

Hispanic Catholics yearn for church's acceptance

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Father Laurence Tracy likens the Catholic Church to an orchestra.

"Every instrument is separate and distinct, but played together they sound beautiful," explained Father Tracy, pastoral assistant for the Rochester Area for the diocesan Office of the Spanish Apostolate.

The problem for Hispanics, Father Tracy said, is that they aren't accepted as equal partners in the faith community by the church in the United States or even in the Diocese of Rochester.

"My dream is that we move out of the era when (Hispanics) were considered as newcomers and immigrants, and accept them as an integral part of the church," Father Tracy said. "We are not a white, Anglo-Saxon church; we are a multi-cultural church."

"I would like to see people being able to go to church and feeling at home," remarked Crimelda Rosario, a parishioner of Rochester's Corpus Christi Church. "I would like to see all the people come to church and be treated the same."

Based solely on numbers, the church in the coming years may be forced to accept Hispanics as equal partners in faith.

According to the results of a survey commissioned by the U.S. bishops' Committee for Hispanic Affairs and conducted by the bishops' Secretariat for Hispanic Affairs and the bishops' Office of Research, at least 12 U.S. dioceses and archdioceses are more than half Hispanic and 27 others are more than one-quarter Hispanic.

The exact number of Hispanics in the Diocese of Rochester is not clear. Estimates range from 36,000 to 50,000 Hispanics living in the 12-county diocese, with anywhere from 60 to 80 percent of them Catholic.

Whatever the current Hispanic population, the estimate is significantly higher than figures from 1980, when the federal census indicated that some 22,825 Hispanics lived in the diocese.

That total likely under-represented the actual Hispanic population, according to Melinda Moyer Whitbeck of the Center for Governmental Research.

"What is significant is that (Hispanics) are the fastest growing ethnic population group, locally as well as nationally," Father Tracy observed. Thus, the priest acknowledged, in the coming decade the church will have to deal with the reality of an increasing Hispanic Catholic population.

Unlike other ethnic groups who emigrate to the United States, however, many Hispanic people are not content to be simply absorbed into American culture, Rosario noted. "I think that the Hispanic culture is so strong that that is not going to happen," she said.

In addition, Hispanics do not belong to one single ethnic group, but a number of different national groups, observed Father Nicolas Menjivar, administrator of Holy Redeemer/St. Francis Xavier Parish in Rochester.

"I am Salvadoran," Father Menjivar explained. "The Hispanics (in Rochester)

are mainly from the Caribbean. They have their own customs. They have their own culture."

This cultural diversity makes it difficult for English-speaking priests to work with Hispanics, Rosario noted.

"I'm not going to say that we don't appreciate the priests who work with us now," Rosario said. "(But) I believe there is a difference. I think Hispanics need to be ministered to not only in their language, but also their culture."

The Rochester diocese currently has only one Hispanic priest — Father Menjivar — and none in formation. Thus, the Hispanic community is turning increasingly to lay ministry, Father Tracy said.

To help meet this need, the Office of the Spanish Apostolate created the Hispanic Pastoral Institute in September, 1989, to help train lay ministers and leaders for the Hispanic community.

"We're looking forward to the day when people from the local Hispanic community can work hand-in-hand with Hispanic priests and sisters," Father Tracy explained.

"I think that is one of the most important steps that this diocese has done for Hispanic ministry," Father Menjivar said. "The church has opened the door of ministry for the lay people, especially from this big minority."

Currently, only one class of approximately 25 students is going through the three-year program, according to Father Tracy. He hopes in the future that three classes will run simultaneously, and that the number of trainees will increase to approximately 75.

In the coming decade, Father Tracy said, these ministers will move out into parishes and into ministry positions. One goal, he said, is for more parishes to have someone on staff who is Hispanic, and can help Hispanic parishioners.

"I look at this as a way of making our parishes more Catholic, more multi-cultural," Father Tracy said. "I think this is going to be healthy for our church."

