

# Hispanic Ministry Program targets growing population

By PETER FINNEY Jr.

Evidence of the growing Hispanic population in the Archdiocese of New Orleans extends beyond the hundreds of workers who gather each morning in parking lots across the metropolitan area, searching for post-Katrina construction work.

Martin Gutierrez, director of the archdiocesan Hispanic Apostolate, said he got visual confirmation of the fast-changing demographics recently while driving past a Vietnamese shopping center in New Orleans East.

"In the middle of the Vietnamese shopping center was a Mexican restaurant," Gutierrez said. "I drove past Lowe's the other day and there were seven taco trucks parked in front. The Hispanic and immigrant population is the only segment of the (New Orleans) population that has increased (since Katrina)."

Gutierrez said he believes the Hispanic population in the region has grown from about 80,000 before Katrina to between 150,000 and 200,000 since then.

While the increase in Hispanic population in the archdiocese is undeniable and more dramatic than in many other areas of the U.S., it also is a major pastoral concern to American seminaries preparing men for the priesthood.

**THE 2000** U.S. census indicated 39 percent of American Catholics were Hispanic, and those figures are expected to skyrocket over the next four decades as the overall Hispanic population in the U.S. grows from 35.6 million to an estimated 102.6 million in 2050. Even more significantly, the percentage of Hispanics in the U.S. is expected to double from 12.6 percent to 24.4 percent over that same period.

Father José Lavastida, academic dean of Notre Dame Seminary and a native of Cuba, says the demographic statistics make it even more imperative to train seminarians in Hispanic ministry.

Four years ago Notre Dame Seminary established a formal Hispanic

Ministry Program. Seminarians taking 15 credit hours took basic, intermediate and advanced Spanish, as well as courses on Hispanic culture, theology from a Hispanic perspective, homiletics and sacramental courses.

Ten of the 25 dioceses with men training for the priesthood at Notre Dame Seminary, including the Archdiocese of New Orleans, have made the Hispanic Ministry Program a requirement for their seminarians.

"Those statistics are out there," Father Lavastida said. "Hispanics make up a huge percentage of the American church. There's no question that the archbishop is very happy that we have this program. Programs such as this are in many seminaries, but I don't know how developed their plans are. Miami and San Antonio are fully bilingual."

Several Notre Dame seminarians are in their fourth year of the program and believe it has been invaluable for their future ministry.

"**THE** Hispanic presence has doubled the Catholic population in my diocese (Birmingham, Ala.) from 2 to 4 percent," said Mark Spruill. "We don't have national churches, but we do have churches that serve a predominantly Hispanic population. If you can't talk to the people, you can't walk with the people."

Joe Schwarz, from the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, said even when he uses his halting Spanish to try to communicate with Hispanic Catholics he is warmly received.

"When people see you speaking in Spanish, they automatically see you trying to communicate with them," Schwarz said. "It can be frustrating because of the language barrier, but they see the attempt. Someone is really trying to make the effort to speak their language."

Michael Baltrus, a seminarian from the Diocese of Nashville, teaches an English as a Second Language class when he is back home and has found that his students are his best teachers.



FATHER José Lavastida, second from right, says the Hispanic Ministry Program at Notre Dame Seminary responds to a growing need to prepare priests to serve Hispanic Catholics. With him, from left, are seminarians Michael Baltrus, Mark Spruill and Joe Schwarz. (Photo by Ron Brocato)

"They love it," Baltrus said. "They bend over backwards to help me. They also come to me for help in other areas. We have a deal. I am helping them with their pronunciations, and if I'm not saying it right, they do the same for me."

"If you care enough to actually learn their language, then you actually care about them as people," Spruill said.

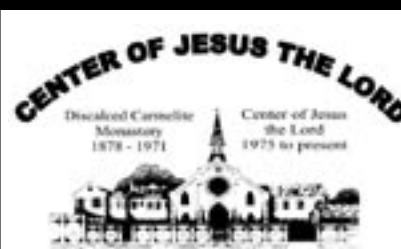
There is a big difference between being able to read Spanish with

understanding and being able to carry on a conversation in Spanish, the seminarians said. Notre Dame offers students a chance to take a 12-week summer immersion program in Mexico to improve their Spanish-speaking skills.

Baltrus said a Hispanic family in Nashville has helped him translate his homilies.

"The mother knows English pretty well, but she uses her 12-year-old son to help," Baltrus said.

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