

Workshop offers Hispanics closer look at justice system

By Teresa A. Parsons

Ten years ago, Deacon Nemesio Martinez saw only a smattering of Hispanic inmates attending Sunday services in the Monroe County Jail.

Today there are dozens. After Mass is over, he listens to the problems many share. They don't understand their lawyers. They don't understand the chaplains or the deputies or the counselors, and few of those people understand them. Above all, neither they nor their families understand "the system" which both prosecutes and protects them.

Spanish-speaking people, or "Latinos," are the fastest growing segment of New York state's prison population, according to "State of the Prisons," a March, 1986, study by the Correctional Association of New York State. Five years ago, 20 percent of state prison inmates were Hispanic. This year, they comprise 26 percent.

The number of Hispanics in the prison workforce, meanwhile, has actually declined from 3.6 to 3.3 percent.

According to superintendent Chris DeBruyn, the Hispanic population at the Monroe County Jail does not appear to be rising any faster than the jail population in general. He estimated that approximately 8 percent of the 590 inmates currently in the jail are of Hispanic origin. All but about 1 percent, he said, are bilingual to some degree.

To address the needs of this growing population of Hispanic offenders and their families, Rochester Interfaith Jail Ministry (RIJM) has invited members of the Hispanic community and those who serve them to a free workshop on "Hispanics and the Criminal Justice System," Saturday, December 6, from 9 a.m. to noon at Casa de Cristiandad (Holy Redeemer School), 640 Hudson Ave., Rochester.

Although she had not yet confirmed all the speakers, Sister Barbara Moore, executive director of RIJM, has invited a representative from the Monroe County District Attorney's office, a Hispanic deputy from the jail, the wife of a prison inmate, and an ex-offender. Most of the workshop will be presented in Spanish.

After the speakers have finished, the workshop will conclude with a discussion of what members of the Hispanic community

can do for those in prison — from visiting and supporting inmates and their families to organizing Bible study groups in the jail.

"It has become more and more clear to us that working with families is the way to go," Sister Barbara said. "Above all, I think we need to sensitize the community to the needs of prisoners and to show them that there are things they can do."

A shortage of jobs and other opportunities and a lack of follow-up services for ex-offenders are to blame for the growing number of Hispanic offenders, according to Nemesio Martinez, a permanent deacon who has volunteered at the Monroe County Jail for more than a decade, and for the past five years has served as one of three Catholic chaplains.

"They are going to drugs, looking for a living. Sooner or later they get arrested," he explained. "Then, when they get out, they are rejected by society. Nobody likes them, nobody trusts them, nobody wants to give them an opportunity. They develop a complex. They say, 'I don't care,' and they continue committing crimes ... Two weeks later, they're back in jail."

For those inmates whose pronunciation and comprehension of English are less than perfect, prison life can be one long series of misunderstandings. Unless they find or are assigned Spanish-speaking lawyers, Hispanic inmates may be confused about their cases. Those who don't understand are often unwilling to admit it.

"That can create a real problem, especially when the prisoner and the lawyer think they understand each other, but they don't," Martinez said. "Then the guy ends up paying the price."

Most prison-sponsored counseling and educational programs are offered in English. In state prisons, classes for English as a second language reach only about one-third of Spanish-speaking inmates, according to the "State of the Prisons" report.

The majority of jail and prison religious services are celebrated in English. While many Hispanic people are baptized Roman Catholic in infancy, they often have not attended any church regularly. "Some go to both the Protestant and Catholic services and they get confused a little bit about which is which," Martinez said.

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Bishop Matthew H. Clark

Along the Way

Those of you who read this column two years ago this week may remember that I wrote about a shopping trip with my mother and my oldest niece, Grace, on the Friday of Thanksgiving weekend. That day, Grace drove with a two-year-old learner's permit and two miles of road experience!

I still shake some when I think about it and, although my memories grow vague (Is it nature's way of protecting me?), I do recall quite clearly writing at the time, "Never again!"

The truth is I've never felt quite right about that. When I fell off my bike as a kid, didn't I get right back on and go at it? When I struck out at bat, didn't I return the next time? And the next? Why then couldn't I go back on the road to a shopping center on the Friday after Thanksgiving?

Even through adolescence and adulthood, both of which know their failures and disappointments, I felt that my own were due not to fear but to some lack — opportunity, diligence, ability, etc. You name it!

Why then, so late in my life, had I allowed dear, beautiful Grace so to terrorize me that two years later my bones shook when I so much as thought about that dread day?

I was filled with such ruminations on that very Friday last week when who came but Jane Frances Early, my second niece, who will celebrate her 17th birthday on New Year's Eve. Do you

know the rest? Of course you do. Jane has a learner's permit. Jane and her girlfriend, Nell wanted to go to the mall. Uncle Matt was the only available driver.....!

The rest is anticlimactic. We got to the shopping center without incident. Jane has considerably more experience than Grace did on that day two years ago, and she drove very well. I did not stop with the kids, but drove home immediately to bask in the glory of my victory over fear. No more cold sweats at night for me. No more white knuckles when I think of shopping centers. Now I'm ready for Mary Ellen. And Margaret! And Kathleen!

I want to remind you that Grace today is an excellent driver. You could store bags of raw eggs on the front seat of any car she is driving and not worry about her or them. She also managed to earn her driver's license on her first road test, something her uncle could achieve only in two tries.

My prediction is that Jane will also require only one road test. She's that good already. But, if she doesn't, I'm sure that — like her uncle — she may learn that victory can be even sweeter the second time around.

My prayers continue that God will bless us all during this Advent Season. I ask the grace that we will appreciate more every day the good things the Lord has begun in us.

Peace to all.

Noted writer, lecturer speaks on Catholic marriage, family

Columnist, internationally known lecturer, and author Father Chuck Gallagher, SJ, will speak on "Being Married and Catholic" Tuesday, December 9, at 8 p.m. in Guardian Angels' parish auditorium.

The originator of the Parish Renewal Program and of various marriage prepara-

tion and enrichment programs, Father Gallagher is well-known to many Rochester-area couples and religious. All are welcome to attend his talk at Guardian Angels, 2059 East Henrietta Road, just off I-190. For more information, call Rick or JoAnn Scheffer, (716)392-3202.

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