

**Carl R. Valdez**  
**Narrator**

**Lorena Duarte**  
**Interviewer**

**October 19, 2010**

**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

Carl Valdez - **CV**  
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

**LD:** It is Tuesday, October 19, 2010. My name is Lorena Duarte, and I'm here with Carl Valdez at Incarnation [Catholic] Church in south Minneapolis [Minnesota]. This is for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project.

Carl, thank you so much. I know that you're very, very busy. We really appreciate your taking time to give us this interview.

First of all, would you just give us your name and how to spell it?

**CV:** Carl Richard Valdez. I am named after my Grandfather, Carlos Borromeo Valdez.

**LD:** Excellent. What is your date of birth?

**CV:** June 10, 1943.

**LD:** What is your occupation?

**CV:** I was a secondary school teacher for 22 years from 1969-1991, then 5 years after my ordination as a deacon (1986), I went into full-time ministry in 1991 working primarily with the Hispanic community.

**LD:** Are you married? Do you have kids?

**CV:** I am married and have six daughters: four stepdaughters, two are biological. We have had two foster daughters. One of our children is adopted from Korea. One of our foster daughters was from Ethiopia. We have eight grandchildren and a great granddaughter.

**LD:** Congratulations. Wow!

First of all, I'm going to settle in here.

**CV:** Please.

**LD:** Tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your family, your parents, your siblings.

**CV:** I was born in the village of Penn Yan, New York. Penn Yan is on Keuka Lake, part of the Finger Lakes area and farm country of west central New York State. My mother, when she worked outside the home, was a waitress at an amusement park and then worked for many years through retirement in the kitchen at the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Canandaigua, NY. She was wonderful with the patients as they walked through the line.

My dad was the hired man on a farm and an orderly in a psych unit at the same VA when I was a young boy, but I remember him mostly as an over-the-road truck driver up to his retirement.

From age 11 to 15, we lived in New Jersey, 350 long miles away, because that was where Dad found a good-paying truck driving job. Then when I was 15, my mother put me on a bus to go live with my grandmother back in Rushville, NY where my mother was born. Grandma was on crutches due to a broken hip, so we took care of each other for 6 months. We became extremely close, and I gained almost twenty pounds.

**LD:** [laughter] Grandma's cooking?

**CV:** Grandma cooked well, and I ate like a horse. I also made many trips on foot to the store and played soccer at my new school, that in addition to being 15.

That was my second high school, then when my parents found a house that November near my dad's next driving job, I went to my third high school in Odessa, NY and graduated in 1961. Our fiftieth class reunion is this summer.

Getting back to my mother, Mom was a country girl all the way through, very dedicated. She worked hard at anything she did. She was the one that always was present at whatever school event there was. She was also very close to her church, Rushville Congregational, the church where I had my beginning. So when I went to live with Grandma, I was received there with open arms.

My parents divorced after their 25<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. They got back together after my mother retired, but shortly after, Dad needed to go to a nursing home. My wife, Gretchen, and I brought him out here to Minneapolis when he needed to move from the nursing home in New York.

Dad grew up in the San Luis Valley of south central Colorado. His first language was Spanish. He was baptized Francisco Fermín Valdez, but later records show him as Herman Francis Valdez. He was born in 1917. Mom was born in 1920.

He had a rough life. His dad died at thirty-five of diabetes. My grandparents on his side did not have a particularly good relationship, according to my grandmother Estella. In fact, the Trujillos and Valdezes didn't get along very well. [chuckles] She was a Trujillo. According to my only living aunt, Marie, my dad's sister who is ninety and lives in Pueblo, Colorado, Dad was seventeen in the sixth grade and humiliated by his mother. One of the very few things Dad had to say about his trip from Los Valdezes, Colorado to upstate New York (in 1934) was that he left with his shirt sticking to the blood on his back from his last whipping from his mother.

**LD:** Oooh!

**CV:** After many years of observation, and even through his death, I can tell you that my father survived by his sense of humor. He had a wonderful attitude for life. I think that's why I gravitated more toward him as I became an adult. There was a sense of mystery and goodness about him that was catchy. I was raised by my mother's side of the family, and remain very thankful for that, but once I left for the Air Force after high school, my world opened up, and I was curious about my father's side.

There are a lot of things that I do, in fact, that come from him. I never realized it until someone pointed it out to me how much I look like my dad. [chuckles]

**LD:** That's your dad right there?

**CV:** Yes. That picture was taken in 1994, a few months before he died. He died on January 28, 1995.

**LD:** Yes, I see a resemblance.

**CV:** He never talked positively about his family, about where he came from, about the Catholic Church, which he left, so all of that was kind of a negative picture for me. It was both a surprise and an annoyance to him when I joined the Catholic Church when I was nineteen. I was in the Air Force. Years passed, and I met my grandmother, Estella, when I was twenty-eight years old.

**LD:** On your father's side?

**CV:** On my dad's side, yes. In July 1971, I hitchhiked from Minneapolis to Monte Vista, Colorado to meet her. I hopped a freight train in North Platte, Nebraska, but never got out of the train yard before getting caught and lectured by the "railroad dicks". I took a bus out of North Platte.

My grandmother was wonderful. Then, from there, I met other family members in New Mexico the same week I was there. All of that contributed to what I've been doing for at least the past twenty-four years since I've been a deacon (working in Hispanic Ministry).

**LD:** Did you have siblings?

**CV:** I have a brother a year older—his name is Jerry with a J (he didn't like his given name, Gerald)—and a sister Carol, who is four years younger. As a family, we were not particularly close. The four-year difference between Carol and me was kind of a natural separation—I was immersed in other interests. My brother and I were considerably opposite as we went through our school lives with the friends we chose and things we did. My relationship with my brother has probably never been better than it is now, which is pretty good. It's easy to see our differences and how we grew up, as he points out, "Carl was the one that was always studying."

**LD:** So you were a studious kid?

**CV:** Well, I kind of had to be. There wasn't a whole lot that came easy, other than I was friendly and amiable, so the teachers liked me.

My last high school in Odessa, New York was the one that I was in the longest. As a senior, I was in a huge class of, I think, seventy-nine. I was president of the class. I only went out for one sport, track. They didn't have soccer, which I'd played the first two years at my other schools. When I tried football in my senior year, I didn't even make it to the first game, because I got injured in practice.

[chuckles]

**CV:** My parents both came out of fairly difficult times, of course, the Depression.

**LD:** Sure.

**CV:** But they found each other. They were loving parents, but I don't remember a lot of happiness. I grew up very cautious, and I would never raise my hand in class unless I absolutely knew the answer. I didn't want to be wrong at anything. So I was very timid. In part, Dad's anger helped that. As amiable as he was, when he drank, he got angry quickly.

I remember as a young boy, maybe five years old, four, plates flying and breaking, and Dad getting into a car accident. Piecing it together, it was because he was drinking. So I grew up pretty quiet and didn't want to do anything to attract attention.

