

Local News

Speakers urge appreciation of cultural identity

By Rob Cullivan

The Catholic Church in the United States needs to acknowledge the contributions of Hispanics and blacks to its tradition, noted two prominent speakers at the diocesan Leadership Day Saturday, Oct. 15.

Bishop Alvaro Corrada del Rio, of the archdiocese of Washington D.C., told his morning audience at Rochester's Cardinal Mooney High School that the great majority of Hispanics in the U.S. Church are alienated from it, leaving some of them open to evangelization by Protestant denominations.

"The tradition of Hispanics is based on centering on the worship of Jesus Christ as validated by Scripture," the bishop said, noting that this tradition causes Hispanics to go wherever "they find Christ as the center," which might include such Bible churches as the Pentecostals.

Bishop Corrada said that Hispanics and non-Hispanics must work towards "mutual enrichment," and that "integration is not to be confused with assimilation," referring to Hispanics' fear of losing their culture and language in the face of societal pressures to blend in.

The bishop cited statistics indicating that 71 percent of all Hispanics in New York state were born here, a fact that might surprise other natives accustomed to seeing Hispanics as an immigrant group.

In a later interview, the bishop said integrating Hispanics into U.S. Catholic life can be best achieved in bilingual and multilingual parishes. Such parishes are "willing to have tensions and dissensions between different backgrounds and languages," Bishop Corrada said.

The unique background of black Catholics should be their starting point for creating a sense of identity, according to Sister Patricia Haley, vocations coordinator for the National Black Sisters' Council. The Philadelphia resident opened her afternoon speech at Leadership Day by leading the audience in singing the spiritual "Walk Together Children." The song typified the experience of U.S. black Catholics, throughout their history, she said, noting that black Catholics have had to work together to resist racism within and outside of the Church.

"We have seen with black eyes, heard with black ears, and we have understood with an African heart," Sister Haley said, acknowledging her admiration for the Polish Pope John Paul II, whom she said had done much to strengthen Church's varied ethnic identities. "He is not ashamed to claim who he is," she commented, urging black Catholics to emulate the pontiff's cultural pride.

Sister Haley said that despite past oppression, blacks must assert their independence in the Church. "No one wants to be identified with a group that has been dubbed by many as a loser," she said. She told the audience that blacks have made great contributions to Roman Catholicism, efforts exemplified by three popes and several black saints.

Following her speech, Sister Haley outlined actions the Church can take to welcome blacks. Many black Catholic parishes are staffed by well-meaning white ministers who are ignorant of potential black leaders right in their communities, she said. White ministers sometimes think "poor equals black equals incapable of doing for oneself," and fail to consult with their black parishioners when setting parish agendas.

To illustrate her point, Sister Haley recalled one case in which a white sister went to work in a Midwestern black parish hoping to "develop leadership." Sister Haley went to the parish to conduct a workshop on personnel development and asked the parishioners present to list their professional and collegiate backgrounds. Several were well-qualified to fill parish staff positions, but had never been consulted in past years by the white sister, who didn't know many of them.

Both Leadership Day speakers hit home with their listeners, who worked in related minis-



During the weeklong Santa Mision, Puerto Rican Bishop Alvaro Corrada del Rio preaches to an Hispanic congregation at Corpus Christi Church on Saturday evening, Oct. 15. Bishop Corrada, auxiliary bishop of Washington, D.C., came to Rochester to conduct the annual Spanish retreat and later spoke at the diocesan Leadership Day about ministry to Hispanics.

Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

tries. Bishop Corrada "was a positive presence," said Wanda Vargas, a catechist at Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier Church in Rochester.

Vargas works with Hispanic youths in religious education and is studying to be a bilingual teacher. She said that "sometimes there's misunderstanding between (non-Hispanics) and Hispanics," but that this can be remedied by teaching non-Hispanics that Hispanics are a plus to the Catholic Church.

"We need more Spanish-speaking staff in all the community," Vargas said. Holy Redeemer/St. Francis holds bilingual retreats for young people in order to "build a sense of friendliness and belonging" between Hispanics and other youths.

Mirta Del Toro, a member of a parish prayer group, considered the speech by Bishop Corrada, a Puerto Rican, a special moment in the day. "We felt so proud that there was a Puerto Rican there," she said. Eighty-five percent of the diocese's Hispanics are of Puerto Rican origin, according to Father Laurence Tracy, pastoral assistant for the diocesan Spanish Apostolate.

Sister Haley's presence elicited similar responses from black Leadership Day participants. "I thought it was excellent," said Beverly Hinton, president of Our Lady of Perpetual Help's auxiliary of the Black Catholic Women's Association. Black parishioners in Rochester have many needs, Hinton said, noting in particular housing, food and education.

"I think we need to do a more effective job of going into individual neighborhoods and meeting individual needs," Hinton said. "There's a lot of people who are really hurting ... a lot (of whom) don't know how to connect with social agencies."

Hinton said her parish encourages parishioners with professional backgrounds to offer their services, and is now forming committees to assess parish needs. Specifically, Hinton noted a need for evangelization among the black community. "There are so many unchurched people," she observed.

Diocesan leaders of both minority communities are working to implement the vision of the Leadership Day speakers. Father Tracy said that \$10,000 has been budgeted to train Hispanics to serve as ministers in the diocese. "While Hispanic people have a great appreci-

ation of the (non-Hispanics) who serve them," Father Tracy said, "they would also like their own Hispanic religious leadership."

Jacquelyn Dobson, executive director of diocesan Office of Black Ministries, said she had worked "diligently to make sure that there is black representation on diocesan committees." One of her current efforts is an attempt to persuade the diocese to hire a black or an Hispanic to be the diocesan personnel director. "Until we get someone like that, I don't think the complexion of the personnel will 'color' itself," she said.

Dobson also remarked that the diocese has a good record of hiring women, but still needs to do more to hire racial and ethnic minorities.

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