

Father Lavin's book urges compassion for new immigrants

ANNAPOLIS – Father John Lavin, C.Ss.R., still chuckles when he remembers the day Jesus got held up by U.S. Customs.

It happened nearly eight years ago when Father Lavin was pastor of the Catholic Community of St. Michael and St. Patrick in Fells Point. A Spanish-speaking parishioner in the bilingual faith community had arranged for an exact replica of a famous Guatemalan crucifix in Esquipulas to be imported to the United States for permanent display at St. Patrick. But as hundreds of parishioners packed the church in eager anticipation of the ebony-colored crucifix's arrival, federal agents at the customs office wouldn't allow the seven-foot sacred object through.

"It was kind of ironic," said Father Lavin, sitting in his office at St. Mary in Annapolis on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Leaning back in his chair, St. Mary's associate pastor wore a shirt bearing a brightly colored image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in honor of Mary's feast.

"Jesus was undergoing the same experience of many immigrants," the Redemptorist priest said with a smile. "He eventually was released."

The story of the Esquipulas crucifix is just one of many highlighted in Father Lavin's new book, "Noticing Lazarus at Our Door." Published by Xlibris Corporation, the 213-page volume covers Father Lavin's more than 40 years ministering in the Hispanic community abroad and in the United States. The purpose of the book is to raise awareness about the millions of Hispanic immigrants who live in the United States – people who are often ignored, neglected or forgotten, Father Lavin said.

"Lazarus was the poor man in the Gospel story that Jesus told," explained Father Lavin. "Every day, the rich man walked by and never noticed him – never invited him into his house. This book challenges us to be more conscious – 'concientizacion' in Spanish – of the value of each human being – especially the poor and the unnoticed."

A Boston native who was ordained a Redemptorist priest in 1966, Father Lavin

served eight years as a missionary to Puerto Rico. He then studied at the Latin American Bishops' Pastoral Institute in Colombia, served as pastor in New York's Spanish Harlem and worked five years as an itinerant preacher to Hispanics across the United States.

Father Lavin arrived in Baltimore in 1992 to serve as pastor of St. Michael, which later became the Catholic Community of St. Michael and St. Patrick. He has been at St. Mary's since 1999, serving as a missionary to Hispanic immigrants.

Father Lavin's book introduces readers to people like Isabel, a Salvadoran immigrant who suffered the loss of several family members who were murdered by the Salvadoran army. She eventually made her way to Annapolis with her husband, earning money by cleaning houses for the well-to-do. She was reunited with her children when she and her husband saved money to bring them to the United States.

"This family is among the lucky ones," said Father Lavin. "So many immigrant families live each day with the pain of separation."

A common thread throughout much of Father Lavin's ministry has been an emphasis on "small Christian communities." Organized as small gatherings of believers, the communities come together to pray and support one another, often meeting in the homes of parishioners and reflecting on the scripture readings from upcoming Sunday Masses, he said.

In his book, Father Lavin recounts the ways some people take advantage of new immigrants. He argues that social justice groups like Casa of Maryland are essential to defending against such abuses.

"One Sunday at St. Michael's, three young men complained to me about a parishioner who had hired them, and still after three weeks, they had not been paid," Father Lavin said. "They pointed the man out to me. When I called him over, he immediately took out a checkbook and paid them."

Father Lavin calls for a moratorium on arresting immigrants at the workplace and stronger penalties for employers who commit human rights violations.

"Instead of building a wall to block out Hispanics, we need to build bridges of

communication between Latinos and the larger society in the United States,” he said.

To order Father Lavin’s book, call 1-888-795-4274. Softbound copies are \$15.99 and hardbound copies are \$22.90.