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# **The Hispanic Apostolate in the Eastern Province of the United States**

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## **Introduction**

Before describing the Hispanic apostolate it is necessary to explain what is meant by the word “Hispanic.” It is a term used in the United States to refer to the people (and their descendants) who have come there from Spanish-speaking places. It attempts to group together Spanish-speaking people from Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Spain; and, while no one is comfortable with that effort, the word does express a complex reality. In this light one understands that the Church’s apostolate to Spanish-speaking people in the United States embraces people from every Spanish-speaking nation. It includes the newly immigrated as well as those whose ancestors came to this country several generations ago. And it can even include descendants of ancestors who lived in the Southwestern states before this nation was formed.

In each of the works described below, the confreres must be sensitive to the language and cultures of all the people they serve. In a given household, you may have traditional grandparents who speak only Spanish and their “Americanized” grandchildren who only speak English. Similarly, in many parishes one must minister to both English- and Spanish-speaking communities. For example, at St. John the Baptist Parish in Brooklyn, New York important days for the African-American Catholic community are highlighted at the English Masses, while the fiestas of *Nuestra Señora de Divina Providencia* (Puerto Rican) in November, *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (Mexican) in December, and *Nuestra Señora de Altigracia* (Dominican) in January are celebrated at the Spanish Mass.

## **Some Historical Perspectives**

The province’s Panama Mission, begun in 1914, prepared the way for the its Hispanic apostolates in the United States a half a century later. Initially sent to serve the English-speaking communities in the Panama Canal Zone, the Vincentians soon began to minister to the Panamanian people and extended their mission into the interior of the country. From the perspective of this article, the Panama Mission can be seen as a training ground which not only immersed the confreres in the language and culture of the people, but also helped the province develop the “missionary mindset” which would be important in later ministries to Hispanic immigrant populations in the USA.

The first established Hispanic apostolates in the Eastern Province began to develop with the settlement of Puerto Ricans in St. John the Baptist Parish in Brooklyn, New York in the 1950s and with the establishment of a community of Cuban refugees in St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Miami, Florida in the 1960s. Throughout most of the 1970s

these two parishes were the province's only Hispanic apostolates in the USA. This was soon to change. The economic opportunities available in the United States coupled with the civil unrest and poverty in several Latin American countries prompted a vast northward migration of Spanish-speaking peoples that continues to change the face of the Catholic Church in the United States even today.

The Eastern Province's response to this changing reality was the establishment of the Vincentian Migrant Mission in the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1979. It was the first work of the province designed specifically for Spanish-speaking Catholics living in the United States. Frs. Arthur Kolinsky and Thomas Hynes, both experienced Panamanian Missionaries, together with Sr. Rosemary Tierney, SSJ (who had been a missionary in Peru) formed a core team that ministered to migrant farmworkers (mainly of Mexican descent) and Hispanic residents throughout the diocese. The ministry was collaborative (involving clergy, religious and laity), highly mobile and done with a mission mindset. High priority was given to developing lay ministry and the formation of lay leaders in each of the communities and farmworker camps served. A unique aspect of this work was that each winter one or two of the confreres migrated with the farmworkers and continued to minister to them in their villages in Texas, Florida and Mexico. This work continued until 1989 when it was ended due to shortages in personnel.

## **Present Ministries**

In 2001 the Eastern Province currently has six apostolates to Spanish-speaking communities in the United States.

### *Brooklyn, New York*

**St. John the Baptist Parish**, founded in 1868, has served Catholics from many ethnic backgrounds as waves of immigrants passed through this Brooklyn neighborhood. When Puerto Rican families began moving into the parish, the confreres initiated a Spanish Mass in the small parish chapel. Today, about 80% of the parish's members are Hispanic and St. John's is truly bilingual. Masses are celebrated in English and Spanish three Sundays a month. On the fourth Sunday a bilingual Liturgy brings the Sunday community together to celebrate the unity within the diversity of the parish. It is not an easy task since people from 30 different countries regularly assist at the parish liturgy.

At St. John the Baptist a lot of effort goes into planning and implementation. The bilingual pastoral plan contains the goals and objectives of each parish ministry. Of particular importance are the Black Ministry and Hispanic Ministry Committees which guide the parish in its response to the reality and cultures of its people. Two other major parish thrusts are lay formation and social action. The St. Vincent de Paul Pastoral Institute for the Laity has a three-year curriculum in both English and Spanish, which develops strong lay leaders. The parish is a beehive of social and educational programs,

addressing the causes of poverty and enabling people to make a better life for themselves and their families.

### *Popular Missions in Spanish*

The **Bilingual Mission Team** was formed in the Fall of 1985 and continues to give month-long missions in parishes throughout the United States and Latin America. Though the general format for the missions remains the same, Frs. Arthur Kolinsky and John Kennedy adapt that structure to the reality of each parish where a mission is given. Wherever they go, Art and John collaborate with the pastor, staff and laity to reach out to Hispanics, especially the poor who feel marginalized or who do not participate in the parish, inviting and welcoming them to the parish family. Generally, each mission is for one month: three weeks are dedicated to visitation and gathering the people to pray in their neighborhoods and the final week is highlighted by a more traditional week of mission preaching in the church. In every case laity from the parish are recruited and trained in mission visitation techniques. When the Bilingual Mission Team moves on, the lay missionaries continue to work in their parish as the core of the Spanish outreach there.

