

# Our Lady of Guadalupe celebration brings Norwalk residents together

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**NORWALK** — An overflow crowd of 250 Hispanic newcomers and long-time local residents filled the pews of St. Augustine Church on Thursday evening, Dec. 12.

A Mass, celebrated by Bishop Raymond Burke, paid special homage to the patroness of Mexico, Our Lady of Guadalupe, whose feast day was that day. The gathering also was intended to cut across cultural barriers and to begin building bridges among people who know little of each other, despite living in the same community.

Hispanics in Monroe County are mostly newcomers, drawn here by the availability of work at Norwalk's largest employer, Valley Pride. This meatpacking plant employs about 250, with

well over half the production workers of Hispanic origin.

This situation is typical of many meatpacking plants throughout the Midwest. The process of slaughtering cattle is difficult, dangerous and dirty work. The local labor pool often avoids it, so Hispanics are recruited to fill the void. Valley Pride kills about 650 cattle daily, mostly dairy cull cows, and specializes in producing ground beef.

To help get more people to the event on Dec. 12, Valley Pride started and ended its workday an hour early. Many Hispanics came quite dressed up for the occasion.

The influx of Hispanics into this region has created some tension. Some local people claim the community is no longer safe, with notable increases in public drunkenness and crime. Hispanics, in turn, believe they are

treated with suspicion, and are particularly susceptible to being gouged for rent.

A group of local ministers and others concerned about fostering better relations have been meeting monthly to see what can be done. Mike Brown, director of the Diocese of La Crosse Office of Justice and Peace, has been participating. It was at a recent meeting that a decision was made to invite the bishop to celebrate a special Mass.

"What a huge success. I saw people out in the pews from all four of my parishes," said Father Kevin Louis.

In addition to St. Augustine's, Father Louis is pastor of St. John's of Summit, St. Mary's Ridge, and Sacred Heart in Cashton. Prior to taking on Sacred Heart as his fourth parish last summer, Father Louis was celebrating a Sunday noon Mass in Spanish especial-



Bishop Raymond Burke visits with local Hispanics at the social in the church basement that followed a Mass in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Dec. 12. (Photo by Patrick Slattery)

ly for Hispanics.

He said a small but faithful and devout nucleus had formed, but it went by the wayside after most of the group's leaders quit at Valley Pride and relocated for work elsewhere.

Since then, he added, there has been little or no Hispanic involvement at St. Augustine's.

A big problem for ministry here, he said, is the transient

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nature of the workforce. He said the majority of the workers are young, single men, who don't plan to stay for any length of time.

Ideally, added Father Louis, he would like to have another Spanish-speaking priest reside here, so that the local Hispanic ministry would be better served. As it now stands, with four parishes, he finds it impossible to stretch himself any further.

In addition to celebrating Mass in Spanish, Bishop Burke also preached in that language, focusing on the special role Our Lady of Guadalupe plays for Hispanics.

At the offertory a youngster, dressed like Juan Diego, the Mexican peasant who encountered the Blessed Virgin in 1531, carried roses and presented them to the bishop.

The highly ecumenical event included a

Lutheran pastor, the Rev. Dan Dibbert, Wilton, who led the singing along with some of his congregation, and the Rev. Jenny Schroeder, a Methodist minister in Norwalk, who extended a greeting in Spanish.

Mass was followed by a social in the church basement, with ample donated food, as well as the Mexican tradition of breaking a candy-filled pinata for the children.

Brown felt the event was a good step forward for community understanding. Adequate housing is the biggest problem to be tackled, he said, adding that progress will only be made when the Valley Pride workforce is less transient.

Brown noted that in other scattered rural regions of the diocese, Hispanics also have become a significant part of the local workforce. He believes that given the right sort of welcome, they can be drawn into local parish life, and ultimately help invigorate rural faith communities.