

Caribbean Catholics stress need for solidarity

ROCHESTER, N.Y. – “God is good,” Caribbean speaker Gerard Granado called out Aug. 17 during the second national convention of Caribbean Catholics of North America.

“All the time,” participants answered in unison.

The responses emanated from nearly every seat in a ballroom at Rochester’s Crowne Plaza Hotel and illustrated the “Call and Response” theme of the convention, which took place Aug. 17-19 and was attended by about 125 people.

Granado, general secretary for the Caribbean Conference of Churches, highlighted the underlying spiritual meaning of the expression he had uttered, a phrase that those gathered were very clearly used to saying and answering.

“There’s a deep sense in the Caribbean of the faithfulness and providence of God,” he said.

Granado urged the group to feel solidarity with their brothers and sisters in the Caribbean. Many did, based on prayers said throughout the event.

“Our fervent prayers are with our sister islands in the Caribbean with Hurricane Dean and simultaneously with Peru in the terrible aftermath of the earthquake,” Vonulrick “Von” Martin, vice president of Caribbean Catholics of North America, said during the Aug. 17 opening ceremony.

Granado’s talk on the call and response of Caribbean Catholics as well as several performances by an area drum and dance group and a steel-drum band helped kick off the three-day convention, which examined what issues Caribbean Catholics in North America are called to address and developed strategies to respond to those issues.

Granado called on the group to acknowledge that sections of society are alienated and broken.

“Our challenge is how do we celebrate fragmentation through the greater good of the body,” he said.

Granado said the church is obliged to take on advocacy by virtue of God’s reconciling will. He cited several issues where advocacy could help, including free trade, the spread of HIV/AIDS, immigration concerns, human trafficking, the value

of inclusiveness and helping the downtrodden, such as those trying to escape strife in such countries as Haiti.

“Fair trade is not synonymous with free trade,” Granado said, citing inequities in banana prices, which have led to social displacement by farmers unable to sell their fruit.

In addition to Granado, speakers during the convention came from throughout the Caribbean community; they included Dame Calliopa Pearlette Louisy, governor general of St. Lucia; Gerald Boodoo, professor of systematic theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh; Anna K. Perkins, dean of studies at St. Michael’s Theological College in Kingston, Jamaica; Father Clyde Martin Harvey, a pastor from the Archdiocese of Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago; and Cecile Motus, interim director of the Office for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The convention was co-sponsored by that office, the USCCB and the Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother.

The opening event featured performances by Rochester-area musicians: the beating of drums and African-inspired dancing from Percussion Ah Saleem, the drum-and-dance ensemble led by State University of New York College at Brockport professor Khalid Saleem, and the Alfred St. John Trinidad & Tobago Steel Band.

Music was a large part of the celebration throughout the weekend. Monsignor Raymond East, the spiritual adviser of Caribbean Catholics of North America and pastor of St. Teresa of Avila Catholic Parish in the Archdiocese of Washington, set Sunday’s Gospel to song.

He suggested that participants make the Caribbean Catholic culture visible in their parish communities by bringing the best parts of their culture, such as music. While many black parishes often feature gospel music, Caribbean choir members could also suggest calypso and West Indian standards for Mass, he said.

“Two-thirds of our choir comes from the islands, but we never do songs from the islands,” Monsignor East said of his parish.

Nimbly plucking strings on an acoustic guitar, Charles Percy Caldeira added a light sound to the ad hoc convention choir that formed during the event’s first day.

Caldeira, a teacher, moved from his native Guyana with his wife and five daughters in 1967 at a time when his homeland was in dire economic straits. He said he misses Guyana, but also notes that the country has been overrun by drug traffickers looking for new markets.

Now he is a member of the West Indian Apostolate of the Diocese of Brooklyn, N.Y., and teaches senior fitness classes. To him, the convention was about highlighting the many distinct cultures that make up the Caribbean.

“This is about Caribbean unity,” Caldeira said. “Unity in diversity.”