**LD:** You came out of your shell a little bit?

**CV:** Well, apparently. I don't know. I suppose I wondered how did my name get chosen for this thing? I don't know.

**LD:** Natural leadership comes through.

**CV:** I don't know. I went into the Air Force right after high school.

**LD:** Okay. What year was this?

**CV:** I graduated in 1961. I entered the Air Force on November 3, 1961, and got out November 2, 1965.

**LD:** What was that experience like?

**CV:** It was wonderful. I'm proud of having worn a uniform. When I talked to a recruiter, I said, "I'd like to get into the military police, or the AP, the air police." He kind of wrinkled his brows, "Well, let's see." Anyway, I was pretty good in languages, so I ended up going to Russian language school at Syracuse University.

**LD:** Oh, wow.

**CV:** It was nine months of Russian, six hours a day. After that, I was sent to Texas again for security service training. Then, I was sent to Turkey as a voice intercept operator, which was listening to voice communications of Russian pilots.

**LD:** Wow.

**CV:** That was on the Black Sea. I really loved that experience. I'm not talking only about the actual military experience. I would take the shuttle—we weren't allowed to drive, of course, just because of the customs, so no one had a car. The shuttle was a truck with a wooden bench along the sides. You'd climb into the back, sit down and bounce through the cobblestone streets of Samsun. I got to know some shopkeepers. I studied a little bit of Turkish, so I could communicate. That was the most enjoyable thing to me, because I could actually communicate with people. I took a couple of trips to Ankara, the capital, on my own on the Turkish bus. I used taxis and took a lot of pictures there. I suppose it was kind of like when you learn to drive, you've got this new-found freedom. Well, I had this natural amiability that I give credit for to my dad, the genes, or whatever. As quiet as I was and with a lack of confidence that I thought I had, I did pretty well. I met some families, and I just remember it kind of opening up new vistas, in a Muslim country.

I was a new Catholic.

**LD:** Right.

**CV:** In fact, the chaplain, who was an Oblate father at my base in Texas, was the one that gave me instructions, and he was assigned to the same place I was assigned in Turkey. So we were together there probably for eleven of the fifteen months that I was there. In that time, we went to the Holy Land, took a plane to Adana, which is the southern-most base in Turkey, then took a taxi all the way through the Holy Land, all the way through Syria to Israel.

**LD:** Oh, wow. All the way by taxi?

**CV:** We were in taxis, crossing borders. Fortunately, the priest spoke French, so he got us through most places, because most places at least are familiar with French. That was, for a twenty-year-old, a pretty exciting trip.

**LD:** I bet.

**CV:** Again, it was opening up avenues. On our way back, I can't remember where we flew out of, but we landed in Nicosia on the Island of Cyprus. That was November 22 1963. We woke up the next day to learn about the assassination of President [John F.] Kennedy.

Then, we returned to Samsun.

Another trip I made was in the spring (1964), the spring I turned 21. A couple other guys who had been stationed in Germany and I went on a retreat in Bavaria. We hopped on a military transport plane. You can get a free ride as long as you're in uniform. We spent 24 hours in Paris, then went to Germany by train. I remember we got separated. We spent twenty-four hours in Paris. [laughter] Then, it was time to get the train to where we were going, and it was five o'clock traffic. We were at a standstill, so we got to the train station kind of right on the button, and we split up. I found myself wandering around the train station, and I missed the train. We were all looking for the right track. They found the right one; I didn't. Somehow, I had the wherewithal to get the next one and I met up with them at the next stop - wherever it was. It's funny, in all that time, it was just being resourceful. I wasn't afraid, which surprises me as I'm talking about it.

In Munich, we had time between trains, and it was spring, in June. We walked around to different bratwurst stands, had a brat and a beer, and the beer is a little stronger. By the time we got on the train. [laughter] I was in a seat like this (riding backwards). The train was going this way. I closed my eyes and, all of a sudden, I was like this (feeling upside down).

**LD:** Oh!

**CV:** I didn't get sick, but that was my recollection of the German beer.

**LD:** [laughter]

**CV:** We spent a few days in this absolutely beautiful part of Germany. They had the ski run up to the top of the mountain, so it was springtime beautiful. We took a trip into Salzburg, Austria, Mozart's home, and had a little tour. It was just wonderful to see.

It was on [the Feast of] Corpus Christi, the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. We were part of a procession that went to four outside altars all made of flowers. Everybody was dressed in traditional costumes. We went in to Mass, and, at the time of communion, you could hear the bells ringing all through the town. It was an experience, and, again, as a

new Catholic and being on a retreat, being part of this cultural, religious event was very impressive.

**LD:** Tell me about being a new Catholic. Why did you, I guess, convert, because you were raised in a different religion? You were nineteen?

**CV:** Yes, I was nineteen.

A few of my high school friends were Catholic, and one of them was my girlfriend, an Italian. [chuckles] In fact, her parents are my godparents. When I was a senior in high school and had my license to drive, I went around to different churches in the nearest towns, a Baptist, an Episcopal, maybe a Lutheran. I always remember going not leaving by the front door where the pastor was because I didn't want to get into a conversation. I just wanted to see what it was like. I had this curiosity.

**LD:** Where do you think that came from?

**CV:** Who knows? I think inside it came from the negativity my dad had for religion. "Prayer is not going to get you a job." He said very little about his growing up. In fact, our parents taught us very early on not to ask questions, and we didn't—regrettably. There's a lot of mystery in that. Mom, however, was always faithful in going to church when she could. She made sure we went to Sunday School. Both parents had a rightness and goodness about them.

**LD:** So do you think that was like a rebellion against that?

**CV:** I'm thinking now, as I'm talking about it, that that could be, especially with my dad's anti-religious feeling. And the mystery, for me, that surrounded it all. I think there was some curiosity about that. Even when the one time I went to Saint Mary's Church in Watkins Glen, New York, with my girlfriend as a senior, I found myself being annoyed. It was in Latin.

**LD:** Oh, sure.

**CV:** It was a beautiful church. There was a beautiful painting of Mary somewhere in the sanctuary, all this devotion to Mary. What's this about? It annoyed me. Then, of course, the stand up, sit down, kneel, stand. When do you kneel? When do you stand? I felt like I stuck out like a sore thumb.

[laughter]

**CV:** When at Syracuse University, every weekend, I would go home and see my girlfriend, and be there at their house and so on. Everything was close.

Once I got away from there, back in Texas, as much as I fought it, I said, "Well, let's give it a fair shot." So I went to the base chaplain, the Catholic priest, and said, "I'm interested

in looking. I don't want to be a Catholic. I'm interested. I don't want to promise anything." Well, one thing led to another. In the time that I was doing that, she broke up with me, which was a good idea. Being away from home, I didn't think it was such a good idea, at the time. I didn't say anything to the priest about her. I just continued, and in the end, I asked her parents to be my godparents.

I wrote a poem called "Rushville Congregational." No, it's called "Purple Goat." It had a little story to it. It's a poem that talks about my roots in the Congregational Church. I recited it by memory in my Mass at Thanksgiving, and my mother was sitting right in front of me. I remember at the church, they have story times for the kids, and you go up and you hold hands with the pastor and sing a child's song. Then you go downstairs and you do some drawings and things. The only thing I remember of that class is that I colored a goat.