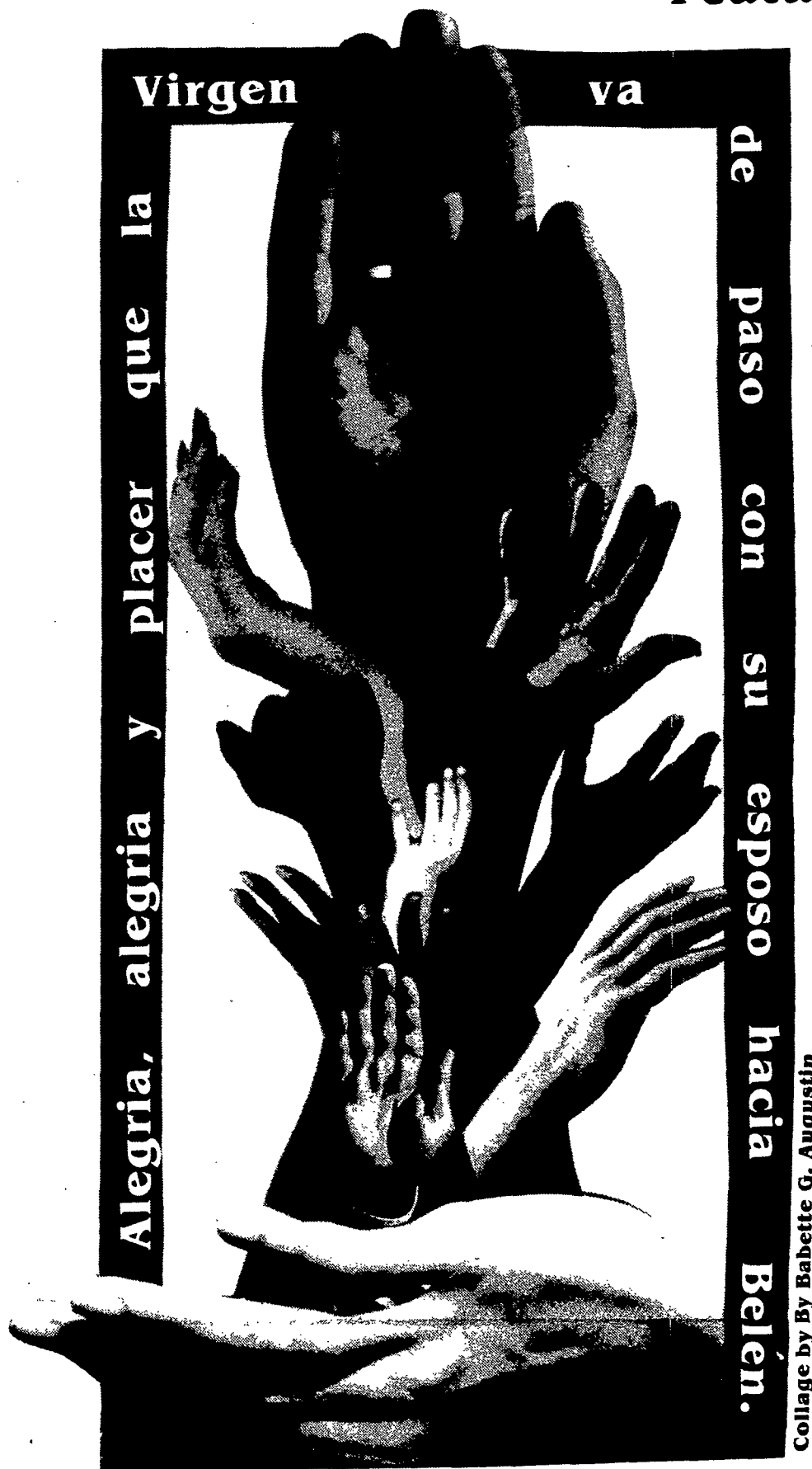
Attempts to pull together the English-speaking and Hispanic communities in the coming years will not necessarily include the bilingual services some churches are currently using, Rosario said. Those services, she said, tend to make people from both the Hispanic and the English-speaking groups uncomfortable.

"There are certain things in your life you do in a natural way," Rosario said. "If you learned to pray in Spanish, then you learned to pray in another language, you can pray in the other language, but it's not the same."

"I think the best way to get people together," Rosario continued, "is to get them into small groups and to get them to know each other."

Essentially, Rosario said, Hispanics are dealing with many of the same issues in the church — prejudice, the plight of divorced Catholics and the decreasing numbers of priests and women religious to name a few — that other groups and individuals are facing.

"I don't see a big difference between an Anglo church and an Hispanic church," Rosario said. "Religion is religion."



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