, play a larger role than does the Hispanic community when it comes to having an impact on society at large—in terms of participating in the nation's leading institutions and being part of the country's political, economic, cultural and social elites who set the tone for the future of the nation.

It is important that we reflect on the challenge before us: how to achieve and develop both a "voice and vote" for the Hispanic community in US society and thus have a hand in the destiny of this nation. To make progress, it is urgent, above all, that we come to know ourselves intimately as comprising a multitude of diverse Hispanic communities that have come from a great diversity of countries. Plus, all of us must do our part to come to truly know and understand the society and culture that are home to us today.

The label "Hispanic" is a generic term that groups all of us Hispanics to together—those from the deep south of Argentina to the immense Mexican north. The term denotes an aggregation of nations, histories, customs, identities, cultures, accents and even different and not well-known languages and dialects. Grouped together, we are simply known as "Hispanics" in this society, an ill-defined conglomeration of peoples.

We cannot hope to successfully insert ourselves into the English-speaking culture if, within our own ranks, we do not know ourselves and do not first take on the hard work required of getting to know ourselves in our great diversity. An integration with the "foreign" is doomed to fail if, within the Hispanic community at large, we are still "strangers" to each other.



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Knowledge of and integration with "the other" requires, implies the necessity—first and foremost—of gaining an intimate a knowledge of who we are as a diversity of Hispanic communities; next, or concurrently, we must achieve a genuine integration of these varied communities, in order to become an authentic, self-aware “we” that is poised to integrate with “the other.”

For the Hispanic community at large, this lack of knowledge of our diversity, this lack of integration in the larger society and culture due to the weakness of our internal cohesion amounts to a weakness and vulnerability; they are an obstacle to us becoming a strong and growingly influential community in this nation. Gaining this mutual knowledge among the various Hispanic communities in the US is of paramount importance if we are to successfully integrate—rather than assimilate—into what we call the "dominant English-speaking culture."

Precisely, this urgent need to integrate is not an urgent need to assimilate. To be an active part of this society—without being subject to prejudices or having an inferiority complex—is a condition not only for our own development but also for the healthy development of North American society at large. It is crucial to stress, again, that integration means neither assimilation nor being assimilated. Integration implies acceptance, respect, and tolerance for historical, social and cultural differences; a search for learning (culture, customs, languages, norms, etc.) and an embrace of differences as sources of enrichment.

Integration will never be a rejection, a forgetfulness, an alienation from or loss of our own roots; it will never amount to a loss of our original stories, a fading of our own identity and "sense of belonging," or a dimming of the awareness of our own distinct existence in the world as "Hispanics."

The ignorance of ourselves, of who and what we truly are, of what we have to offer other cultures, and of what we value most deeply as Hispanics, generates disunity within our Hispanic communities. This prevents our deeper knowledge of, and integration with, the rest of American society; it hinders our own development and blocks significant progress in establishing our presence on the national and world stages.

To help remedy the situation, there is an urgent need for Hispanic leadership to smartly and dynamically represent our community. There is an urgent need for men and women leaders to emerge from and be present to well-defined Hispanic communities. These leaders must be steeped in our history and cultures, sharing our values and hopes; they must be very well trained and have stellar academic backgrounds; they must be very



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well versed in all topics pertaining to US society and culture—they must function as our representatives in this society and before the rest of the world.

We need leaders who can articulate our pain and our longing, our vision and aspirations, our demands for justice and all our legitimate interests—all in the pursuit of serving the common good. These leaders must personify all that is best in our communities and cultures.

Hence, knowledge, integration, and leadership must be our watchwords—these are the three major goals to be achieved by the US Hispanic community in the short term. Then, in the longer term, the Hispanic presence in this nation can become valuable to all Americans—a fruitful presence that will benefit all of US society, while putting the spotlight on the best Hispanic culture has to offer, both at the personal and the communal level.

Knowledge, integration, and leadership form the tripod on which the best days of the Hispanic community in this nation's future will rest; they hold the key to unlocking the treasures of the Hispanic heritage for the sake of the US and the entire world.