**LD:** Purple.

**CV:** The poem says, "or was it green?" That's how I ended the poem, or was it green?

**LD:** [chuckles]

**CV:** I can't remember because the two colors mixed into it. That's the "Purple Goat." I write a little poetry now and then, so my file is called "The Purple Goat." [chuckles]

**LD:** Ahhh. Excellent.

**CV:** Even when I was little—as soon as you start remembering things—I remember asking Mom, "Does God live in there where the dishes are?" because she said "God is everywhere." In one house we lived in the outskirts of Canandaigua, there was this house up on the hill. The barn was broken down and there was deep grass all around it, and the house was abandoned. "Does he live up there by the abandoned barn past Gracey's house?" So I've always had that curiosity, and I've always had this sense of having to do right for fear of being wrong. I suppose there's still some of that in me.

I was slow at making decisions. There are always a lot of what-ifs. If I do this, what if? What if? Sometimes that means not doing anything.

**LD:** Were you slow in your decision then to convert?

**CV:** I don't think so. I also think it was that I felt, well, I've gone this far, I might as well continue.

**LD:** So you converted when you were in Texas and, then, went to Turkey?

**CV:** Yes.

**LD:** After your adventures in Turkey and your adventures through Europe, you came back to the States and finished up in 1965?

**CV:** Yes, I was discharged in November.

In my last duty station, which was a Strategic Air Command base in Massachusetts, my boss was from Fargo [North Dakota]. He was a graduate of the College of Saint Thomas in Minnesota. I was already in school, taking classes.

**LD:** While you were in the service?

**CV:** Yes. In Turkey, I did. I didn't have time when I came back to the U. S., because I became a bartender.

**LD:** In your off-duty time.

**CV:** Yes. That was a fun experience, too—a mixologist.

**LD:** [chuckles]

**CV:** It was in a fancy restaurant. Somebody that had a connection said, "Carl, why don't you go work with Tom Moylin?"

Before I got out, I applied to Saint Thomas, because Brian, who was my boss, the lieutenant from Saint Thomas, introduced me to Doctor Jim Byrne, who was the chair of the Education Department at Saint Thomas. I applied there and was accepted, of all things, which surprised me. So, in February of 1966, I drove out.

**LD:** To Minnesota?

**CV:** Yes.

**LD:** What were your first impressions of Minnesota?

**CV:** Well, it was February.

**LD:** [laughter]

**CV:** There was a record snowfall. As I crossed, I don't know if it was the Saint Croix River or another shorter bridge, I looked down and there were cars racing on the ice.

[laughter]

**CV:** We got plenty of snow in New York and it is cold. I had been ice fishing, but driving cars on the ice? You'd walk on the snow and it would squeak. That was cold. Again, it was another new adventure, something new. The fact that I was actually starting

school was great, and I had help because I had been in the service. There was a federal grant for veterans that I was able to take advantage of, and it helped me a great deal getting through.

Right away, I got a job as a resident assistant in the dorms, and at twenty-two I was a little older than the average sophomore. Saint Thomas accepted all the credits that I had earned previously, including the nine months of Russian. So I had a whole year's credit when I went in.

This was also when Vietnam got hotter.

**LD:** Sure.

**CV:** The protests. I was pretty strict, coming from the military. If I'd see somebody walking on the grass instead of the sidewalk, I'd let them know. [chuckles] I didn't expect people to square their corners as they turned as if they were marching, but I had this rightness about me, which I still do. Now I'm a lot more flexible, of course.

I had a hard time with the Vietnam War, with the protests. In looking back, I regret that I wasn't more open to the Martin Luther King marches. In all that turmoil, I was more on the side of "Let's keep things the way they are." I'd never been a well-read person. I just had this inner sense of wondering where is all this stuff going to get you? As the country was in turmoil, I was in an inner turmoil as well, with all that.

In that time, I got engaged to a young woman from Waterloo, Iowa. We were married in 1970. After two daughters and buying a house, we were separated in 1973. Going through that divorce was, I think, the most difficult season of my life, having grown up needing things to go right and doing things right. I was the first college graduate in my family. I was favored, as my brother would say. [laughter] I had the clean, well-run bicycle. I took care of my stuff. I did my homework. So, to face divorce, to face this failure was pretty traumatic. I did end up with custody of my girls, so I raised my girls as a single dad. I cooked and I froze food. And I was teaching.

**LD:** I was going to ask. What did you graduate Saint Thomas with?

**CV:** A major in French and, then, I continued on to get a master's in teaching. My first teaching job was at Regina High School. A girls' Catholic high school in south Minneapolis.

**LD:** What did you teach?

**CV:** French. That was a two-year stint. Then, I went into a field of special education called Special Learning and Behavior Problems (SLBP) and taught in the Robbinsdale school system for 10 years. After that, I was certified in vocational education and taught in both junior and senior high schools in Osseo coordinating students on work programs. So twenty of my twenty-two years of teaching were in special education.

I don't consider myself a particularly good teacher, but I had an understanding of kids, especially those who needed a break. Whatever faults I had, I worked hard at helping kids take care of themselves and teaching them.

I remember one experience. I had this seventh grader, Verle Neumiller. He was a short kid with a big smile. He was in my class for either two or three years. He said, "Mr. Valdez, I'm going to be a truck driver when I grow up." I said, "Okay, Verle. Good. It's nice to have a goal."

Many years later, I was in Penney's Department Store in Brookdale [Shopping Center] doing some Christmas shopping. Two men came in and, right away, I recognized this big smile of Verle Neumiller. We greeted each other. He introduced me to his friend, and he was wearing a uniform shirt with the North American Van Lines logo on it!

**LD:** [laughter] Ah ha! Oh, my.

**CV:** I said, "Verle, you told me about this job in seventh grade." [laughter]

**LD:** He had become a truck driver?

**CV:** Yes.

**LD:** Wow.

**CV:** Special ed teachers don't get the popular awards, because you've got a handful of kids. But I've had a couple of kids come and swear up and down, "Mr. Valdez is the best teacher I ever had."

**LD:** That's incredible.

**CV:** I remember Juanita Miranda. This was when I was in Osseo. She was a junior high ninth grader in the WECEP program, Work Experience Career Education Program. She was a handful. I mean most of my kids had one foot in the door. I would do some hauling of kids to and from jobs, and I was bringing her back. It's snowy. I wiped my feet on the doormat before I went into the school, and she said, "You should be wiping your feet when you leave the school, not when you go in." [laughter] Her mother sent me a thank you card. It was the first thank you card I'd ever gotten from a parent of one of my kids. I still have it. It's in one of my files.

**LD:** Wow. What did it say?

**CV:** It was just a simple thank you saying something like, "I know it's your job and a lot of people don't recognize what you do, but thank you," something as brief as that.

As I think of it, in those 22 years, I taught in four schools in three school districts and in

three subject areas in both elementary and secondary classes plus one administrative job and coaching soccer. Moving gave me energy. That's the way I grew up, too.

**LD:** Sure.

**CV:** I started questioning, even before I moved the last time in teaching (to Park Center High School in the Osseo system), do I belong in education? Should I continue to do this? That was just prior to my ordination in 1986.

One thing led to another, including in December 1990 when I was invited into a conversation with Father Pat Griffin, the pastor at St. Stephen's here in Minneapolis.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** Those present were Sal [Salvador] Miranda and Juan Linares of Catholic Charities and José Carrera, the director of the Office of Hispanic Ministry. Juan and JoEllen Tucker, a social worker at St. Stephen's School, had been seeing a lot of Spanish-speaking folks around St. Stephen's, so the conversation led to the idea of starting a Spanish Mass at St. Stephen's.

