

Parish priests, staff learn Spanish to connect with people

Habla español? Do you speak Spanish?

For an increasing number of non-Hispanic priests and archdiocesan staff, the answer is yes. But that doesn't mean that Hispanics aren't willing to learn English – they are.

The impetus for priests and parish staff to learn Spanish, said Maria Johnson, director of the Office of Hispanic Ministry for the archdiocese, comes from understanding that a culture has the right to receive the gospel in its own language. The pastor reaches out to his people – it's not for the people to adapt themselves to the priest.

“Because we are a missionary church, we go to them,” Ms. Johnson said.

And pastors have plenty of reaching out to do. Hispanics make up nearly 40 percent of Catholics in the United States today, and that's expected to be 50 percent within a decade, Ms. Johnson said. Hispanics make up 41 percent of all Catholics under the age of 30, and 44 percent of Catholics under 10, according to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“This is beyond the areas where there traditionally was a strong Hispanic presence, Los Angeles, New York, Miami,” Ms. Johnson said. “This is now Georgia, the Carolinas. The Hispanic population in Wilmington and Baltimore started to grow in the '90s.”

“In the last two-and-a-half years with the archdiocese, I have seen Spanish start to

be picked up among church leaders,” said Georgina Vaca, coordinator of Hispanic and Young Adult Youth Ministry. “It is evident that little by little the reality of the growing Spanish-speaking community in Baltimore City and Baltimore County is causing pastors to respond by immersing themselves in Spanish language programs or in immersion programs abroad.”

Father James D. Proffitt, pastor of St. Michael the Archangel, will be in Mexico starting on New Year’s Eve, living for six weeks with a family who doesn’t speak English.

Father Proffitt confessed to being a little nervous but added with a laugh, “I’m not living in a hut in a jungle with no running water. Guadalajara is a cosmopolitan area.”

He took Spanish in college, “but it had been so long, it was really like staring over,” he said.

While there, he’ll be attending a tutorial program with vocabulary classes in the morning and classes that focus on conversational Spanish in the afternoon. Weekends will include cultural trips and visits to parishes.

St. Michael the Archangel is one of 20 parishes that offer Mass in Spanish.

“The number of Hispanics in the archdiocese is multiplying exponentially. People think, ‘Oh, we have to learn Spanish because they won’t learn English’ but that’s not the case,” Father Proffitt said. “Most have some English in varying levels. Their English is better than my Spanish.”

That first generation, adds Ms. Johnson, learn a survival level of English because they work long hours.

Speaking Spanish, Father Proffitt said, “says something about being welcoming. People pray in their native language.” He also notes that “it’s not just translating my homily into Spanish - it’s understanding the culture.”

Archbishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, who has taken a pastoral Spanish course at the College of Notre Dame, says he finds it personally beneficial “because it broadens my horizons. It helped me to grasp not only the language but also to grasp the culture.”

Father Proffitt notes the church needs to be able to reach out to people “to make these celebrations a celebration of faith. The first generation of any group, they need pastoral care,” he said. “And if we don’t do it, somebody else will.”

Added Ms. Johnson, “It’s a very powerful message to the people of the parish - our pastor is doing this for us. The action says, ‘You are welcome here.’”