

Features

Mexican priest leaves parish with stronger community ties

By Rob Cullivan

As the dark-haired, mustachioed priest sat back in his office chair, he pondered what memories he would leave behind among members of the inner-city parish where he spent the last two years. "Yes," he said, envisioning the journey southward to his native land of Mexico, "if they don't remember me by some of my homilies, they'll remember me for my dancing at parties."

Father Enrique Cadena attended just such a party last Sunday afternoon following 11 a.m. Mass at Corpus Christi Parish in Rochester. The festive occasion was bittersweet, though, as it marked the parish's farewell to the popular priest, who left Tuesday, Jan. 10, for his home parish in Tabasco, Mexico.

Parishioners at Corpus Christi in Rochester will undoubtedly remember Father Enrique Cadena for more than just his fleet feet. Since his arrival in July of 1986, the friendly priest has impressed parishioners with his unusual combination of fun-loving exuberance and serious dedication. Whether he was singing "La Bamba" at the latest parish party or illustrating Scripture with a personal anecdote, he seemed to bring new life to the idea of spiritual fellowship found in the Gospel.

A member of the Order of Missionaries of the Holy Spirit, Father Cadena came to Corpus Christi to study at St. Bernard's Institute and to serve the parish's Hispanic community. He recently completed his studies and will take home with him a master's degree in pastoral ministry with a minor in counseling and family therapy. But a sense of academic accomplishment isn't the only thing he plans to bring back.

"One of the main things is a sense of freedom," Father Cadena said of the lessons taught by his experience at Corpus Christi, "being who I am, disregarding what everyone thinks."

What everyone thinks of him may vary according to their taste in preaching. Making his own way as a homilist, the priest has distinguished himself as a combination actor-speaker-stage director. Ana Torres, a parishioner who sometimes serves as guest speaker at parish Masses, noted that Father Cadena always managed to bring the meaning of the Gospel home.

"He got everybody involved in (the homily)," Torres said. "You couldn't wait to hear what was going to come out of it ... Sometimes he did a little play. He would have people come up to the altar. You were more attentive, and you were more awake."

Waking up his congregation has led Father Cadena to some unusual stunts. The priest's favorite Mass was the weekly liturgy on Thursday evenings. "I always tried to bring in something new," he said.

One of his new ideas put the congregation's faith in each other to an excruciating test. The theme of one Thursday night Mass was "Sharing what we have," so the priest began the Mass by asking parishioners to take out their wallets and give them to others in the congregation. At first, the people played along, expecting the priest to ask everyone to return the wallets to their rightful owners within a few minutes. But by the time of the homily, Father Cadena still hadn't mentioned the wallets again.

"I sensed that they started to feel uncomfortable," Father Cadena recalled. "It made them see how attached they were to their wallets." He devoted the homily to a discussion of participants' feelings about the exercise, but Father Cadena himself felt like a hypocrite. He hadn't brought a wallet to the Mass.

Parishioners' attachment to their wallets symbolized for the priest U.S. citizens' materialistic drive, which he had previously noted in an interview with the *Courier-Journal* upon his arrival here in 1986. He still finds materialism a part of life here — "Everything is buy and buy and buy" — but he has found deep spirituality as well.

"The way everyone grows up here is very individualistic," he said. "But I think when you find a friend, you really find a friend. It's something that's going to be there for a long time." Mexicans are more neighborly than their American counterparts, Father Cadena said, but their openness to each other doesn't necessarily lead to deeper friendships.

Down-to-earth friendship is the trademark of Father Cadena's priesthood. James Ramerman, parishioner and a former coordinator of the parish's lay ministry, described the priest as a "tremendously powerful personality" who's going to be missed by the parish. "He likes to have fun, (and) he likes to have serious talks," Ramerman said. Ana Torres' brother-in-law, Michael Torres, described the priest in similar

terms. "I saw him as just a person inside the community. He was on the inside of the circle ... more of a family member," Michael Torres said, noting that the priest enjoyed talking about sports with him. Such sentiments would please the priest, who set out to be a "brother" to parishioners rather than a distant authority figure. "I wanted to be with them; to respect others, to be close to them," he said. According to Ana Torres, his efforts were a success. Noting that the parish's Hispanics are more involved in the parish because of his efforts, she said, "More people are coming into the church. There's a lot more involvement. They're taking it more seriously."

Father Cadena also impressed Corpus Christi's English-speaking community, according to Ramerman. "He's the best bridge I can think of," Ramerman said, referring to the priest's work with both groups. "He fits in culturally with both."

The priest sees Corpus Christi as an example of what bilingual parishes can become in the United States. "I wish more churches could be like this," he said. He praised the English-speaking parishioners' commitment to outreach programs, a commitment he noted is beginning to rub off on Hispanics.

During his stay at the parish, the Hispanics have become more involved with the parish's outreach programs, he said, noting that Corpus Christi's efforts to aid a sister parish in El Salvador has involved both language communities.

The extensive work that the laity perform at Corpus Christi and other U.S. parishes can serve as an example to the Mexican Church, Father Cadena said, noting the role of women in the U.S. Church as an example of that work's results. "Here you have lay people who are very well-educated. Already there is not enough of a theological base for saying, 'No,' to women in the Church," he said.

Saying yes to an expanded role for women is a concrete part of the priest's ministry, and Ana Torres counts herself as one of the beneficiaries of that commitment. Father Cadena approached her to become a regular lay commentator on liturgical readings after he heard her speak about a Lenten reading last year. "He said I was a revelation of the Church," she exclaimed. "I was never that outgoing in the church as I am now."