**LD:** Before we get into your service full time as a deacon in the Latino community, I was curious about something you said a little earlier about your frustration in the 1960s and the 1970s with the Vietnam war, et cetera, and how you kind of regretted not being a little more open to things like Martin Luther King. It made me think. What was your relationship with your Latino-ness, or your cultural identity? Obviously, your last name is Valdez. Your dad's first language was Spanish, but did you grow up feeling Latino in any way?

**CV:** Not in any way. Everything was new to me. I had an affinity for my grandparents.

**LD:** Your maternal or paternal grandparents?

**CV:** Well, the only ones I knew were my maternal. They were separated. In fact, everybody in my family, except one, was separated or divorced. That's how I grew up.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** That affinity for my grandparents led to my beginning to write to my Grandmother, Estella, in Colorado when I was in the Air Force in Turkey. That led to the trip 17 years later from Minneapolis to Colorado to meet her in person.

**LD:** Did you grow up speaking Spanish at all?

**CV:** Not at all. I took Spanish in high school all four years. Actually, I dropped out of Spanish as a senior. I had some vague notion that I was taking Spanish because that was

my dad's roots or something. But there were never stories. There were never letters shared.

I remember one Christmas. Let's see. I would have been in fifth or sixth grade. We got a bunch of gifts from my dad's family in Colorado. One was a wallet. I can't remember if my wallet had the saddle on it or the boots on it, cowboy boots, but they were our first wallets, and some other mementos that were from Colorado, western style stuff. Dad never gave us an inkling of where he was from. In fact, a few years ago, I was in a group of clergy, and I was asked, "Being Valdez, and the only Valdez where you grew up, what was that like?" Well, I don't remember.

[laughter]

**LD:** It's like being Smith or something.

**CV:** Yes, it didn't even register.

**LD:** I was wondering, too, about the language, if they were coming to you at that time, in 1990, because you knew Spanish.

**CV:** Yes, that was, to some extent.

**LD:** You had remarried at that point?

**CV:** Yes. I went through the whole annulment process with the church. I couldn't be a deacon if I hadn't done that.

**LD:** Sure.

**CV:** Gretchen and I met teaching. We were married in 1977 on June 3rd. She brought four kids into the relationship, and I had my two.

**LD:** I just wanted to make sure I got all the chronology right.

**CV:** My barber was a deacon, Tom Gorcyski, and he invited me to an information session back in, I suppose, 1981. Anyway, it took, and I applied. We were sitting in the office of the director, who was Father Michael O'Connell, and he said, "It would be wonderful to have a Hispanic serving Hispanics." I still didn't get the picture. I said, "I agree with you 100 percent. It won't be me."

**LD:** [chuckles]

**CV:** "I don't know the language. I wasn't raised in the culture. They won't accept me. Period." Three years later, I was in Mexico with Gretchen.

**LD:** Is that where your dad's family comes from originally, Mexico, way, way back?

**CV:** Yes, because New Mexico, and Colorado were part of Mexico. That's before the border changed.

**LD:** Before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo?

**CV:** Yes.

One of my aunts, *la Tia* Margaret, Marguerita, was my favorite on that side of the family. She had half an arm, with little fingers coming out. She was a school teacher. She played the piano. She was in the Senior Olympics. Anyway, that's another story about her death.

Where was I?

**LD:** This is all very fascinating. I could do two hours just on your *Tia* Marguerita. I have a *Tia* Marguerita who is my favorite, too, by the way.

Three years later, you were in Mexico after having just said that they won't accept you.

**CV:** Gretchen grew up on the near north side of Minneapolis in "the projects" on Olson Highway. Her friends were Mexican and black. She remembers taking the trolley over to Saint Paul with her Mexican friends to Guadalupe [Our Lady of Guadalupe Church] or to somewhere where there was a dance or some activity.

Early in 1986, we saw a brochure from Augsburg College's Center for Global Education for language and cultural training, so in July, off we went to Mexico for five weeks, and in class for four.

**LD:** For four weeks?

**CV:** Four weeks. We lived in a dorm setting for the first two and, then, lived with a family for the other two. Then, because of a young man that I had visited in the hospital here in Minnesota, a Mexican, who had a terrible accident on a farm—he was on a tractor and it rolled over on him—his parents, from Mexico City, came to pick us up, because we had developed a good relationship with this young man. His parents took us to their home in Mexico City and, then, they had another in Querétaro. We spent a week with them. So that was our first experience.

Then, we were assigned to Ascension [Catholic Church] with Ray Monsour. When he got there, he started a Mass in Spanish once a month.

**LD:** Ascension was where?

**CV:** North Minneapolis.

So we got involved a little bit. I laugh now. I would give this written-out homily to Edith Becquer—this was just before the Mass—and said, “Could you make some corrections on this?”

[laughter]

**CV:** Now, of course, I understand why, trying to give these homilies in Spanish.

**LD:** What year was this, approximately?

**CV:** Well, we were at Ascension from 1986 to 1991, so it was in that time period. I’m not exactly sure when.

I was invited to be on the Hispanic Ministry Advisory Board for the Archdiocese [of Saint Paul and Minneapolis]. There were two women that were kind of co-directors, at that time: Sister Consuelo Covarrubias and Virginia Rodriguez.

**LD:** Virginia Rodriguez?

**CV:** Yes.

**LD:** That was my aunt!

**CV:** Really?

**LD:** Yes! And her husband Jorge? Coco, she called him.

**CV:** You know what? It might have been at your sister’s funeral. Was she there?

**LD:** Yes, she came from California.

**CV:** We saw each other.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** We started talking.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** Then, something clicked. Have we seen each other before?

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**CV:** Yes.

**LD:** What a small world. Wow! Okay. Sorry. This is so strange. [chuckles]

**CV:** So I kept getting these invitations, especially from Consuelo. That was some of my background and the fact that I was ordained, there was some latching on. There were people who apparently wanted to claim me. I was okay with it. I just didn't realize the impact – when I'd agree to be on the Advisory Board, with Saint Stephen's.

I continued with my duties teaching. My work at Ascension was a couple of things. I taught a baptism class and I preached, and I got into areas of social justice. Gretchen, she's always reaching out. "Why don't we do this? I've got an idea," she says. That's kind of what governs my life: Gretchen gets an idea. We got into what now is Isaiah, but then was the Joint Ministry Project with a coalition of churches in Minneapolis looking for commonalities among people from churches. So we got into education issues, police issues, housing issues, things like that that affected the community.

[sigh] I had some leadership at a meeting. It's the only night in my life that I haven't slept. We had a meeting and the gym at Ascension was filled. We set up 400 chairs, and there was standing room only. We wanted to get community-oriented policing on the north side. A week or so before, we invited the Police Chief John Laux and Mayor [Don] Fraser. So there we were in this room full of people. Essentially, they said, "No. We're not going to make a decision at a public meeting," which was wise. I didn't have the wherewithal to say, "Would you meet with us?" So I kicked them out.

**LD:** [chuckles]

**CV:** That divided the church. Ascension was pretty much of a white island in a sea of black. Of course, I had made more black friends after that experience. It was terrible. It was not good planning. It was not good. It ended up with us going on a TV show. I can't think of the show.

