

The church universal - right here in Baltimore!

It is fascinating to hear a recounting of a Catholic's first visit to Rome.

The thrill of walking into the expanse of St. Peter's Basilica, the awe of standing in the Sistine Chapel and viewing the ceiling that Michelangelo painted and the joy of being present at a papal audience are the usual hallmarks of a person's visit to the Eternal City. Many people have remarked to me, "I cannot believe how many people come from all parts of the world to Rome." It is amazing to realize the embrace of our faith for all peoples and cultures and how the Christian message has taken root in diverse places of our world.

While we would expect that a city like Rome would attract so many visitors, it is sometimes difficult to imagine that our own Archdiocese of Baltimore reflects the church universal. Yet, a visit to many of our parishes illustrates that we are a community of diverse cultures, united in our Catholic faith. It is awe inspiring to meet so many of our immigrants who look to the church as a sign of stability and a spiritual, as well as a social, home.

During his tenure as our 14th archbishop, Cardinal William Keeler observed the growth of the Hispanic population within our archdiocese and wisely discerned that we needed to reach out to this growing community. From Baltimore City to Western Maryland and in our suburban parishes of Baltimore, Harford and Anne Arundel counties, we witness the presence of Hispanic Catholics who are proud of their faith and devotion to the church. As the vicar for Hispanics, I have had the opportunity to visit many of our parishes for various celebrations and have heard their stories of great faith. My own life has been greatly enriched by participating in the Masses for Our Lady of Guadalupe and realizing the tremendous devotion for our Lady in the hearts of our Hispanic Catholics.

Two years ago, I had the privilege of accompanying our vocation director, Father Jerry Francik and Father Gil Seitz, who works in our diocesan tribunal, on a trip to Colombia, South America. We were hosted by Seminarian Hector Mateus, a native of

Colombia, whose sister and brother-in-law opened their home to us with generous hearts. Our first day was marked by a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Monserrat, a shrine high on a hill just outside of Bogotá. I could not believe the number of young people who were there that day, attending Mass, praying the rosary and spending time

in quiet prayer in the different chapels of that shrine. It was truly an edifying experience and enlightened me about the great devotion of our Hispanic brothers and sisters. During that visit, we also stayed for a few days with the parents of seminarian Gonzalo Cadavid. I am delighted to report that both Hector and Gonzalo are currently deacons and, please God, will be ordained for our archdiocese this June as priests. On that visit, we were welcomed to three different seminaries, each one at full capacity. While one seminary trained students to be ordained for dioceses of Colombia, the other two were established to send men to other countries for priestly ministry. A newer seminary program trained students for ministry specifically in Africa and Asia. Of particular amazement to me was the generosity of sending priests to so many different parts of the world and the joyful willingness of these men to leave their homeland to bring the Gospel message to far off places and cultures different from their own. Truly, our entire church is enriched by such generosity.

After his resurrection, Jesus told his apostles to go out to the whole world to preach the Gospel. Following the instruction of our Lord, the apostles and generations after them have planted the seed of faith in all countries and cultures. May our church of Baltimore continue to be enriched by our Hispanic brothers and sisters and all the people who come here from the world over bringing the gift of a vibrant faith and a visible sign of the church universal.