

Everyday evangelizers: Taking the Bible door to door in Mexico, U.S.

MEXICO CITY - When Nora Hilda Rodriguez was studying in college, she noticed that her Protestant friends always carried their Bibles, which they frequently consulted.

She began carrying around her own Bible - a massive family edition that left little room in her backpack for schoolbooks. She often wondered why she didn't have her friends' familiarity with Christianity's guiding text despite her devout upbringing and involvement in numerous parish groups.

"I never doubted my faith," Ms. Rodriguez said. "But I did begin to question: If I am in the true church, why don't I understand my faith?"

She sought answers from her parish priest, but "his answers weren't enough, they were obsolete, without any basis."

Ms. Rodriguez's search for understanding eventually led her to the Missionary Servants of the Word, a 30-year-old organization that targets young lay men and women in Mexico and the U.S. and trains them to evangelize in a manner uncommon for the Catholic Church - door to door. The Bible is a key element of their missionary work.

The Missionary Servants try to reach out to those who do not necessarily go to Mass, which means going to homes, prisons or wherever people congregate. The group also organizes retreats for young people and offers courses on Bible studies for lay men and women.

After six months of training, Ms. Rodriguez began traveling across Mexico with a lighter, travel-friendly Bible, knocking on doors in the central state of Guanajuato and later on the Yucatan Peninsula. She is currently in formation to become a nun.

Her organization, meanwhile, may be an example for the Catholic Church as it seeks to find fresh ways to make the Bible important in Catholics' lives. Pope Benedict XVI has convoked a worldwide Synod of Bishops Oct. 5-26 with the aim of revitalizing interest in Scripture.

Father Demetrio Vargas Gomez runs the Missionary Servants' Reconciliation Center, a refuge of dormitories, chapels and gardens spread across several acres of land in the gritty outskirts of Mexico City. Recruits live in the complex during their training, and the site also hosts retreats and Bible studies.

Father Vargas has been with the organization since it was founded in 1978 under the guidance of an Italian priest, Father Luis Butera Vullo, serving in Mexico. Father Vargas began much like the approximately 1,000 young laypeople who undergo training for the group each year in Mexico. He was a young man with little religious background but eager to find answers for himself and to help others understand.

In those days, Father Butera Vullo had few people helping him, and Father Vargas was one of the few brave enough to go door to door and lead prayer sessions on public buses. At the time, Father Butera Vullo's efforts were not greeted with enthusiasm within the church, Father Vargas said.

"Nobody believed in (Father Butera Vullo)," he said. "Even the priests around us didn't believe in him. We were really discouraged by others who told us to leave him because they said there was no future in what we were doing."

But Father Butera Vullo and his group of recruits persisted, and today the organization operates across Mexico and in the United States, Canada, Dominican

Republic, Guatemala, Venezuela, Chile and Kenya. There are plans to begin working in Vietnam and then in China.

The organization takes in young, unmarried men and women between the ages of 18 and 30 and trains them for missionary work. Upon completion of their training, the missionaries are sent out at the request of parish priests for missionary stints of one year or more. They receive no salary, although their basic needs are provided for by the parish in which they are stationed.

Father Vargas said the priests often end up accompanying the young missionaries on their visits, which helps the priests understand their communities better.

“There are some beautiful stories from some of the priests,” he said. “They say, ‘It wasn’t until I went out to visit people that I really learned how my community lives.’”

Those who have participated in the missionary work say it is rewarding, but they receive plenty of rejection from those who mistake them for evangelicals or who simply are not interested.

“A lot of people don’t believe in God anymore,” said Juan Rodriguez Alvarado, a 22-year-old who worked as a missionary in northern Mexico and now hopes to become a priest. “The best part of the missionary experience is finding people who need God. If you go and tell them, ‘God loves you,’ you can send their lives in a different direction.”