Outgoingness is the hallmark of the U.S. Church, according to Father Cadena. "You are bigger on ecumenism and relations with other denominations," he said, although he noted that the Mexican Church must face different challenges that make it more resistant to interdenominational dialogue. He criticized evangelical religious groups in the United States for funding fundamentalist Christian missionaries to encourage a passive acceptance of the economic status quo in Mexico.

"The main goal (of these missionaries) is not to evangelize people but to keep them divided in their faith. In Mexico, the Catholic Church, in a way, is really feared by the government," he said, noting that social revolution has often created active sympathy among the country's priests. Evangelical missionaries use material goods to attract Mexican converts, he said, diverting them from building up a common desire to change the social order.

Ironically, the Mexican church may now be facing the same threat of materialism that Father Cadena so often noticed challenging the U.S. Church. To defeat that threat, the priest plans to continue to use the same weapons he used at Corpus Christi — openness and a fun-loving spirit. As he left the parish, he said he had one hope for the Hispanics he is leaving behind. "My hope is that even though I am leaving the community, they will remain a community."

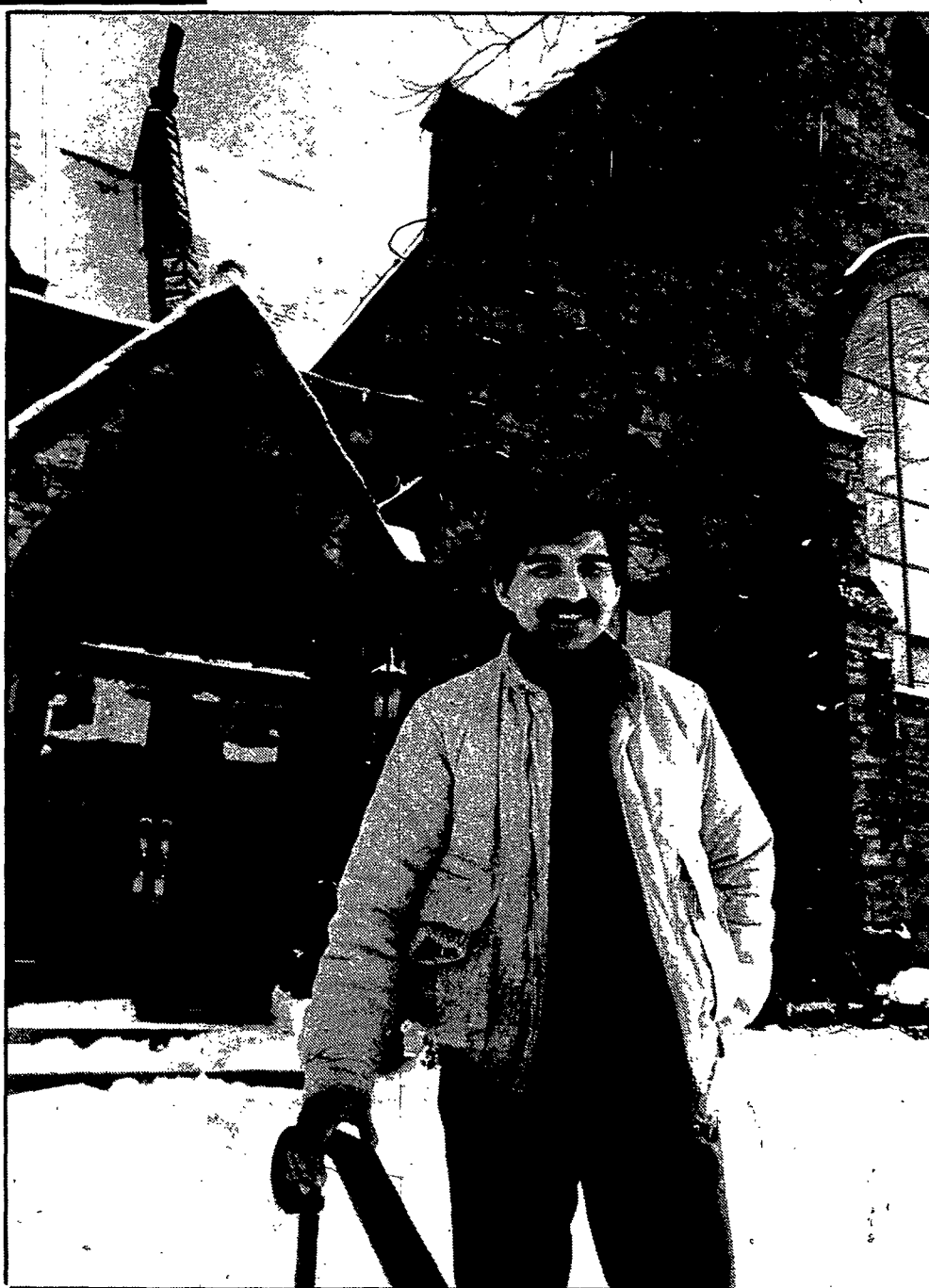
Association plans dinner to benefit blind children

The Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired of Greater Rochester, Inc., will present Chefs' Delight, a benefit dinner, on Jan. 30 at the Holiday Inn-Rochester South.

The evening will begin at 6:30 p.m. with a cash bar, followed at 7:30 by a dinner prepared by members of The A.C.F. Professional Chefs and Cooks Association of Rochester. It will include hors d'oeuvres and desserts.

Cost for the dinner is \$35 per person or \$350 for a table of ten, with the proceeds to benefit programs for blind and visually impaired children.

For more information, call Kathy Langton at 716/232-1111. The deadline for reservations is January 19.



Linda Dow Hayes/Courier-Journal

Father Enrique Cadena returned to his home in Tabasco, Mexico, on Tuesday.

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