### *Southampton, New York*

**Hispanic Evangelization Ministry** in Southampton, New York evangelizes immigrants from all parts of Latin America who are drawn to this area on the eastern end of Long Island because of job opportunities in construction, lawn care, restaurants, house cleaning and farm work. Several realities are important to understand about the people. For the most part they are recent immigrants. Spanish is their predominant language (for both adults and children) and they have a strong attachment to the customs of their homelands. The summer season demands that the people work long hours; consequently, participation in Church activities drops off during this time, only to pick up again in the fall.

The confreres moved into this ministry in 1997, responding to a need in the diocese which was not able to provide Spanish-speaking priests to the growing Hispanic immigrant population there. Frs. Gregory Semeniuk and Orlando Cardona (from the Colombian Province) live together in a community house but are constantly on the road visiting the people and traveling to the six towns where Mass in Spanish is celebrated in the local parishes. For the most part the local pastors and parishes are welcoming, but language and cultural differences still keep the English- and Spanish-speaking communities apart. In addition to their sacramental duties Greg and Orlando have put emphasis on lay formation and youth ministry.

### *North Carolina*

Fr. Maurice Roche was the first Eastern Province confrere assigned to Hispanic ministry in North Carolina. He ministered to the Mexican immigrant population in the Diocese of Raleigh from 1990 until the time of his death. Our present work of **Hispanic Ministry in the Diocese of Charlotte** began in 1995 when Fr. Vincent Finnerty was appointed the Diocesan Director of Hispanic Ministry. The diocese, which covers the entire western half of North Carolina, has seen a dramatic increase in its Hispanic population in the past decade. Figures from the U.S. Census tell the story of the challenge that Vince faced. In 1990 only 76,726 people of Hispanic origin were counted in the entire state. By the year 2000 that number had grown to 378,963, an increase of over 300,000 Hispanics, mainly immigrants, drawn to the area by jobs in the construction and service industries.

The work accomplished there has been phenomenal. Since 1995 the number of Hispanic Catholic communities has grown from 17 to 47; and the number of Sunday Masses in Spanish has increased from 17 to 56 (including our own Vincentian parish in the city of Greensboro). Local pastors now celebrate many of the Spanish Masses, sometimes with lay leaders translating the homily. The diocese now has a coordinator of Hispanic ministry in each of its ten vicariates.

Evangelization Retreats, planned and organized by trained lay leaders, have been a very successful, effective and powerful tool for reaching and evangelizing the Hispanic people in the Diocese of Charlotte. Over 8,000 youth and adults have made these retreats. They are adapted from the traditional *Cursillo* to meet the specific needs of the population. Participants returning from the retreats are asked to give a testimony about their experience at Sunday Mass the following weekend. These testimonies serve to encourage others to make the retreat.

In 1998, Fr. Joseph Elzi, joined Vince in Charlotte and the work continued. In recent years a diocesan-wide, Catholic radio program was initiated, a diocesan Hispanic youth minister was hired and work has begun on a Hispanic center for evangelization in the city of Charlotte. Four young men now live with the confreres in an ongoing vocation discernment program. They work in outside jobs as they study English and take university courses to prepare themselves for the seminary. Two former discerners have entered the seminary, one for the diocese and one, Jesús Guadarrama, for the Vincentians.

### *Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

The **Hispanic Evangelization Team** in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania is a collaborative ministry with the Daughters of Charity. Having three full-time members, Sr. Christine Mura, DC, Fr. Joseph Cummins and Fr. Stephen Grozio, and one part-time member, Fr. Charles Shanley (who is also assistant novice director), the Team ministers to the Hispanic Catholic community in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. Bringing years

of experience to this work, the Team is presently responsible for Hispanic ministry in three parishes located in some of the poorest neighborhoods of the city and for Hispanic evangelization in the entire Philadelphia North Vicariate through outreach, ministry to women and ministry to young adults.

Some of the highlights of our work are the women's support group and the workshops sponsored by our "Women Are Worthy/*Mujeres Merecen*" program to promote the well-being of Hispanic women who often experience powerlessness in a society in which they bear the heavy burden of working, raising children and keeping the household together. This summer, evangelization outreach programs will be organized in five parishes. Laity will be trained in evangelization techniques and will go out to their Hispanic brothers and sisters in their neighborhoods. The Team also collaborates with the *Instituto Católico*, teaching courses in the lay formation program and co-sponsoring workshops on lay leadership.

### *The Alabama Mission*

The newest apostolate to Hispanics in the province is located in Alabama. In 1995 when the confreres started to implement the apostolic plan for the restructured **Alabama Mission**, they soon became aware of the presence of a growing Mexican population. Drawn by the prospect of work in factories and in the logging industry, the recent arrivals were predominantly Spanish-speaking and many were undocumented. Two confreres, Frs. Martin McGeough and Francis Sacks, began studying the language and were able to read the Mass in Spanish for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. This first celebration on 12 December 1997 was well-received, and the people asked them to continue celebrating Mass in Spanish. Slowly but surely the numbers grew; and now Mass in Spanish is offered each Sunday in the towns of Roanoke, Ashland and Alexander City, and once a month in Opelika. In 1999 Fr. Thomas Hynes was assigned to the Alabama Mission specifically for Hispanic ministry. Tom continues to do outreach to the Hispanic community and has begun *comunidades de base* in the local trailer camps.

### **What does the future hold?**

Census reports and immigration trends project a continued increase in the number of Hispanic Catholics in the United States and today's seminarians are responding to the challenge by learning Spanish and immersing themselves in ministerial experiences with Hispanic people. We are also seeing an increase of interest in the community on the part of Latino men. As the face of the poor continues to change, so too will the face of the province as God's beloved poor are called to ministry in the footsteps of Vincent de Paul.