

Nashville Diocese establishes Tennessee's first all-Hispanic parish

NASHVILLE, Tenn. – Just two years after he blessed Our Lady of Guadalupe Church as a mission of St. Edward Parish, Nashville Bishop David R. Choby dedicated it as the first independent Hispanic parish in Tennessee.

“It means a lot to us. We’re making history,” said Hector Martinez, lay administrator of the parish.

Our Lady of Guadalupe has been established as a “personal” parish to serve the Hispanic community, rather than a territorial parish with geographic boundaries. The decision was based on the heavy concentration of Spanish speakers in the area, the availability of church property and a demonstrated commitment by parishioners to create a new, self-sustaining parish.

St. Edward parishioners donated enough money to purchase existing buildings for the new parish and renovations were funded through grants from the Diocese of Nashville and the Catholic Extension Society.

Martinez said now Our Lady of Guadalupe parishioners are completely responsible for the building’s upkeep. “It’s not easy, but we’re doing it.” The campus, a sprawling older building with dozens of classrooms and offices, needs constant repairs and upgrades.

Our Lady of Guadalupe administrators have already been managing their own budget and parish ministries, so Martinez said he anticipates a smooth transition as the parish takes on a new status.

Although Our Lady of Guadalupe will be independent from St. Edward, the new parish will continue to look there for guidance.

St. Edward pastor Father Joseph Breen, who was instrumental in establishing Our

Lady of Guadalupe Parish, said what they have accomplished is “quite a miracle.” He was acknowledged with thunderous applause at the dedication Mass Dec. 12.

Currently 550 families attend weekend Masses at Our Lady of Guadalupe. Hundreds of children attend catechism classes, and Bible study sessions are popular among adults.

“We have a lot of young families,” some of whom are returning to a Catholic church for the first time in years, Martinez said.

Although Our Lady of Guadalupe has one Sunday evening bilingual Mass and uses bilingual textbooks for religious education, most parish business is conducted in Spanish. Walking the building’s halls during the first Communion and confirmation classes, Spanish and English can be heard as students easily switch back and forth.

Spanish is the predominant language of the parish because “when you are worshipping, language does matter,” Martinez said. Parish administrators encourage parishioners to learn English, especially through Catholic Charities’ on-campus English as a Second Language classes. But when it comes to the Mass, Hispanics find it more meaningful to worship in their native tongue, with their own worship style.

The Saturday evening and two Sunday morning Masses are Spanish only, as is the parish’s weekly eight-page bulletin. Father Fernando Garcia, from Colombia, is a native Spanish speaker and associate pastor Father Anthony Lopez, a native English speaker, mostly relates to his parishioners in Spanish.

Many parishes in the diocese have strong Hispanic ministry programs and nearly half have at least one weekly Spanish Mass.

Bishop Choby said he sees Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish as an “exceptional” case and hopes that in general, “the spiritual needs of the Hispanic community can be provided for in the established parishes of the diocese.”

With Mass, adoration, confession, classes and other activities happening every day of the week, Our Lady of Guadalupe is a thriving center for Hispanic Catholics in Nashville.

Catholic Charities' Hispanic Family Services is now based at Our Lady of Guadalupe and plans are under way for St. Mary Villa to open a new satellite child care center there in 2010.

"We are continuing to grow," Martinez said. "This is just the beginning."