

Ministering at Laurel Park, priest wants to smell not like sheep, but a 'horse'

LAUREL - As he does every month, Father Hector Mateus-Ariza got together with a small group of volunteers April 10 to celebrate Mass for workers at the Laurel Park racetrack. A handful of workers showed up; they knew this was their opportunity to attend Mass and receive Communion before Holy Week and Easter.

Father Mateus-Ariza, pastor of Resurrection of Our Lord in Laurel, has a parish community that is small, vibrant and culturally diverse. He utilizes every opportunity to bring people to his parish, and when someone at the racetrack invited him to visit the workers, the priest immediately grabbed the opportunity.

"The pope said to smell like sheep, but I want to smell like horse," Father Mateus-Ariza said with a smile, referring to Pope Francis' call to priests to evangelize by being among their flock. "One of the reasons I like the pope is exactly for that, because it's about going out and being with the people."

On this visit, Jesus Aguirre, a horse walker who never misses the Masses, helped set up the altar at one of the lounge rooms for the workers. He told Father Mateus-Ariza that his brother had died and that the funeral took place that same day in his native Michoacán, Mexico. The priest offered the Mass for Jesus' brother and said some comforting words during the homily.

"It leaves me a lot of peace and tranquility. It helps me a lot," Aguirre said in Spanish about the Mass and the ministry. He added that he prays for his family in Mexico and works hard to help his elderly parents.

Since February 2018, Father Mateus-Ariza and about six parish volunteers have provided barn workers at the racetrack with a monthly Mass, confession, and weekly opportunities for adoration, prayer and Communion. The groups are small and on a good day as many as 15 workers might attend. Luis Larios, a volunteer, leads the

weekly visits.

“We have seen the needs of those who lack God in their lives,” said Larios. “We have motivated them to dedicate time for God, not only to work.”

“With Luis coming in and sitting down to talk, I feel like some of the people at Resurrection Church are making that connection and they’re talking to people, and they’re sharing stories about their hometowns,” said Sue LaCourse, a volunteer for the Racetrack Chaplaincy of America, who has been at the Laurel site for about 10 years.

About 250 workers live on the property taking care of the horses, said LaCourse. She reached out to Father Mateus-Ariza as she saw many of the spiritual and emotional needs of the workers. She said many of them are seasonal workers coming from Mexico and other countries. They may struggle with loneliness and isolation, since they are away from their families and may not be familiar with the language and the community around them.

“Having a group of people to share your faith is very important,” added LaCourse. “Here are a lot of problems that people have, so being able to come here and be in a strong faith community is very stabilizing for the people who live here.”

Through her organization, LaCourse has also arranged for weekly visits from a nearby Baptist church.

Workers who choose rent-free housing live in facilities that have been under public scrutiny after Baltimore Del. Nick Mosby recently called for an inspection due to deplorable conditions such as cracked ceilings, exposed wires, poor heating and air conditioning, and inadequate bathroom areas. The Stronach Group, which owns the racetrack, said in a statement that it expected to correct the issues brought to their attention and that a new barn with 115 dorms is expected to be completed this year.

Father Mateus-Ariza said many workers choose the least expensive options and live with lots of limitations so they can have more money to help their families in their home countries.

Juan, another horse walker from Mexico who preferred to share only his first name,

grew up as a practicing Catholic, but in his adult life he distanced himself from the faith until about two years ago, when life brought him back to it.

“I’m coming back to my faith because of things that happened. Sometimes one doesn’t even look for God’s word and yet it comes to you and it surprises you, and that’s what happened to me,” he said.

He appreciates the ministry group from Resurrection Parish that helps him stay connected with his faith.

Among the volunteers, Fatima Delgado, 20, is a college student and a choir member who played the guitar and sang at the Mass.

“Sometimes the Mass feels more lively when there’s some music, so I try to bring my guitar and sing some songs that the community can get involved with, especially the old songs that people can remember and can bring them a little bit of those home memories,” Delgado said.

After the Mass, the group shared dinner, which provides a chance for fellowship. They enjoyed Mexican tortas and Milanese sandwiches.

Father Mateus-Ariza is already planning his next visit during the Easter season. He wants to make it a celebration of the Resurrection of Christ.