

Hispanic Heritage Month

Alphonse Gallegos

September 2024



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Alphonse Gallegos was born on February 20, 1931 in Albuquerque, New Mexico to a pious Mexican American family. His father was a carpenter and his mother was a homemaker who lovingly cared for the couple's eleven children. Many nights the children would gather to pray on benches built by their father and consider ways the family could serve the community. Eventually, the family moved to Los Angeles to seek treatment for Alphonse's extreme myopia—a condition

that left him unable to clearly see objects more than a couple of inches away. Multiple surgeries improved his condition, but failed to correct the problem and his vision remained poor throughout his life.

His family wondered if his poor eyesight would keep him from his boyhood dream of being a priest. He first became an altar boy at San Miguel parish in the Watts district. Then, through much hard work, he graduated with honors from Manual Arts High School and entered the Order of Augustinian Recollects at age nineteen. By 1958, he was ordained at the Augustinian Recollect Seminary in New York. For many years, he served in the community during the day and diligently studied at local institutions at night. He eventually earned an undergraduate and graduate degree in psychology.

Fourteen years after his ordination, he returned to Los Angeles to serve in the parish where he had grown up, a parish where he soon became known as "Father Al." However, he would soon acquire another nickname, one that made him famous and inspired countless people—the "Bishop of the Barrio." The Watts neighborhood where he served had been torn apart by riots in the years prior to his arrival and it remained a dangerous place. Clashes between the majority Black population and the sizable Hispanic population were fueled by rival gangs that turned the city's streets into killing fields. An important part of Father Al's ministry involved building personal relationships with the youth of the community. His stated goal was that "each child realizes and respects his dignity as a person, understands and takes pride in his cultural heritage, and grasps an authentic relationship with God."ⁱ

Soon, the youth of the city began to embrace the optimistic message of Father Al. He encouraged them to stay in school and took many of them on college visits. In his few short years as pastor, he saw nearly thirty of his neighborhood kids graduate from college, an unprecedented number. His explanation was simple, "Before, standing on the street corner, they felt the world had nothing to offer—until they discovered that they had something to offer the world."ⁱⁱ No street was too dangerous, no pickup basketball game was too unimportant, and no home too modest for Father Al to be present. Everyone felt seen, heard, and valued by Father Al. When gang members got in trouble, their first call was often to

Father Al. When young people graduated from college, their first invitation was sent to Father Al. When drug addicts felt hopeless, a visit from Father Al gave them hope. One community he seemed to take a special interest in was the lowriders with their flashy cars and adventurous spirit. He would bless their cars and invite them to church. After meeting Father Al, no one in the community could say that no one had ever shown them kindness. A few years later, he moved to Sacramento to serve as the first Director of the Division of Hispanic Affairs for the California Catholic Conference.

He served admirably in this position but was soon walking the streets of Sacramento late at night to seek out the lowriders and migrants of Sacramento. To be closer to the people, Father Al moved into the rectory of St. Rose Catholic Church and began spending more time in the barrio and migrant camps. When he was unexpectedly appointed the auxiliary bishop of Sacramento, he formally took “Love one another” as his motto.ⁱⁱⁱ Bishop Alphonse Gallegos loved the people of his community. He was a strong voice in the pro-life movement and spent many hours comforting dying AIDS victims. He served meals at local shelters and personally paid school tuition for many poor children. He attended soccer matches and joyfully watched from the stands cheering on his kids—all with eyesight too poor to see beyond the bottom of the rusty bleachers. Since 1997, a commemorative statue of Father Al has been displayed in what is now known as Bishop Gallegos Square.



Bishop Gallegos life was tragically cut short in 1991 when he was struck by a car while assisting a stranded motorist. The Hispanic low-riders of Sacramento formed an honor guard and the funeral procession was one of the longest in Sacramento history. From that time to the present, Bishop Alphonse Gallegos is remembered as an individual with a deep faith that motivated him to love others. His big smile and contagious optimism saved many individuals from a life of poverty, crime, and substance abuse. In 2022, a large group turned out for the “Bishop’s Cruise,” an event that commemorated his life and legacy in the lowrider community of Sacramento. At that event, a former parishioner summed up the extraordinary life of Bishop Gallegos. “Everyone looked up to him, he was everyone's father.”^{iv}

Key Question

1. Bishop Alphonse Gallegos lived out his religious calling in a very public way. How would the lives of those around him have been different if he had been required to keep his faith private?
2. Did Bishop Gallegos see a contradiction between living by faith and working hard?

Sources

ⁱ <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/venerable-alphonse-gallegos-bishop-of-the-barrio/>

ⁱⁱ <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/venerable-alphonse-gallegos-bishop-of-the-barrio/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://bishopgallegos.org/index.php/2021/03/16/bishop-alphonse-gallegos-coat-of-arms/>

^{iv} <https://www.kcra.com/article/hundreds-gather-sacramento-honor-late-bishop-alphonse-gallegos/41489908>