**LD:** A local show?

**CV:** Yes. It was a public TV show. Eric Eskola was the host.

**LD:** I work for them. [laughter]

**CV:** Eric Eskola, Cathy Wurzer.

**LD:** *Almanac*.

**CV:** It was on *Almanac*. The public meeting was on a Thursday. The next night, we were on TV on *Almanac*, there with the police chief and me and a couple of others. That turned into meetings. I, obviously, made the news, kicking the mayor out and the police chief out.

Anyway, we were getting into these issues. I started owning the Hispanic identity more and more. There wasn't a voice from the community. As much as I wanted to be innocent

and in the background, I couldn't be. That night was a terrible baptism, but I wanted that to happen. Those are my biggest concerns in the justice area—I don't even like to use that word—but areas in which there are people that don't have the benefits that they ought to have. People need leadership. They need help. They need to help themselves, but they need help to give them a push, like I had pushes. There are a whole lot of people that went on before me that prepared the road –

**LD:** Sure.

**CV:** Certainly in the Hispanic Ministry and the Archdiocese, of which I'm among the more senior members these days, there are still guys and women who had done a whole lot of work before I did - before I even got here.

**LD:** So you really start working with the community, then, at that point. What are the other churches that you've served at, you've worked at?

**CV:** After Ascension, there was the work of starting the Mass at Saint Stephen's. I was the only one that quit my job to do it. I was the designated lead person there for about five years.

**LD:** At Saint Stephen's?

**CV:** Saint Stephen's.

That was a time, too, when my dad became incontinent. My wife and I went out and got him from where he was in New York, and brought him out here. I put him in a nursing home right across from what used to be at the Catholic Youth Center [CYC] on Park Avenue South and Twenty-Second Street, in Minneapolis. That's where my office was at first, because I couldn't afford Saint Stephen's. I couldn't pay rent there. [chuckles] CYC offered me space for free.

Anyway, I would get my dad and bring him over to the Spanish Mass. He was in a wheel chair. I remember getting him in there and going through the Mass. He was looking up at me, and he said, "You sure can speak that Spanish."

**LD:** [laughter]

**CV:** We'd never talked about the Spanish side of him, never. So a lot of the people who are still here latched on to Dad, and they spoke to him in Spanish. He was either faking it very well, or - I suspect that it's a little of both - but I think he understood. It's also a time when he came back to the church. He received communion.

I can't remember her name, but one of the workers at Saint Stephen's, whose job was to visit the nursing homes, said, "If I were to have a parent, I would put him there." That's where I put him, which was very, very convenient for me as well.

The first two years, I didn't have a salary, didn't have any paycheck coming in. That year [1991-92], I made \$7,000 working in Latch Key, an after-school program for kids.

**LD:** Wow.

**CV:** Then, I got a grant, thankfully, that helped me at least pay some bills.

In July 1991, while still at Ascension, Gretchen and I went to MACC (Mexican American Cultural Center) in San Antonio, Texas to study more Spanish, and in September that year (the year of the famous Halloween blizzard), I drove out to San Bernardino, California to work for three months with a priest and nun who had given summer workshops for us in Hispanic Ministry. I wanted to be in a Spanish-speaking working environment before jumping completely into St. Stephen's to do ministry. Our tank (savings) was pretty much depleted by that time.

Moving to St. Stephen's was an overwhelming job. It was overwhelming because I didn't have any staff, no secretary, no faith formation person, nobody. I was it. So I was trying to do all of this, trying to develop a worship aid in Spanish so people could follow the Mass. I'm running around all week long.

Excuse me. I'm going to back up just a little bit. In 1991, for fifteen months, I went around visiting Spanish-speaking people that would come to the Mass at Holy Rosary Church in Minneapolis, because they had a monthly Spanish language Mass. I also worked with people at Saint Stephen's who had a monthly Mass, and there was a monthly Mass on a different Sunday at Ascension. There were three monthly Masses in Minneapolis and one monthly Mass in Saint Paul, all on four different Sundays. That was what was offered. [chuckles] That of course was in addition to the long history of the presence of Our Lady of Guadalupe in St. Paul. I'd go around visiting people, do a little Bible study in their homes, and had some leadership training developed from the Joint Ministry Project organizing skills. I put a team together, and we'd invite people like Father Kevin McDonough, who was the Moderator of the Curia and always pulling for us behind the scenes at that time. At the Mass, I'd have these people come up asking, "We want our own priest." "We want our own church." "We want our own programs." People took their leadership seriously.

In June 1993, we went to Mexico for six weeks to study again. This time, every weekend, I would travel from Cuernavaca, Morelos to Mexico City and many pueblos and cities in the states of Morelos, Michoacán and Guerrero. My purpose was to meet as many families of the people that I had met in my previous two years of ministry here. My eyes were opened even wider, because every family had its own personal story. I met their wives, children, parents, brothers, sisters, cousins and friends. I stayed in hotels and homes and ate at their tables. I travelled by bus, microbus and taxi.

When I came back home, I was greeted with the good news that I was a salaried employee of the Archdiocese as of July 1, due to some juggling of resources by Fr. Kevin

McDonough, and the go-ahead from Bishop Larry Welsh, the Vicar for Hispanics at that time.

In 1995 Father Larry Hubbard came along with his seventeen years experience in Venezuela, and he helped out. Pretty soon, he was steady and, then, Archbishop Harry Flynn planted him there, which is good.

From St. Stephen's, in March 1996 I went to Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Saint Paul. José Carrera had had his office there, still as director, but then he left to pursue different work. That left a gap in leadership, Fr. Larry Hubbard had been newly assigned to St. Stephen's, and my five-year internal clock for change seemed to be ticking, so Bishop Larry Welsh allowed me to move to Sacred Heart.

Again, it was another new beginning, and it was just before Easter, before Holy Week, so I got a group of people together over there. They'd already had a Spanish Mass started over there in September a year and a half before. So it had been going on for eighteen months, but there was no growth. Maybe seventy-five people would come in for the Mass. So I started talking with the parish council over there and said, "We need to do something different." They [the Hispanic community] still weren't part of the church of Sacred Heart. They were a separate entity using the church. With the leadership that was already there, we continued with the Catechism that they were offering, at least, for First Communion.

Then, I developed a team of Hispanics - I still use Hispanic interchangeably with Latino, although I know Latino is becoming more popular. Where my roots are from, New Mexico and Colorado, it was called Hispanic.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** Hispanos.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** I got twelve people together, in one of their homes, and I put them in groups of two and had them ask certain questions of each other, because they didn't know each other. They would see each other at this Mass, but they wouldn't know each other. By the end of the night, they were just excited. I had them do it twice with two different people. From there, they went knocking on doors. We had a game plan. People would say, "Oh, it's the first time I had a Catholic knocking on my door."

**LD:** [chuckles]

**CV:** They came back all excited.

In conjunction with my visiting the parish council—it was, of course, all English-speaking folk—I said, “I want to aim for us being part of a whole unit.” The parish council liked that idea, so we got some people together from both communities, and the most faithful ones were from the English-speaking community. But there was enough of a movement to get people to know each other. When I told my group of twelve, “You’re going to do this to the English-speaking community,” they said, “Oh, no! We want our own church.”

