

# Church reaches out to Hispanics to encourage religious vocations

By Kevin Myers

Rochester's committee for implementation of the Third National Hispanic Pastoral Encuentro faces an uphill battle promoting religious vocations to Hispanic-Puerto Rican youths.

Father Larry Tracy, of the local Spanish Apostolate, said the lack of Hispanic vocations to religious life and the priesthood is caused by a combination of spiritual and socio-economic conditions in Hispanic communities.

Father Tracy cited the scarcity of Hispanic priests and religious to serve as role models within the Hispanic community as a severe spiritual limitation, because priests and religious are often the primary inspiration for potential vocations. He added that most people who are called to a vocation have had close relationships with priests or members of religious orders. "The only religious people they (local Hispanic youths) see are white," he said. These priests and religious are not as likely to be effective role models.

The scarcity of Hispanic priests and religious has evolved through hundreds of years. According to Father Tracy, priests and bishops in Puerto Rico were not allowed to minister within the Catholic Church during the colonial period unless they were loyal to the Spanish Crown. And in the 19th century, when the United States claimed the island, Hispanics and Puerto Ricans were again pressured by the Catholic Church to submit to colonialism.

As a result, anti-colonial sentiment among Hispanics became closely associated with anti-clericalism, and native Cubans and Puerto Ricans shied away from the formal church, Father Tracy explained. For that reason, Hispanic people began to celebrate their faith in their homes rather than in churches.

Ministers to Hispanics are trying to reverse

that trend as the Hispanic population in the United States continues to grow in numbers and influence.

No one would any longer say that non-Hispanic Catholics can ignore the needs of that segment of the Church. "It's generally recognized that we need Puerto Rican priests and religious," Father Tracy said.

Puerto Rican communities in the United States still celebrate Catholicism in a more family-oriented fashion than non-Hispanics, he acknowledged. But during the past decade, more Hispanics have begun to worship at churches.

In response to the increased national involvement of Hispanics in the Catholic Church, the Third Encuentro urged further efforts to increase Hispanic vocations — especially in such cities as Rochester which have fewer Hispanic priests and religious than the national average.

Responding to that call, the diocesan Hispanic Apostolate is recruiting priests and religious men and women from other communities to serve as role models for Hispanics in the Diocese of Rochester. "Indigenous role models cut into the problem of Hispanic youths not being able to imagine themselves in this type of vocation," Father Tracy said. "There has been a 1,000 percent increase in (Hispanic) bishops in the United States in the last 10 or 15 years ... Although we haven't experienced this yet in Rochester, it allows us to bring them in as role models."

Bishop Alvaro Corrada Del Rio, an auxiliary of the Archdiocese of Washington, D.C., celebrated Mass at St. Francis Xavier/Holy Redeemer Church Friday, Nov. 15. In his homily, the bishop — the first native Puerto Rican to be consecrated bishop in the continental United States — stressed the importance of involving local Hispanic youth in the Church.

The following day, at St. Francis Xavier

School, a program on vocations was offered specifically for Hispanic youth. The Diocesan Apostolate cosponsored the program, which was part of the week-long Santa Mision. The husband-and-wife team of Felix and Norma Rivera, members of a Puerto Rican order of preachers, conducted the mission.

Edwin Garcia, a participant in Becket Hall's vocational discernment program, also spoke to the youths, who came from six different parishes. Addressing the question of celibacy, Garcia described the dichotomy between spiritual and cultural pressures that weighed on his decision of whether or not to enter the seminary.

"In Hispanic culture, it's expected that the oldest son get married and carry on the family name," he noted.

But economic constraints are also consid-

erations for Hispanic youths considering vocations. Because most Hispanic communities are very poor, Father Tracy said, many youths are forced to drop out of school to support the family. "Over 50 percent of Hispanics who enter fifth grade don't graduate from high school," he added.

On the national level, Hispanic response to vocational calls is very low compared to non-Hispanic response. But it must be remembered that the Hispanic community only began to emerge from its pattern of in-home celebration about two decades ago. Such local organizations as the Third Encuentro implementation team have a long road to travel before Hispanics are equally represented in the Church.

"You're not going to be able to pick Hispanic priests and sisters out of the air," Father Tracy concluded.

## Christmas Bazaar

St. John's Church, Clyde, will offer a Christmas bazaar Saturday, Dec. 7, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., sponsored by the women of St. John's and St. Patrick's Church of Savannah.

Food will be available throughout the bazaar, and free parking and babysitting will be offered.

Proceeds will be used to redecorate St. John's Hall.

## Women's Retreat

Notre Dame Retreat House in Canandaigua plans a retreat for women Friday through Sunday, Dec. 6-8. The topic, "Enriching Your Prayer," will be explored through presentations, guided reflections, group sharing and opportunities for individual conferences with the staff.

For more information or to register, write the retreat house at P.O. Box 342, Canandaigua, N.Y., 14424, or call (716)394-5700.

## Public Sanctuary

A convention of 265 clerical and lay delegates of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, on Saturday, Nov. 9, affirmed and supported the use of local churches as "places of public sanctuary for undocumented refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala and Haiti," and encouraged the parishes to examine their responsibilities for providing the refugees with "physical, emotional, spiritual and legal aid."

Currently, according to the Episcopal Church, only five churches within the Episcopal diocese's eight-county area have declared a willingness to become sanctuaries. None of them are Episcopal.

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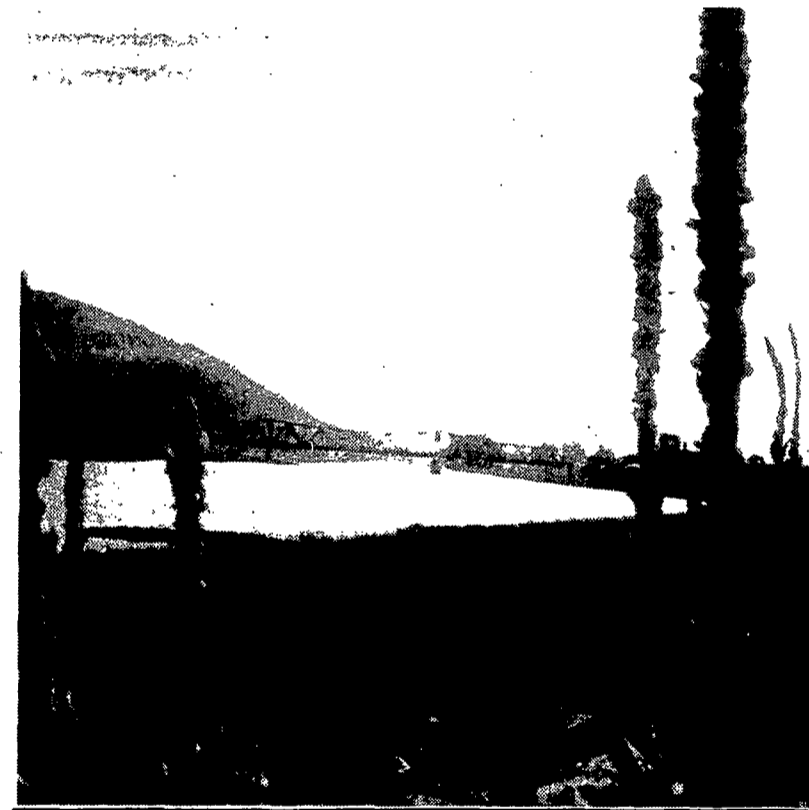
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