

Bilingual bishop

Bishop Jugis ministers to multitudes of cultures

by KAREN A. EVANS

staff writer

CHARLOTTE -- Since being named bishop of Charlotte, every Mass Bishop Peter J. Jugis has celebrated has been at a church where a considerable population of the parish speaks Spanish. He understands that addressing parishioners in their native language is part of his ministry, and is happy to be able to offer that gift to Spanish-speaking Catholics of the Diocese of Charlotte.

"At every parish celebration I have been present at so far, whether it's the anniversary Masses in Jefferson and Franklin or the confirmation Masses I've celebrated in Hendersonville and Winston-Salem, in my conversations with the pastor prior to the Mass, I always ask 'do you want me to give some comments in Spanish?'" the newly ordained bishop said.

"It is a significant part of my ministry," said Bishop Jugis. "Since I have that gift to offer, I want to make it available whenever it would be called upon."

There are an estimated 140,000 Hispanic Catholics living in the 46-county Diocese of Charlotte, and that number is growing every day. The significant increase in Hispanic households, who normally do not register at parishes, may double the number of Catholic households to more than 300,000 by 2020, according to the diocesan Office of Planning.

Like most teen-agers, Bishop Jugis began studying Spanish in the eighth grade while attending Quail Hollow Junior High School in Charlotte (now Quail Hollow Middle School) and continued with his studies at South Mecklenburg High School.

"I loved it so much, and I seemed to have a talent for it, so I took it ... through the 12th grade." Bishop Jugis' involvement in multicultural ministry goes back to his high school days in the late 1970s, when Father Joseph Waters offered a Spanish Mass at St. Vincent de Paul Church, the Jugis family's parish.

The future bishop helped at the Mass by playing the music (he plays six instruments). Myrna Hoffmann, his high school Spanish teacher and a St. Vincent de Paul parishioner, helped him become accustomed to the songs and to the Mass.

While attending the North American College, the U.S. seminary in Rome, the seminarian tried his hand at Italian. Following the completion of his studies in 1984, he returned to serve the Diocese of Charlotte and found it to have an exploding Spanish-speaking population.

"There were very few Spanish-speaking priests," said Bishop Jugis. "There was a great need, and I wasn't shy to offer my services."

As parochial vicar at St. Leo the Great Church in Winston-Salem, the young priest would also say Mass in nearby East Bend, alternating weekends with Msgr. Anthony Kovacic, the then-pastor at St. Leo the Great.

"Whatever the status of an immigrant, whether they are documented or undocumented, there is nothing illegal about coming to the Mass," Bishop Jugis said. "Many parishioners are documented or children who are citizens, born in the United States.

"They have the right to receive the sacraments. It would be unjust not to make that available to them," he said.

Concurrently, a steady increase in the number of individuals from Southeast Asia over the years has led the Diocese of Charlotte to establish a Korean and a Vietnamese mission in Charlotte in the 1990s. There is a combined 1,000 registered individuals at the missions, St. John Lee Korean Church and St. Joseph Vietnamese Church.

Bishop Jugis expressed a willingness to learn Korean and Vietnamese in a continued effort to shepherd the immigration populations of the diocese.

"What is already beginning to happen in the parishes should be continued," he said. "That is, bilingual Masses and parish celebrations, so that the Catholic Church stays one and united and does not fall along parallel tracks according to diverse ethnic origins."

"All of the pastors are making heroic efforts and doing a very good job of planning bilingual celebrations," the bishop commented. "This brings people together -- they begin worshipping together, they become familiar with each other. The parish grows and is enriched, rather than remaining two ethnic groups coincidentally occupying the same (worship space)."

"These are our brothers and sisters in the faith, and I want to make sure to welcome them," said Bishop Jugis.