



Yesenia Flores exits church with family members.

Quinceañera for a day

Celebration of a girl's 15th birthday a rich tradition for Hispanics

COLLINSVILLE - Parishioners arriving early for the 5 p.m. Vigil Mass on May 27 would be excused if they assumed the joyous celebration spilling out onto the grounds of St. Therese Church was a wedding. The church bells were pealing, and a mariachi band serenaded the "bride," radiant in her gown and surrounded by family and friends.

But the celebration which earned so many admiring glances was a quinceaños celebration, by which the Hispanic Catholic community celebrates the coming of age of a young girl, marking her 15th birthday with the renewal of her baptismal vows and a public commitment to God and Our Lady to live out the teachings of Christ and His Church as carefully and as completely as she can.

The community-wide expression of gratitude to God and joy in the innocent beauty of a young girl as she turns 15 is extremely important to many Hispanic families, who use the occasion to strengthen the bonds of faith and family by inviting close friends and relatives to assume the role of godparent in the ceremony.

"There are actually several sets of godparents," explained Msgr. Patrick Brankin, pastor of St. Therese and celebrant of the quinceaños Mass. "Each of the godparents plays a definite role in the ceremony; but what really matters is that the family is strengthened as a whole by so many mutual bonds of support and encouragement."

Yesenia Flores was the center of attention at St. Therese that Saturday afternoon. A student at Owasso High School, she was accompanied by a court of seven young women (her damas)



Mariachi "Santo Domingo" serenaded the invited guests.

and seven young men (her chambelanes). "The number of damas and chambelanes can vary," explained Msgr. Brankin, "but in this case, the total number of damas and chambelanes was 14, which plus the quinceañera equals 15, the 'magic number' for the celebration."

Perhaps most commonly celebrated among Mexican Catholics, quinceaños ceremonies are a tradition well known in other Latin American cultures. Since the most important aspect of the liturgical ceremony is the renewal of the girl's

baptismal vows, various gifts, symbolic of her baptism, are presented to the quinceañera by her padrinos.

These include a crown, which recalls that Baptism promises that one day Catholics will be crowned with glory in heaven; a ring, which recalls the love by which Yesenia became a child of God; a rosary, a Bible and a medal, all signs of the ways by which her baptismal life is nurtured by prayer, and a bracelet, called an esclava, a reminder that Yesenia promised to remain always a servant of Christ.

After the Mass, the quinceañera, her brother Edwin, who served as his sister's chambelan de honor, her court and her family posed for pictures in front of the parish shrine, while younger boys shucked their formal attire to kick around a soccer ball and family members from as far away as Chicago ooh-ed and aah-ed over each other's children, until a monstrous black limousine pulled alongside the entrance to the church. An immediate lure, the open limo invited many of the younger guests to peer inside and marvel at its opulent interior.

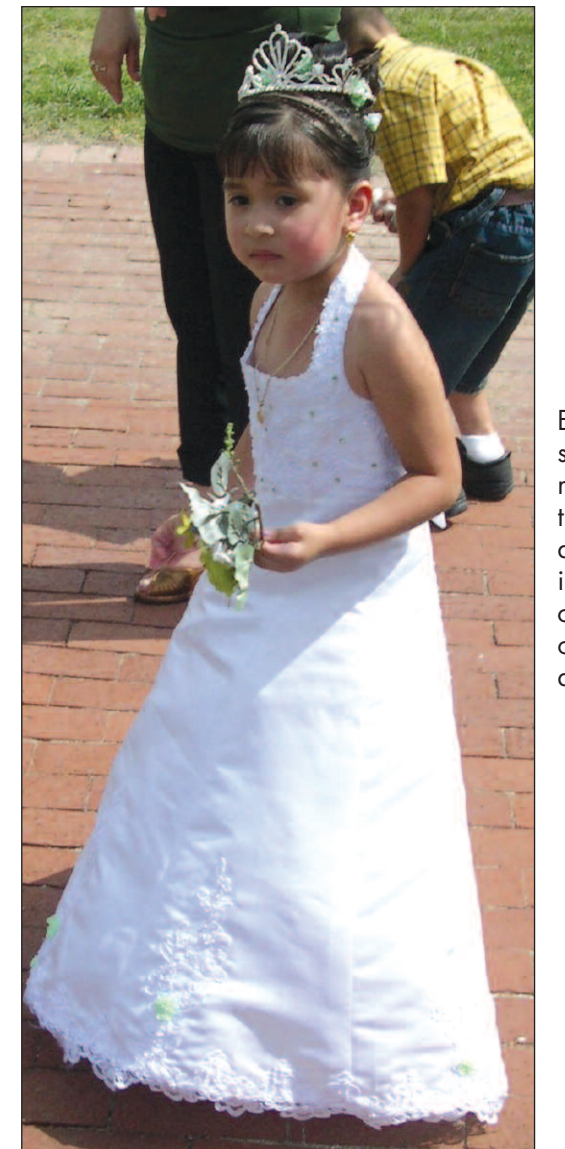
"Although such a gift is extravagant, even a limo this luxurious can be defended," explained Msgr. Brankin. "Most families will save for years to provide a fitting celebration for their daughters. But in a culture in which family and faith are the strongest possible values, parents might be excused if they go to such extravagant means to proclaim the importance of family ties and absolute necessity of love between two generations."

Edwin Flores (dressed in white) turns to speak to two chambelanes at his sister's quinceaños.



Yesenia and her court of damas pose for the official photographer.

Large enough to transport all the damas and chambelanes, the rental of this massive limousine was a surprise gift to Yesenia from her parents.



Even the smaller members of the family are involved in the celebration of a quinceaños.



The lawns at St. Therese Parish become an impromptu soccer field.



Family and guests renew old friendships.