

St. Augustine's, Richmond: Challenges seen also as strengths

By Steve Neill Of The Catholic Virginian (November 2005)



Msgr. Michael Schmied in front of St. Augustine Church.

St. Augustine parish in eastern Chesterfield County, probably more than any other parish in the diocese, has created an environment in which almost all communications and sacramental preparation for adults is done in both English and Spanish. Msgr. Michael S. Schmied, pastor, estimated that approximately 60 percent of the parish's 1,700 households are "Anglo" or non-Hispanic and that 40 percent are classified Hispanic. Yet the ratio shifts to perhaps 50-50 when the number of children is considered because Hispanic families have a higher birth rate than the non-Hispanics. "The vision is an integrated community respecting the differences, but sharing the same faith and ministries," Msgr. Schmied told The Catholic Virginian.

Mass is celebrated in English at the Saturday vigil Mass at 5:30 p.m. and on Sunday at 9 and 11 a.m. The Spanish liturgy is celebrated on Sundays at both 1 and 6 p.m. Children's Liturgy of the Word takes place at both the 9 and 11 a.m. liturgies in English and at the 1 p.m. liturgy in Spanish. The children are given a blessing before they leave the sanctuary for reflections on the readings of the day.

While all religious education programs for 515 children from grade 1 through two years of preparation for Confirmation are in English, programs for parents whose children are

preparing for reconciliation and Eucharist are offered in both English and Spanish.

Likewise, preparation classes for parents seeking to have an infant or older child baptized are offered in both English and Spanish. There is even an RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) program offered in Spanish for adults who may be from a Catholic country, but never finished the sacraments of initiation.

The list continues. The parish bulletin is bi-lingual, with even bulletin inserts providing the same information in both English and Spanish. There are Bible study classes in both English and Spanish and a men's spirituality group in both languages.

Bi-lingual liturgies in which both English and Spanish are used are rare. The Triduum in Holy Week is bi-lingual as is the Ash Wednesday liturgy. Family gatherings like retreat days are also bi-lingual. "We're working through the language barriers," said Deacon Eric Broughton. He and Eugene Corrigan are the two permanent deacons who assist Msgr. Schmied and Father Patrick "Paddy" Cannon, parochial vicar.

Both deacons normally witness all marriages without a nuptial Mass at St. Augustine's and perform other liturgical rites which do not require a priest. They frequently give the homily at Sunday Mass, but Msgr. Schmied normally always gives the homily at the Spanish liturgies. "Our presence has greatly enabled Father Mike to spread out his workload," Deacon Broughton said.

In addition to his liturgical role, Deacon Broughton also teaches the 5th grade religious education class on Monday nights. Parents of children in grades 1-6 have their own adult education opportunity each Monday and Tuesday night when they bring their children for religious education class. While the children are meeting in various classrooms from 6 to 7:30 p.m., parents can participate in a facilitated adult session in the commons. This year the numbers have grown because parents are taking the initiative to invite other parents, said Eileen Brown, pastoral associate for Christian formation.

Established in 1973, St. Augustine parish is a spin-off from Sacred Heart parish in South Richmond. A growing number of families had moved from the city to new suburban neighborhoods in Chesterfield County. The late Msgr. John J. McMahon, pastor of Sacred Heart, was appointed founding pastor of St. Augustine's. The Diocese of Richmond purchased property for a new church at the intersection of Beulah and Hopkins Roads. But before the church was dedicated in 1975, Mass was celebrated at the Bensley School. Danny Belcher Sr., an active member of St. Augustine's, has been involved from the parish's beginnings. "I had just come back to Richmond after getting off active duty," Mr.



Hispanic ministers at St. Augustine's are so designated by their "estintivos" they wear during the two liturgies in Spanish each Sunday.

Belcher said. “I came to church on Sunday and my father grabbed me and said “Come on, we’ve got work to do. I’ve been working ever since.”



The sanctuary of St. Augustine Church during Sunday Mass.

St. Augustine’s continues to draw new parishioners through the RCIA. Among the current candidates is Tom Green, whose wife, Megan, is a life-long Catholic. The two have a 19-month-old daughter, Mackenzie. “When we moved to the Richmond area a year ago, we started searching for the right church and community for us,” Mr. Green, a former Episcopalian, said. “We came to St. Augustine’s and started feeling pretty quick that this was the right place,” he continued. “The community of the church was very important. The core fundamental beliefs of the Episcopal Church and the Catholic Church are pretty similar so it’s not too much of a stretch.” Mr. Green said the RCIA formation “has been a very good learning process in faith and life so far and I’ve only been in it for two months.”

Regarding social outreach, St. Augustine’s maintains a food pantry which feeds approximately 40 families a month. A “poor box breakfast” is held the third Sunday of each month after the 9 a.m. Mass for new parishioners (“nuevos miembros”) after which they are assisted through the registration process. The meal is prepared and served by the Knights of Columbus, Bishop Peter L. Ireton Council 6189, and is open to other parishioners who pay \$3 a plate with the proceeds going to buy perishable items for the food pantry. The parish K of C council has 280 active members. Parishioners are encouraged to bring non-perishable food items liked canned goods and cereals to each Sunday liturgy for the food pantry. What is collected before each liturgy is brought forth in a grocery cart at the offertory at each Mass. This provides a visible symbol of the parish’s concern for those in need, Mrs. Brown said. St. Augustine’s is part of an ecumenical group known as CHASM — Chesterfield-Colonial Heights Alliance for Social Ministries — which has a screening process for people seeking to use the food pantry.

A mobile health unit sponsored by Bon Secours comes to the parish each Tuesday from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. and on the third Sunday of the month. Health care professionals seek to help uninsured or underinsured people and the outreach is available to all people, regardless of church affiliation.

Parishioners of St. Augustine’s serve a hot meal at Freedom House, a program at the Salvation Army, the fourth Tuesday of the month. The group usually includes teenagers, young adults and parents. “We feed the poor and working poor of Richmond,” said Angy Acosta, pastoral associate for youth and young adult ministry. “The guests are very gracious and say lots of thank you’s.”

St. Augustine’s sponsors both Boy Scout and Cub Scout programs which meet in the church buildings. The St. Augustine Youth Council sponsored a pancake breakfast Oct. 30 with proceeds benefitting Hurricane Refugee and Animal Relief Services and the parish’s outreach program. Youths who helped set up, serve and clean up at the event also earned credit hours as they prepare for the sacrament of Confirmation.

There are ESL (English as a Second Language) classes under the auspices of the diocesan Refugee and Immigration Services twice a week during the period of June through August. Now on Monday nights there is a new six-week follow-up program for the summer ESL students in which the students set the agenda for the following week “and the teachers take the ball and run with it,” said Mary Lou Marple, pastoral associate for human concerns. The two teachers will seek answers to the questions the students raised which might deal with proper protocol on the job site or how to use the library.

Communication with two different languages of St. Augustine parishioners and bringing the sacraments to all continues to serve as a challenge, but it is one that is being met. Parishioners — both Anglo and Hispanic — generally like their parish and turn out for most major events. “We go miles on smiles,” Mrs. Marple said.

DJ Belcher, a life-long member of the parish who was baptized there and is now a member of the parish pastoral council, was asked what he felt St. Augustine parish’s greatest challenges are. “I would say our challenges are, oddly enough, also our greatest strengths — integrating all the different cultures we have in our church from the Hispanic community,” he answered. He pointed out that the Hispanic community represents many nationalities, including Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Cuba, Mexico and Puerto Rico. “It’s a beautiful thing and with all those different cultures integrating our ministries, it’s really spiced things up and the amount of volunteers is nice too,” he said.