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Faith Today

A people of God on the move



By Joe Michael Feist
NC News Service

The young man's grip tightened around the rough wood. He strained noticeably as he lifted the crossbeam, then rested it on his shoulder. Slowly he began the long trek through the narrow streets of his neighborhood.

On both sides of the man, soldiers prodded and shoved. Behind them, several women cried softly.

Soon the weight bore down on the cross bearer and he stumbled and fell. As he did so, the crowd following the man paused and meditated on the scene of suffering.

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This very physical re-enactment of the Way of the Cross is repeated dozens of times in Mexican-American parishes throughout the southwestern United States each Lent. The procession is a reminder that Lent is a time of pilgrimage, a journey of faith.

In many ways, however, Hispanics in the United States are part of a constant pilgrimage. In fact, the unofficial theme of a

Lent — that season of pilgrimage — is an invitation to expand horizons, to grow, to move forward. Father Virgilio Elizondo believes that Hispanics in the United States are a pilgrim people in many ways. And, he feels, there's an excitement in the journey.

1977 national assembly — an "encuentro" — of U.S. Hispanic Catholics was "un pueblo en marcha," translated as "a people on the move."

"(Hispanics) have not arrived. That is our blessing and our challenge," said Father Virgilio Elizondo, a theologian and president of the Mexican-American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas.

Father Elizondo sees a parallel between Lent, a time when people strive to move to a new point in their lives, and the position of Hispanics today.

"We are still on the move for our own identity in the United States, on the move as to what it means to integrate without losing our cultural identity, on the move as to what it means to be Catholic," Father Elizondo said.

He compared the Old Testament story of the Israelites

wandering in the desert to the searching of Hispanics today, saying that "in this context, there is a sense of excitement about moving."

The "blessing" of not yet having arrived, suggested Father Elizondo, is that once a person feels he has no journey to make, he is overcome by complacency and ceases to grow.

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Hispanic Catholics in the Southwest often undertake pilgrimages to the Shrine of Nuestra Senora de San Juan del Valle in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. They do so because of a promise they've made or as a sign of devotion to the Virgin Mary.

For example, a pregnant woman may make a "promesa," or promise, to journey to San

Juan if her baby is healthy.

Often, an entire parish or neighborhood joins in a pilgrimage.

It is the journey itself, rather than the arrival, which takes on meaning and importance. "The getting there is what's exciting," stated Father Elizondo.

Said the theologian, the pilgrimage is a "symbolic reflection of our deepest life experiences, a cultic celebration of our daily life struggle."

Migrant farmworkers and Central American refugees are others in the midst of a journey, both symbolic and actual.

"The Way of the Cross is being lived daily," said Father Elizondo. "For many people, life is one of coming and going."

During Lent, Father Elizondo believes, all Catholics are reminded of their passing state. Life is a journey and we must make the most of each step.

"A pilgrimage is not a vacation trip," added the Texas priest. "You experience suffering and doubts. But there's an assurance of the outcome because of our faith."

(Feist is an associate editor of Faith Today.)