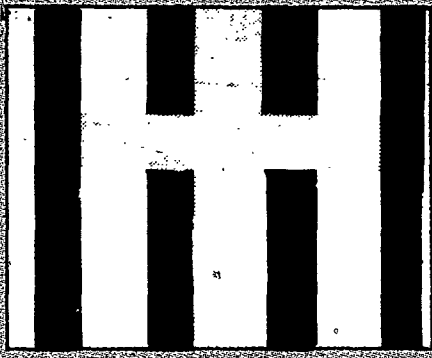


### Counseling convicts

Thanks to the efforts of a Rochester deacon, members of the Knights of Columbus are moving into prison ministry — a move that is welcomed by prison chaplains. Page 6



# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## Is Hispanic exodus a blessing?

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

Millions of Hispanic Americans have left the Catholic Church in the last decade, and the rector of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, couldn't be happier.

"I think the evangelical movement is one of the greatest blessings that has happened to the Catholic Church," Father Virgil P. Elizondo remarked last week during an interview at St. Bernard's Institute. The priest was in town to speak at the annual Spirituality Institute, which was sponsored by St. Bernard's July 10-14.

Father Elizondo said the movement of Hispanics, and Catholics in general, toward fundamentalist churches should cause Catholic leaders to examine what Catholicism needs to do to attract believers who are disenchanted with mainline Christianity.

"Sometimes you have something at home that you really don't appreciate until someone tries to take it," the priest commented, noting that the church has taken for granted that Hispanics would remain in

the church because they have been Catholic for centuries.

But that situation is rapidly changing here in the United States, according to an article by Roberto Suro in the May 14 edition of *The New York Times*. The article estimated that four million of the nation's 20 million Hispanics now practice some form of Protestant Christianity, and that approximately 60,000 Hispanic Americans join Protestant denominations each year.

Hispanic-American alienation from the Catholic Church was a major concern the U.S. Catholic bishops discussed during their general meeting June 17 in South Orange, N.J. During that meeting of the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the NCCB's president, Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, criticized the evangelical churches for their "very clearly designed efforts to wean people away from another church."

Among those efforts, Archbishop May cited fundamentalist churches' use of art and music that are similar to those found in Catholic parishes. "They want to

make (Hispanic) Catholics feel at home," he said.

The archbishop went on to denounce the fundamentalists. "They preach against the veneration of Our Lady, against the priesthood. They ask 'Why should you confess your sins to a priest?' This is not just an evangelical effort to bring the Bible to the people."

Father Elizondo called Archbishop May's statements "a cheap shot," likening such criticism to that a boss might have for a disgruntled former employee. "If people are happy with their job, they don't go looking for another job," he said.

Father Elizondo speaks from a broad understanding of Hispanic society. He has authored several books on Mexican-American culture and has worked extensively in television and radio. His work has included guest homilies on *Nuestra Familia* on the Hispanic Telecommunications Network, and correspondence work for a four-part CBS News special on the Latin American church entitled "Hunger for God... Hunger for Bread," which aired in 1986.

Father Elizondo said fundamentalist churches attract Hispanics because these churches offer something Hispanics and other minority groups often feel they can't find in the U.S. Catholic Church — a sense of welcome.

"The U.S. Catholic Church, for the most part, is still not ready to welcome Hispanics, blacks and Native Americans," he said.

Unlike such white ethnic groups as the Irish, Hispanic Americans, who currently make up approximately one third of all U.S. Catholics, are under-represented in the church's clergy, Father Elizondo said. That statement is borne out by statistics reported in the *Times*' article: the U.S. Catholic church has only 2,000 Hispanic priests, representing a mere two percent of its clergy, as opposed to the 2,300 Hispanic pastors found in the Southern Baptist Convention alone.

A lack of Spanish-speaking priests translates into a lack of Spanish-speaking parishes, Father Elizondo commented, adding that ethnic groups of previous eras benefited from having their own national parishes, which helped them to make the transition into U.S. society.

Another key factor in the exodus of Hispanics from the Catholic Church is the emotionless liturgies found in the average U.S. parish, Father Elizondo said. Hispanics prefer liturgies featuring singing, dancing and spontaneous displays of devotion, he said, and fundamentalist churches allow more room for such forms of worship. "There's a certain sense of enthusiasm that many of the mainline churches have lost," he said.

The U.S. Catholic Church's interpretation of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II may have helped to create a situation in which Hispanics find the average U.S. Mass to be sterile and unappealing, Father Elizondo observed.



Courier file photo  
**Hispanics often leave the Catholic Church in search of emotion-filled services. One such service was Mt. Carmel Parish's 1986 presentation of Christ's Passion, which featured Maria Martell and Ramon Perez.**

"In a way, (U.S.) Catholics couldn't wait to become (mainline) Protestants," he said, noting that many parishes "cleaned up" their altars by removing statues of saints and devotional images in a effort to emphasize that Christ, and not his human subordinates, should be the object of Catholic worship.

Father Elizondo said he also rode the iconoclastic bandwagon in the late 1960s, removing statues and pictures from St. Timothy's Parish in San Antonio until an elderly woman confronted him one day and asked him why he was doing so. The priest replied that he was trying to make the church more Christ-centered. She then asked, "If Christ is the center, what is he the center of? Why do you want to put him alone?"

The woman then went on to say that Christ was rarely alone in the Scriptures, an insight that left Father Elizondo dumbfounded. He noted that he then realized that Christ is the center of the Christian family, and that he should be portrayed in that family's company. "I let myself be taught by the people," he said, smiling.

The Hispanic people have taught the priest to interpret the reforms of Vatican II in a new way, he said, noting that the council's documents on liturgical practice actually encourage the "genius of the people" in creating liturgies responsive to their needs.

The priest also noted that the Catholic Church might regain disenchanted Hispanics by reviving its traditional encouragement of artists. "Most modern churches

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Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier  
**Father Virgil P. Elizondo and Rosemarie Freeney Harding talk about their presentations at St. Bernard's Institute's annual Spirituality Institute.**

## Institute speaker emphasizes justice efforts in U.S. history

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton are just as much a part of U.S. history as are John D. Rockefeller and J.P. Morgan, but Rosemarie Freeney Harding finds that young people too often see the nation's story as the triumph of men looking out for number one, rather than as the triumph of people looking out for others.

Harding, a researcher, civil rights activist and family counselor who worked to desegregate the South in the 1960s, currently teaches with her husband, Vincent, at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colo.

A Mennonite active in ecumenical work since the 1950s, she conducted several workshops at St. Bernard's Insti-

tute's annual Spirituality Institute July 10-14. In an interview Thursday, July 13, she discussed a wide range of issues, including the role of Catholics and members of other denominations in the civil rights movement and the history of religious activism in U.S. politics.

That history is a legacy the nation's young people need to hear about, Harding said. "I've been in classrooms where they say it's human nature to be selfish, that it's realistic," she remarked, her hands rising and falling in disbelief. Such teachings reinforce the notion that injustice is a normal part of the human experience, rather than an aberration that should be rooted out, she observed.

Instead of just teaching students the nation's history of wars and business

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