By this time, I was getting a feel that with all the tension that there had been at Saint Stephen’s and those lessons learned, and looking at myself, my own roots, I said, “No way. It’s not going to happen. First of all, we don’t have the resources, personnel, or money. We need to be integrated. We need to bring in our culture, but we need to be integrated.” I held firm to that. That’s, eventually, what happened. On Pentecost, one of those years—it must have been, maybe 1997, I had it advertised in the *Catholic Spirit*. On Pentecost Sunday, we had a bilingual Mass to reflect that we are now all part of this community. We are one church.

There was Sister Pat Forster, a Franciscan. She was one of the original people to go to Venezuela when the Archdiocese opened a mission there, who is now in Mexico developing something new. She is a bright, bright woman. She joined Sacred Heart. She was looking for a church community, and she saw what was going on, and because of her presence, it just blossomed. I’m a good starter, but I need many other people to do detail work, which she was extremely good at. She was a wonderful teacher, a trained catechist and that sort of thing.

Then, four and a half years rolled around. What was going on? There was talk in Richfield that there needed to be something done out there. I didn’t want to go out to the suburbs, but I sat down with Larry Hubbard and with Anne Attea.

They helped me in the decision to go to Richfield. There are seven churches in that deanery - very manageable. There are three in Richfield, three in Bloomington, and Pax Christi out at Eden Prairie. I met with the deanery priests and said, “We’re thinking about this, but we’ve got to figure out where to locate. It needs to happen. But, also, it’s not going to happen unless all of you are together on it. It needs to be a deanery thing, not just whatever church gets the Hispanic population.”

After considering demographics, location and many interviews, we decided on Assumption and its Pastor Fr Mike Tix. I interviewed parishioners from Assumption, the names that the pastor gave me. I saw their plan that they had done a year or two before saying that, “We need to be a more open church. We’re getting old.” The great majority of the people that I sat down with were in favor, so that’s how that decision was made to go to Assumption.

**LD:** And then from there, you came to here?

**CV:** Here. So I was at Ascension, Saint Stephen’s, Sacred Heart, Assumption, and here.

**LD:** Incarnation.

**CV:** This was kind of coming back home, because the group that left Saint Stephen's came here when they outgrew Saint Stephen's. There was a group that stayed over there. Now, what I understand is that they've got a full church on Sunday morning, in Spanish.

**LD:** During all this time, clearly, the Latino community was growing; otherwise, you wouldn't have such demand for bilingual Masses. What was that like? What did you observe in the growth of the community, the changes to community?

**CV:** Well, starting at Saint Stephen's - Saint Stephen's was right in the Whittier Neighborhood, and that's where GFI was - Goldberg Foods, Incorporated, which was a meat processing plant. In all the apartment buildings in that area right around Twenty-Eighth Street and Blaisdell [Avenue South], you heard Spanish. That was the primary language.

I think chaos is what I experienced. To this day, it's the way I operate. I get interested in something and I plow into it. Sometimes, I don't even know what I'm doing. It just seems like it needs to get done. Then, I'll get distracted and do something else. I'm all over the place. So part of that chaos was inside of me, and, certainly, it was apparent at Saint Stephen's. The issue was leading a parish, but I'm not trained to lead a parish. As Kevin McDonough said on one of our walks, "Well, you certainly didn't get any help with this." [laughter] But there's no doubt about it that it was grassroots work. Yes, I've got those qualities that can move with uncertainty. I don't have to know what I'm doing even though I want to do it right. I'm not a very good researcher, but I have this feeling. I'm hearing people say such and such, so such and such has to happen. Let's do it.

At St. Stephen's, I would visit people in their homes, sometimes in their workplaces. I had, before our baptisms were organized, people coming up to me, "Can we baptize next Sunday?" or "Can we baptize this day?" or that day? So I had baptisms all over the place. Finally, we got down to "un domingo cada mes" [One Sunday a month]. It was hard to make that decision. Among my features is a people-pleasing characteristic.

Even the sense of people not being documented. Early on at Saint Stephen's, I would say, "I suppose fifteen percent don't have papers." Well, it was more like eighty-five percent.

One of the fresh-air kinds of feelings that I had when I moved from Saint Stephen's to Sacred Heart was more surety about what I was doing and also that, no, we're not going to have just our own church. We're going to share a church. We're people saying that we're followers of Jesus Christ. We're not going to have just our own private thing here.

**LD:** What were the communities like that you were serving, and how did that change as the years went by? What were some of their needs, concerns? What did they come to you with?

**CV:** Primarily it was the sacraments, like baptism.

I can remember my very first Mary and Joseph. [laughter] They were a couple of eighteen-year-olds. She kept trying to get a hold of me. This was when I was at Ascension. She wanted me to baptize her daughter, Anita. When we finally got to talking, then, kind of at the end of the conversation, she said—this was on the phone—“Do you think you could marry us, too?”

**LD:** [laughter]

**CV:** And that’s just what I did. I laughed. She said, “Why are you laughing?” This was before, when I didn’t know anything about how the community was. I said, “Well, normally, we try to do it the other way around.” They took marriage prep with me and my wife, mostly with me. One day Maria said, “José’s got another woman.” She livened up and sat up in her seat and said, “He’s always out in the parking lot fixing his car.”

**LD:** [laughter]

**CV:** “His car is his other woman. He buys things for it. He’s always shining it.”

So I married them and baptized their second child, too, a few years later.

I would be in people’s homes, and they might have had a card table and one chair. In some apartments, I’d walk in and these guys are sleeping all over the place. They’d just get up and work. They were working all night. One woman that I reacquainted with here was at Saint Stephen’s - Adriana is her name. I helped her dad with a dentist appointment to get his false teeth. He had to get teeth taken out. So my work involved translating - moving people around in my car. I’m trying to get a liturgy ready. I’m trying to keep one step ahead in this. I’m going to take the Scripture over to this family so we can talk about it, and I’m one step ahead of them. What is the Scripture saying? I’m trying to negotiate with Saint Stephen’s and Sacred Heart, everywhere, with the English-speaking community.

**LD:** Was there tension there?

**CV:** Always—at least at Saint Stephen’s. They were liberal enough to invite us in, but we still had a process to follow. In my style, we kept getting ahead of the process. They’d kind of sign on the dotted line a couple days before. When we finally realized that we could do it, we had this Mass in which we invited everybody with a Spanish surname and allies. After having twenty to thirty people at Mass once a week, we had close to 300 people at that Mass.

**LD:** Wow.

**CV:** I couldn’t sing the opening song, I was so overwhelmed. I literally said, “God help me. What are we going to do?”

I'm still trying to be married all this time. [chuckles] Raising kids. They're in high school by this time or out. It was just chaos.

The community itself, I'm realizing, is full of people who work in restaurants. They're doing housekeeping. They wear white shirts, yet they're poor as dirt. But things were changing - the banks and the telephone companies are among the first to catch onto this new source of money. They started establishing phone lines in Spanish and actually hired people that were Spanish-speaking and so on. These things were opening up. CLUES [Chicanos Latinos Unidos En Servicio][now Comunidad Latina Unida en Servicio], in 1991 I think, expanded their office to Minneapolis because they were getting so many people with Minneapolis addresses going to their office in St. Paul.

