

# Hispanic Mass new for Sparta Deanery

By **PATRICK SLATTERY**  
Times Review Staff

**NORWALK** — On Sundays at noon, when most priests can relax and enjoy dinner after completing their week's most important work, Father Kevin Louis launches into his fourth Mass of the weekend.

This Mass is not only at a different time, but it's also in a different language, Spanish.

Because of a recent labor row, there aren't many in the pews of late — perhaps a dozen or so. But numbers isn't what this Mass is about.

Father Louis believes as a man of God he can help bridge the gap between Hispanics and Anglos in this community. Celebrating Mass regularly in Spanish, he says, lets Hispanics know that the Catholic church cares about their spiritual and

material needs.

A Spanish Mass is something new for the Sparta Deanery. It was introduced due to the influx of Hispanics who have come north to work for Norwalk's one and only major employer, Valley Pride (formerly Pine Valley).

While meatpacking in times past was unionized, high-paying work, that's not the general rule any more. Nationwide it's become a low-paying industry. The work can be grueling and physically hazardous. People with other employment options tend to avoid it, so Hispanics migrate to distant places like Norwalk for steady work. Most are here for only limited periods of time.

Somewhere between 100-200 Hispanics now live in this Monroe County community of

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**MASS IN SPANISH:** Father Kevin Louis and Hispanic Catholics on the front steps of St. Augustine Church in Norwalk following the celebration of the Sunday noon Mass in Spanish. (Photo by Patrick Slattery)

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550. Inevitable tensions have arisen, with charges made that crime is more prevalent due to the newcomers, and that Hispanics bunch into any available local rental properties.

Recognizing a need for a new local ministry, St. Augustine's former pastor, Father Roger Scheckel went to language school in Texas to learn Spanish, and initiated the Spanish Mass. In mid-summer, however, he was reassigned to St. James Parish in La Crosse.

Upon becoming pastor of Norwalk, as well as Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Mary's Ridge and St. John's of Summit, Father Louis was asked by the bishop to carry on the Hispanic ministry initiative.

Well enough, said Father Louis, except for a slight problem — he never took a class of Spanish in his life. The 32-year-old priest had studied in Rome for four years, however, and is fluent in Italian, which belongs to the same family of Romance languages as Spanish. Additionally, his best friend at North American College was an Hispanic seminarian from Brownsville, Texas, and Father Louis has traveled extensively in Spanish-speaking countries.

With that kind of background he has found Hispanic ministry reasonably smooth going.

Italian words keep popping into his Spanish sermons and the like, but by and large, he reports, the Norwalk Hispanics tell him he's communicating well, and to keep it up. The priest makes a point of not writing out his sermons in Spanish, and enlists the congregation's help when he needs to grasp for the right words.

To celebrate Mass and preach in another language, Father Louis admits, is hard work.

To make matters more difficult, the priest recently lost virtually his entire Hispanic congregation.

A labor dispute at Valley Pride caused a considerable number of Hispanic employees to walk off the job and quit. Many of them went to work at another meatpacking plant in Michigan.

Before this, said Father Louis, the Hispanic congregation was coming around nicely. They had altar servers and readers at Mass, music was getting off the ground, and women's and prayer groups were being organized.

Then overnight...all gone. The new Hispanic meatpacking employees are mostly single men. Far from home and family in alien surroundings, Father Louis says they need all the help they can get — and that's why he willingly surrenders his early Sunday afternoons to share the Word and the Eucharist in Spanish.