

## **The Significance of *Padrinos* and *Madrinas* of a *Quinceañera***

**by Sister Angela Erevia**

### **Popularity of a cultural tradition**

An ever-increasingly popular cultural tradition, the *quince años* celebration is an occasion to celebrate the gift of life of a 15-year old boy or girl. Family, friends, and faith companions accompany young people in these celebrations. Without an explanation, the reality is that this tradition mostly focuses on young ladies - *quinceañeras*. For the sake of space, this article will focus on *quinceañeras*. However, young men deserve just as much attention in being recognized with similar celebrations in their honor. Some young men have had *quinceañero* events.

### **Introducing the young people to the sacred ways of our ancestors**

The *quinceañera* celebration is based on ancient indigenous puberty rituals. Young people were introduced to the sacred ways of their ancestors and were prepared for a life of service to the community. Therefore, the *quinceañera* celebration is a religious cultural tradition; it is not a sacrament.

### **Mass of thanksgiving, renewal of baptismal promises, consecration to Mary, and blessing by the parents**

Initially in this country, a *quinceañera* celebration consisted of having a Mass of Thanksgiving for the gift of life of a *quinceañera* followed by a *fiesta*. A *quinceañera* renews her baptismal promises, receives Holy Communion, makes an act of consecration to the Virgin Mary and offers her a rose, and receives a blessing from her parents during the Mass. In preparation for a celebration, a *quinceañera* is normally guided by a catechist to reflect on the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, penance, and Holy Eucharist. She is guided to reflect on how she has lived her faith in the home, school, and church. The reality is that this cultural tradition continues to gain popularity beyond the Catholic and the Hispanic community. It is a known fact that it is celebrated by other religious and ethnic groups throughout the United States.

### **Parents journey with their children discovering the purpose and the meaning of life**

Giving young people a sense of the purpose of life, the meaning of life, and a promise to stand with them on their journey belongs primarily to the parents. They are the primary educators of their children. They are responsible to create a safe environment for them, teach them how to set personal boundaries, and provide for their personal growth and development at all levels - physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual, and spiritual. However, parents can be overwhelmed with these responsibilities and expectations. Most parents will welcome the assistance of other adults in fulfilling their duties toward their children. Having *padrinos* and *madrinas* is a great help for parents. From now on the terms of *padrinos* and *madrinas* will be used interchangeably with the term “sponsors.”

### **Role of *padrinos* and *madrinas* for a Christian event**

Traditionally speaking, having *padrinos* and *madrinas* for a Christian event is very often associated with the celebration of the sacraments within the Christian faith community. Sponsors are invited to accompany a child, a young person, and/or an adult for the reception of the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, First Communion, or matrimony. Culturally speaking today, the use of having *padrinos* and *madrinas* has spread widely to other ethnic and religious groups beyond Christian celebrations. It is likely that a new meaning has emerged with this use of inviting and having *padrinos* and *madrinas* in the context of a *quinceañera* event.

### **Spiritual bond of *padrinos* and *madrinas***

Being a *padrino* or a *madrina* in the Hispanic community always creates a spiritual bond with a child or a young person and their parents. Hispanics give names for this spiritual relationship - the child calls the adult sponsor *padrino* or *madrina* and the sponsor calls the child *ahijado* (godchild) or *ahijada* (goddaughter) derived from *hijo* (son) or *hija* (daughter). The parents and the sponsors become *compadre* and/or *comadre*. The root word for *padrino* and *compadre* is *padre* which translates as “father.” The same applies to *madrina* and *comadre* which is derived from *madre* which translates as “mother.”

### **Significant mentors and role models**

In a *quinceañera* event, the adult sponsors play a very significant role in the lives of young people. To be asked to be a *padrino* and a *madrina* is an invitation to be an extra *padre* and *madre*. Far beyond simply incurring some of the expenses of the celebration and the *fiesta*, *padrinos* and *madrinas* become part of the extended family and become significant mentors and role models for the young people for whom they are sponsors. This places a tremendous responsibility on the adults to be credible persons in their own personal relationships and affairs.

### **Creating a safe environment for the young people**

Strictly applied to a Christian tradition, this spiritual bond means that the adult sponsors are invited to make a commitment to assist the parents in all the ways previously named - creating a safe environment for the *quinceañeras*, teaching them how to set boundaries in their personal relationships, and providing for their personal growth and development at all levels - physical, emotional, intellectual, sexual, and spiritual. When it is necessary, adult sponsors replace the parents when the parents can no longer care for the well-being of the *quinceañeras*. Looking at *padrinos* and *madrinas* in this way gives a profound meaning to their role in the lives of *quinceañeras* celebrating this religious cultural tradition.

### **Sacredness of life, sense of belonging, security, dignity, and self-esteem**

The adult sponsors can help *quinceañeras* to make sense of their lives by giving them a sense of the sacredness of life, a sense of belonging and security, the example of respecting the dignity and human rights of others, a sense of the sacredness of their sexuality, building up their self-esteem, helping them to believe in themselves, showing respect for their individuality, and recognizing their presence, gifts and talents. They can help *quinceañeras* deal with their personal questions, concerns, doubts, and pressures about life. The adult sponsors may accompany the *quinceañeras* to give them hope in difficult times and love them when they feel unloved and unaccepted. *Padrinos* and *madrinas* can make an extremely significant contribution by giving *quinceañeras* the example of how to create, nurture, develop, and maintain right, good, and healthy personal relationships and boundaries with their family members, friends, and peers.

### **Hopes and dreams of young people**

At a gathering of Hispanic youth sponsored by the Hispanic Ministry Office of the Archdiocese of Omaha, young people expressed their hopes and dreams in various clear and explicit ways and forms. They verbalized their most profound desires for having God in their lives, peace and unity in the family, good relationships of friendships with their peers, the importance of health and education, and enjoying life. They named their gifts and talents - having God and Jesus in their lives, having two cultures and speaking two languages, the blessing of family and friends, music and dance, culture and traditions, energy and creativity, commitment, faith, hope, joy, spirituality and prayer, ability to work with others, *quince años* events, and cultural foods and traditions.

### **Concerns and risks of young people**

They also named the counter values they face in hostile environments and unsupervised settings. They expressed a deep concern for not having God in their lives, drugs and alcohol, gangs and violence, sexual and emotional abuse, rape, prostitution, and teen pregnancies, racism and discrimination, vandalism and destruction of property of others, bad behavior and lack of respect for others, lack of openness to build relationships with others, irresponsibility and hypocrisy, bad attitudes, misuse of freedom and lack of respect for their parents. Dealing with young people and giving them hope can be a real challenge for parents and adult sponsors alike. It can also be a wonderful opportunity and a great blessing!

### **Role models for our fragile youth**

Considering all that has been said about the hopes and dreams and real needs of young people in our midst, there is no doubt that the *padrinos* and *madrinas* play a very important and significant role in their lives. They are significant others, mentors, and role models for our fragile youth looking for a sense of meaning of their lives. Whatever expenses they make in providing for the various symbols and items for the *quinceañeras*, *padrinos* and *madrinas* primarily make a commitment to support parents in their role of being the primary educators of the faith and to build strong and wholesome personal relationships with them. Congratulations to those brave men and women who accept this serious and challenging commitment as *padrinos* and *madrinas*.

Great will be their reward for their generosity in dedicating themselves to the care of some very vulnerable members of our families!

*Sister Angela Erevia, MCDP, is presently the director of Hispanic Ministry for the Diocese of Dodge City in Kansas.*