



Keeping the flock faithful

Catholic priests find themselves in a battle as evangelical Protestants come recruiting.

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WIMAUMA - Father Demetrio Lorden walks into the garage of a concrete block house here, slips on his robe and vestments, and unpacks a gold chalice.

He tests a microphone, and as dogs howl nearby, a small group of Hispanic workers and their families launches into a discordant song of praise.

Lorden calls this his "evangelism Mass," the one he has every Monday night in houses and mobile home camps of this immigrant community.

Like other Catholic priests with Hispanic members, Lorden is trying to fend off competitors for the parishioners in his pews.

Protestant evangelists - people just as dedicated as he is, but with a quite different approach to Christianity - are aggressively recruiting on his turf. Some target workers as they labor in the fields; others approach them in their homes or at local bodegas, grocery stores.

Catholic priests like Lorden are responding with outreach and Bible studies, hoping to hold on to this large and growing population.

"[Hispanic immigrants] need to know someone is there caring for them," said Lorden, pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe church. "But one of the things that pushed me to do that fervently and constantly was because ... other churches and denominations are visiting them and proselytizing them."

Sometimes Lorden's home-based Masses are the only contact workers have with the Catholic church, said Alejandro Lopez, 34, a construction worker who attended Lorden's service on a recent Monday night.

For those who can't make Sunday Mass because of work, Lorden's service helps sustain their faith, especially during hard times, Lopez said.

"It makes you feel better," he said.

The majority of Hispanics in the United States, or 68 percent, still call themselves Catholics. Of those who leave the Catholic church, most become Pentecostal or evangelical Christians or they leave religion all together, according to a national study released this year by the Pew Hispanic Center.

Some Catholic priests acknowledge that Protestant sects like the Pentecostals have responded faster and more aggressively to immigrants with aid and tight-knit worship circles in Spanish.

On a recent Saturday afternoon, Rev. Jose Luis Correa, a Pentecostal pastor in Dover, handed out pamphlets with some church members as they walked through the parking lots of small Hispanic grocery stores or food stores with Hispanic patrons.

Then, they visited a mobile home park nestled between strawberry fields and railroad tracks. Many residents did not answer the door or weren't home. Others politely took the pamphlets and said they would come to church.

Sometimes, Correa said, he approaches them in the fields with water. Often he brings them clothes and food.

"We tell them we believe God will provide for their needs," said Correa, of Assembly of God or Templo Cristiano. "You're not going to reach them by being on a pulpit or sitting in an office."

Correa tackles their personal problems: marital disputes, alcoholism - a service sometimes lacking in the Catholic church.

For some immigrants like Edin Gonzalez, a 25-year-old Guatemalan carpenter who left most of his family behind, the church has become an instant community.

"It's like my second home. It's my family," he said.

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When Hispanic converts from the Catholic church join Protestant sects, they let go of their attachment to the saints, religious images and Mary, the mother of Jesus, Correa said.

"We don't worship idols," he said.

Catholic priests bristle at the accusation and say Protestant evangelizers are tearing Hispanics away from their culture and faith.

"There's almost like a whole campaign to bring down the blessed Mother like she's the anti-Christ," said Father Carlos Rojas of St. Clement Catholic Church in Plant City.

Rojas, of Puerto Rican decent, said Hispanic Catholics, particularly Mexican Catholics, are very devoted to Mary.

They believe Mary, known as Our Lady of Guadalupe, appeared to a Mexican Indian peasant named Juan Diego in 1531. Juan Diego's story contributed greatly to Catholicism's spread in Mexico.

Recently, in a mix of religion and culture, St. Clement held a three-day festival and a two-day vigil to mark the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe that included Aztec dancers, mariachi bands and statues of the Virgin Mary.

The festival, which took place at the Plant City Stadium, drew 3,000 people, the first time it was held on such a large scale.

And it was yet another effort to cement the Catholic church's historical presence in the Hispanic community.

St. Clement, like other Catholic churches, started a Bible study for its Hispanic members in part to counter Protestant evangelizers, shifting from a tradition that left Bible readings and interpretations to priests.

"When you are entering into dialogue with other religions and people who are attacking the Catholic church, there is a need to have Bible studies," Rojas said. "If you are asked this question, here is a way you can respond."

Juan Gomez, pastor of the Church of God, a Protestant church in Wimauma, said his members don't attack Catholics. They just worship differently.

"We believe that Mary was a beautiful woman of God, but in terms of redemption, Christ is the one in terms of intercession, Christ is the interceder, not Mary, as they believe," said Gomez, who converted from Catholicism to the Church of God at 15 after immigrating to Ruskin from Mexico.

Gomez said he questions the Juan Diego story and the Catholic blending of religion with Hispanic culture.

But ultimately, newcomers aren't forced to stay in his church. If they don't like the spirited form of worship and Bible study, they go elsewhere.

"We try to bring people to a deeper relationship with Christ," he said. "It will always be up to the people."

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Clear differences between the two

The battle for Hispanic faithful continues to brew between Catholics and Protestants, with both sides increasingly stepping up their recruitment efforts. Among the Protestant denominations, the Pentecostals have been particularly aggressive.