

# Hispanic immigrants are a blessing to the community

**By Religious Sister of Mercy Mary Neil Corcoran**

When John F. Shettle called me three years ago about his interest in working with immigrants, I was reminded of so many dedicated and generous volunteers likewise inspired. So I reminisced about the early days of the Hispanic Apostolate, now the Esperanza Center, and decided to share these memories with you as we prepare to celebrate our 50th anniversary next year.

What today is the Esperanza Center is the fruit of the vision of Nancy Conrad, who had just returned from Latin America as a member of the Young Christian Workers and quickly became involved with the problems recently-arrived immigrants were experiencing. As the Latino population grew, she recognized the need for an organized agency to respond and address the needs and concerns of the ethnic group. Cardinal Lawrence Shehan shared her concern and authorized the opening of such an office. Thus was born the Hispanic Apostolate!

Father Manuel Roman was appointed the first director and Ms. Conrad served as his assistant and then as director until 1975. In 1968, the apostolate moved its headquarters to a handsome building on E. 25th Street. Renovating this structure was a community project spearheaded by Ms. Conrad, Father John Auer, Roberto Arellano, president of the center's board and many loyal Hispanic volunteers.

In the early 1980s the Hispanic Apostolate relocated to Southeast Baltimore and became affiliated with Catholic Charities. In 1989, I was appointed coordinator of Hispanic Ministries by Cardinal William H. Keeler in addition to my responsibilities as director of the Hispanic Apostolate. A great source of guidance for me in serving the Hispanic community was the Pastoral Letter on Hispanic Ministry prepared by the U.S. bishops in 1983, "The Hispanic Presence: Challenge and Commitment."

In this pastoral letter, our bishops proclaimed "... we recognize the Hispanic community among us as a blessing from God. We call upon all persons of good faith

to share our vision of the special gifts which Hispanics bring to the Body of Christ, his pilgrim church on earth.”

Twenty years prior to the publication of this letter, our archbishop realized and practiced this reality by founding the Hispanic Apostolate to serve newly arrived immigrants to our archdiocese.

This tradition of service and commitment to the Hispanic community continues in the ministry of Maria Johnson, her staff, priests and numerous volunteers. Maria was appointed director of Hispanic Ministry in 2000, and has continued to recognize what our bishops proclaimed: ...the Hispanic community among us is a blessing, rather than a problem.”

Witness the phenomenal progress of participation and integration of Hispanics in our Catholic parishes in recent years. In our archdiocese, there are 17 parishes with liturgies in Spanish and the active participation of thousands of Hispanics in parish activities. They pray and work side by side with their English-speaking parishioners and join them for bilingual liturgies and activities.

What the American bishops pleaded for in their pastoral letter on Hispanic ministry, our beloved late Archbishop William D. Borders expressed so well in his own heartfelt commitment and love for the Hispanic community:

“We of the Archdiocese of Baltimore have been blessed by the richness of your varied cultures, by your insight into the Church as a family, and by the beauty of your music. I think of the loss that would have been ours if you had not come.”

*Sister Mary Neil is the former director of the Hispanic Apostolate in Baltimore.*