When we started at Saint Stephen's, I went over to Our Lady of Guadalupe and was speaking at Mass with Father Jerry Hackenmueller and announced that, we have, now, a Spanish Mass weekly. That transition from the monthly to weekly happened within that two-week period between the big Mass that we had, and, then, "Hurry up parish council, have a special meeting or something and approve it, because we're on the road. We've already got it planned." [laughter] Then, I had to go around and find priests—that was my job—who could come in. Some were steady. Others were not. So there were always changes in that. What do we do with the money? Where do we count it? Who counts it? How do we keep track?

My move to Saint Paul was one of the best things that happened to Saint Stephen's. That Easter, because it was close to Easter, Larry Hubbard was alone and feeling it, and the community felt it. He had seventy-five people helping him with Holy Week services on Easter.

**LD:** Wow.

**CV:** Seventy-five people. They were just proud. [pause] [Mr. Valdez tears up] And some of those people are here.

**LD:** What makes you emotional about this?

**CV:** [sigh] [long pause]

In my own rickety, dilapidated, disorganized way of doing things, we were forming community. They couldn't depend on me; so they had to do it themselves. [pause] So, yes, I had a part in that.

**LD:** Yes.

Tell me about some of your own satisfactions, the things like this that bring you joy.

**CV:** When I went to Saint Thomas as a sophomore, at twenty-two years old, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. Having been hooked up with the chairman of the Education Department, he planted me in teaching—and that’s what I am. I don’t always follow the rules. The rule is, I suppose, you need to be further along the road than what you are now. You need to grow. I think it’s the reason I was attached to Special Ed with small classes, taking kids that nobody else wanted. Even though I was never in that situation—I was always cared about, cared for—I had a heart for kids that needed help more than others. Part of that might have been my own lack of self-confidence. It’s not that I went into that area because of this great knowledge that I had. I’m trained as a spiritual director. Spiritual direction is not about directing, it’s about accompanying. That’s pretty much what I do.

There’s this mystery that why I am even in the church. God is such a mystery. Our faith is such a mystery. Our doctrines that we teach are such a mystery, and for many in the world, they are unbelievable. I say, “Yes, they’re unbelievable.” But there’s something in there. I don’t know who God is. I don’t know what God is. I believe that if there’s something not right, if there’s so much inequality, then something’s got to be righted - that there’s a goodness that we have to strive for. That goodness is Godliness. It’s of God. To answer that question, there’s never a short answer.

[pause]

Sometimes I’m in a store and some little kid recognizes me, and I don’t know who it is. I don’t even recognize him. I still have parents coming up and telling me, “Oh, you baptized my little boy.” “He’s seventeen now.” “You gave us a break.” I crossed the street a week ago—we were having something in the rectory across the street—and this African American woman was coming out of—you know there’s a food shelf over there in the lower part of the rectory.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** She was carrying a little table out, and there was somebody ahead of her going over to her vehicle with a basket of stuff. She looked up and she said, “I know you! You helped me. Aren’t you the pastor?” I said, “No, I’m the deacon here.” And she said, “A few weeks ago, you gave me twenty dollars because I didn’t have any food for my baby.” It’s things like that. I think the satisfaction is when people—not that they’re following my way—are finding new avenues to do something to manage their lives.

I won’t upstage the will of God in this, but I want to believe that I had a part, along with many others, like Fr. Larry Hubbard, in the recent ordination of two men, Deacon Ramón García and Father Fernando Ortega. Both were *jóvenes*, men from Mexico in their early twenties at St. Stephen’s when we began the ministry there. If we did nothing else, we provided an atmosphere in which two very capable people could realize their vocations. That’s something to celebrate.

There are a couple more profound experiences that I’m proud of. Somewhere around

1994 at St. Stephen's, with the help of what is now Isaiah, a congregation-based organization, and the Whittier Neighborhood's economic development organization, we did a talents inventory, asking people what they were good at and interested in, something they might like to do to start a business of their own. Then we had a series of classes in Spanish on what it takes to start your own business. Many entrepreneurs jumped at the chance. That led a few years later to the development of Mercado Central on Lake Street and Bloomington Avenue, a building that was renovated specifically to house Latino businesses: restaurants, a bakery, jewelry and clothing stores, and even a grocery.

In the 1980's and '90's, Lake Street was looking pretty shabby east of Lyndale to the river, but today it's a new Lake Street with thriving businesses, many Latino, from the Mississippi River to Lake Calhoun. I'm glad that the church was part of that enterprise.

Another important church action we did happened when I was at Sacred Heart. We became aware of a lack of attention of Spanish-speaking patients at United Hospital in St. Paul. We had examples of children, other patients and even a janitor translating between patients and staff. In some cases, there were incredible waiting periods in the emergency room. One of our parishioners actually instructed another patient on the use of some equipment that a mother needed for her child, because there was no staff person that could do it.

To her credit and the hospital's, the vice president in charge of operations came to Sacred Heart to meet with us. She asked that we only have three or four people, but she brought seven of her staff. We greeted her with fifteen! That meeting led to another two months later so they could present us with a plan, even though they were not sure that we represented the Hispanic community. To assure them of our representation, we brought about 25 people representing five churches in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

That second meeting was not without tension, but the end result was that United hired a full-time, Spanish-speaking liaison to assist with providing a more welcoming and professional environment for Spanish-speaking patients and families. That, of course, included written instructions from the pharmacy as well as spoken language, and not just Spanish.

The success of that win for the community was the result of organization skills learned from what is now Isaiah as well as the assistance of one of its organizers. We were little people, church people, making changes, and it was precisely that action at the hospital that propelled us into immigration issues and having direct communication and meetings with the area director of immigration.

I do a lot of pre-marriage work. These are primarily couples that have been together anywhere from five to twenty-five years, and they want to get married in the church. They want to experience the sacraments. And sometimes it is looking across the hall at the auditorium where we have the baptism talks in the baptism season, the summer

months. From May to October, we're baptizing twenty-five or thirty kids at a time twice a month. So in the classes—I have two classes a month—I've got 120 or 150 people in the auditorium. I'm breaking them up into small groups and such. The disappointments are when I don't see them at church, coming back for more than baptism. I'd like to know that this means something to them, and they want to go further with it. But then they do come through, and they say, "I know it's time. Our nine-year-old is asking us why we're not married." [chuckles]

I guess getting rid of that fear that so many have grown up with.

**LD:** Fear of?

**CV:** Fear of attachment. Getting married in the church, that's *really* the commitment, and men especially are afraid of it.

**LD:** Yes.

**CV:** So it's all kind of what-ifs. Those are those personal things.

**LD:** Can I ask? What do you think the Church comes to mean for Latino people, in particular Latino immigrants here in Minnesota?

**CV:** I'm pretty parochial on that, because I don't know about all of Minnesota.

**LD:** Sure.

**CV:** Well, when we started at Saint Stephen's, it's true that the place that people go first is the church.

**LD:** Why?

**CV:** That's a real good question, because I think the Church has done a number on a lot of people, hurt them. However, people often come out of poverty, which the majority do, although not all. Some are very, very educated and have come out as doctors, architects, and engineers. But those who have had very humble experiences and anywhere from a third to a ninth grade education, no matter how poor their experience was with church or how infrequent it was with church, church is something that they grew up with. There's always a little [several words spoken Spanish]. It represents something. It represents a hope. So people come to someone and that's why the churches where I've been have grown, because there's somebody full time in there working. It's not necessarily because of *me*. It's because there's a presence, and that presence represents an overall good—God.

