

Hispanic leaders see progress, challenges

Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar for the archdiocese and Cardinal William H. Keeler's delegate to Hispanic ministry, told a group of some 15 Hispanic clergy and lay people there is a commitment among the local Catholic leadership to reach out to the Spanish-speaking community, but said they rely on input from them.

The meeting produced a catalog of requests that include integrating parish Hispanic ministries with the English-speaking population, educating all Catholics about immigration issues, offering more Catholic school scholarships to Hispanic youths, and recruiting more Latino representatives in pastoral councils.

Tuition assistance for Hispanics should be calculated in a way that is more consistent with disposable income in their households, said Maria T.P. Johnson, director of Hispanic Ministries for the archdiocese.

Disposable income in many of these homes is different than other households, considering about 20 to 30 percent of the money they earn is sent to family members in their native country, Ms. Johnson said.

"There is also a problem with crime (in East Baltimore), and members of the Hispanic community are being victimized," said Father Luis Cremis, associate pastor of Our Lady of Pompei, Highlandtown, a parish where about 65 percent of parishioners are Spanish-speaking.

Hispanic clergy reported tremendous progress in meeting the pastoral needs of the Hispanic population in the archdiocese since the early 1990s, with 19 parishes holding weekly Spanish-speaking Masses and more clergy immersing themselves in pastoral Spanish classes.

The result has been an influx of the estimated 70,000 Spanish-speaking regional population attending Mass in archdiocesan churches, more full-time clergy in the parishes who are able to communicate with them and a rising Hispanic population in the Catholic schools, Ms. Johnson said.

For example, the Hispanic population at Archbishop Borders School, Highlandtown, has grown from 3 percent in 2004 to 50 percent in 2007, Father Cremis said.

Catholic leadership wants to make sure the accomplishments made on behalf of the Hispanic population and the challenges they still face are well known to future leaders in the archdiocese.

Hispanic congregations do appear to have an average age that is younger than the English-speaking population, Father Cremis said.

“When I celebrate a Mass in Spanish, I am the oldest person in the church,” said the priest with salt-and-pepper hair. “When I celebrate Mass in English, I am one of the youngest.”