



¡Bendición, por favor!

“Bendición, por favor...a blessing, please”. Asking parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, godparents, and priests for a blessing is part of the culture in many Hispanic countries, but nowhere is the practice more pronounced than here in Venezuela. It is part of the morning greeting children give their parents, repeated multiple times during the day’s comings and goings until heading off to bed in the evening.

Few families here have cars, and those who do, use them sparingly given the gas shortages. So, people walk. As the day heats up, the shade of a mango tree overhanging the street offers some respite. In the evening, waiting for their homes to cool down, folks bring chairs out along the street to socialize and enjoy the welcome evening breezes. Kids turn the street into a playground with a variety of games and ride their bikes back and forth. Needless to say, folks here are out on the street a lot, so, whenever I go out walking, I pass by and meet lots of people and am constantly being asked, “Bendición por favor”. The same is true when I am out biking, the request commonly being a bit more forceful to catch my attention as I whiz by.

“Dios le bendiga...God bless you”. Did you ever catch yourself saying the “Our Father” like a parrot as the words flowed out but your mind was on something completely different? Any oft-repeated turn of words runs the risk of becoming routine, so automatic that they become just that...words. Along with “amen” and “alleluia”, words easily spoken at Mass out of habit with little thought, “Dios le bendiga” is a candidate on the endangered meaning list. I myself have been guilty of lacking proper intention while responding to the “Bendición, por favor” of dozens of people exiting after Mass or throwing the words to the wind with a quick turn of my head and a wave back in acknowledgement as I bike on by. May God bless me to stay focused with these blessings.

Although kids asking their parents’ blessing is not common in our American culture, some families have made it their practice. While visiting a couple in their home some years ago, their eldest daughter, around 17 at the time, came into the living room. “Excuse me, mom and dad,” she interrupted, “I’m going out with some friends and you may not still be up when I get back, so can I have my blessing before I go?” Mom and dad each said a brief prayer and blessed her, tracing a cross on her forehead. She smiled, excused herself, and left. Toward the beginning of the baptismal liturgy, parents and godparents are invited to make the sign of the cross on the child’s forehead. This couple had taken that to heart. From the time that teenage girl was a baby, mom and dad had prayed and blessed her every single night. Her day would have felt incomplete without their blessing.

In our American culture, receiving a parental blessing is associated more with a guy seeking approval to marry someone’s daughter or, as is more common, as a “sneeze blessing”. “Bless you!” my mom would say. There are several folksy accounts of the origin of this blessing including a belief that a person’s soul could be thrown from their body when sneezing or that sneezing opened the body to invasion by evil spirits. A more probable explanation stems from a request from Pope Gregory the Great in 590 AD. Rome was being ravaged by a resurgence of the bubonic plague which had claimed a third of Europe’s population. Pope Pelagius II had just died from the plague, and Gregory, a deacon at the time, had been chosen to take his place. Major symptoms of the plague included coughing and sneezing. Since plagues and other disasters were commonly considered divine chastisements, Pope Gregory, according to tradition, ordained that people say “God bless you” as quickly as possible after someone sneezed in hopes that this prayer would protect them from otherwise certain death. The Latino custom of asking for a blessing may be rooted in Pope Gregory’s request.

The question we should consider, however, is not why Latinos ask for and impart blessings as they do but rather why many other cultures do not. We are all called to instruments of God’s blessing for one another, and asking someone for a blessing is a recognition of their being such an instrument. So, don’t feel shy to ask for a blessing or unworthy to give one. Moreover, while it is important that we bless one another with our words, it is even more important that we be a blessing for others through our actions. “Dios le bendiga...God bless you”.

Points to ponder

When have you specifically asked other people for their blessing? When do you ask God to bless you? If your family is not accustomed to asking a blessing before meals or blessing kids at bedtime, consider doing so.

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.