I haven't even touched on the immigration woes and the political atmosphere and the hate and the racism all this stuff that goes on.

**LD:** Let's talk a little bit about what about what you were saying that you hadn't touched on, the racism, the immigration woes. The people that come to you, how do you see that affecting them?

**CV:** I tell them, openly, both in my homilies, and so does Kevin McDonough, that the economic problems these past couple years, or when people face floods in southern Minnesota, all of that obviously touches our families as well. They are under a lot of stress. There's a stress that's always there. Like when you're being told, 'You're not wanted here.' Yet, you're given a job and you're working, or there's so many people telling you, 'You don't belong,' including the government, starting with the government. That adds a tension that you don't even sometimes recognize anymore because it's so normal for you. So if something happens between you and the people you love, the people that you live with, or if you've got somebody putting you down at work, or if your kid is in a gang, all that makes sense. It's not right, but it makes sense that you're so wound up. I can't change that. But know that I understand that and, also, give yourself a break when you try to communicate with your family."

It is the overall good that I'm trying to be part of... How are kids doing in school? How can we get more parents involved when they don't speak the language? Schools are catching on. But I always push that. I always pushed parents. "Okay, so you're working two or three jobs. You've still got to get to the conference. You've still have to know who your child's teacher is. You still have to sit down with your kid. You can't raise them the way you were raised with the belt and the bottle or the whip, or whatever." There are so many inconsistencies and discrepancies in our society.

I tell them in a personal way that I appreciate their work, and that that has everything to do with my ministry. "I appreciate the fact that you are here. You're working. You're paying taxes. You're doing your best with your family. You've got the Spirit of God within you to be able to cross a border, sometimes two or three times, looking for work. You want to provide. You're sending money back and you're in this constant upheaval." I don't want to say that to feel sorry for them. I don't want to help in that way. I want to be compassionate. We all have to learn that there are limits to how much we can help, but there are unlimited things that we can do to help people help themselves, or to be more independent and to have a sense of well being. I think that's why I'm good at what I do, and why I've bounced around so many times from one church to another, starting the flow of things.

I left this out. I've mentioned her name a few times, but my wife is clearly in the background in all of this. But she is a force that every community that I've been in would not recognize. She put three choirs together over here. It requires a reshuffling, bringing someone on who can work with people. She was behind all that.

**LD:** Wait. You said the community would recognize.

**CV:** Would not.

**LD:** Would not recognize? Why do you say that?

**CV:** Because she's not an out-front person.

**LD:** Ahhh. So she's a behind-the-scenes person?

**CV:** Yes.

**LD:** Gotcha.

**CV:** Ernesto Piedra is from Cuba. He played at Assumption; that's where we met him. He used to have his own band, but not a church band. This is the first time he's played religious-type music – he's very qualified, very gifted, and has a wonderful way with people. There was a whole lot of stubbornness with the music. [laughter] And there still is, but it's more manageable. Gretchen figured out a way to get Ernesto here, so he's being paid a pittance, but he's being paid. He gives lessons to kids, as well as adults. There are kids that never had a guitar in their life that are now playing in the choir and playing very well and singing. He plays for three of our four Spanish Masses.

Now, we have one less English Mass and one less Spanish Mass. We combined them to make a bilingual Mass on Saturday. That's two weeks old now.

Anyway, it's things like that that Gretchen does, and things like that that make it happen, such as getting over \$300,000 in grants over the past 10 years and connecting with 2 key women at Assumption, then starting a model resource center for the community, especially for women and children. When I go someplace, whoever gets me has a heck of a good deal, because they've got a terrific organizer, a behind-the-scenes person, which is Gretchen, unpaid, and, then, they've got me as a front person. [chuckles] She's effective in other ways. There are so many things that happen because we're both here, not because I'm here.

**LD:** Right.

What would you say are your hopes—wrapping things up; we've covered so much—for the Latino community in Minnesota in the coming years?

**CV:** A combination of seeing its own talent, so many talents, and to be able to integrate and be a strong part of the leadership of the state—and not the only leadership, but a part of the tapestry of the leadership that is here.

The Dream Act is just piecemeal stuff. We need to have what we're calling Comprehensive Immigration Reform. There needs to be an acceptance from the people that have been here, that grew up here and likely speak only English. They need to appreciate their own roots and appreciate the roots of others, and get all our kids educated. This dropout rate is horrendous with Hispanic, Latino, with African American.

It's disgraceful, and it's a disgrace for all of us. It's not just that population that is affected - we're all affected.

We all have to change in different ways, which is the primary message of this recently laid out plan for the Archdiocese. That's only twelve counties, but it's a big population. It needs to be all over the state. Even that's a little parochial. It needs to be part of our existence in this world. Having people recognize and develop their talents, giving people breaks where they need breaks, and giving them a kick in the butt when they need a kick butt. That's my wish.

Certainly, as an ordained minister, that's underscored. It's not just a secular wish that I have, but, certainly it is for those who want to learn more about their faith, more about their relationship with God, to constantly be vigilant and active with that so they can participate better in the whole society. Then they can use their, in this case Catholic, roots to grow. It is part of that whole mystery that I was talking about, that they grab onto that mystery in their lives, and that spirit that's already in them that needs to continue to grow.

**LD:** Very good. Is there anything else that you want to add about your reflections, your work, or about the Latino community in Minnesota?

**CV:** I guess I'm a Minnesotan because I've spent over forty years of my life here. My roots are in New York and Colorado and New Mexico. It's, if nothing else, interesting that I was the only member of my family here in Minnesota, but I'm the one that has reached out to both sides of my family in a big way.

But, in a larger sense than that - I don't consider myself a well-traveled person, but I've traveled to other countries, Guatemala, Mexico, Costa Rica, Canada, and in Europe and Asia. In looking at all the chaos, there's a whole lot of goodness. The suffering that we have, and we've suffered plenty, it's a shared suffering. If we can, remember those times of gratefulness and to be grateful for the people around us, certainly for ourselves. It's bigger than the *I*, the me, bigger than my family. There's so much good that we really do, but there are a lot of holes, a lot of hurt that won't be resolved. We'll have moments of relief, like the liberation of those thirty-three miners [San Jose Mine, Copiapo, Chile, rescued October 13, 2010]. We'll have moments of relief when we can help flood victims or tsunami victims or tornado victims or people in war-torn countries. It's a constant search and use of the good that we are.

Now, if you ask me that in twenty minutes, or an hour, or two hours from now, I might have a different answer.

**LD:** Sure. [laughter]

**CV:** I think the theme would be pretty much the same.

**LD:** Yes. It's always perfect at that moment.

**CV:** You're a writer. Of course, you understand. [laughter]

**LD:** Whatever is meant to come out, comes out and it's perfect in that moment.

This has been fantastic. I just want to thank you once again on behalf of the Historical Society. This has been a really, really enlightening conversation and a wonderful gift to share with the people of Minnesota. Thank you.

**CV:** Again, I don't know if the word is embarrassed. I'm flattered. I'm humbled. [chuckles]

**LD:** It wasn't by accident that many people said your name. So consider it a mark of a job well done.

**CV:** I'll accept that.

**LD:** Thank you once again.

**CV:** You're welcome.

Lideres Latinos Oral History Project  
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