Choosing to be Catholic in Utah

BY BETH GRIFFIN

“T

o be a Catholic in Utah, you have to choose to be a Catholic. It’s just not part of the culture,” says Msgr. Terrence Fitzgerald. He was born in Utah to second-generation Irish immigrant parents and was raised as part of a proud Catholic minority in the predominantly Mormon state.

Now Vicar General Emeritus for the Diocese of Salt Lake City, Msgr. Fitzgerald explains, “Because there is no Catholic culture in the community at large, like in Boston or Philadelphia, the family is the primary source of nourishment, support, and faith formation for youngsters.”

Most people in Utah are Mormons, the informal name for members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Mormons settled the Utah territory in the 1840s and have been a majority presence throughout the history of Utah.

Catholicism was introduced to the area in 1776 by Franciscan priests from New Mexico looking for a route to the Pacific Ocean. Later, European Catholic immigrants arrived to work in coal and silver mines and the first Catholic church was built, by and for them, in 1871. In the last century, federal workers and military personnel increased the state’s diversity. Hispanic immigrants are the most recent newcomers. Overall, Catholics represent about 10 percent of the population.

Catholic Home Missions (CHM) provides grant support to the Diocese of Salt Lake City, which serves 300,000 Catholics spread throughout the entire state. Funds are used for marriage preparation and enrichment, seminary education and vocations, ongoing formation of clergy, and mission support. Msgr. Fitzgerald says, “CHM funds programs that form and empower people to live their faith in the midst of being a minority.”

He continues, “You have to applaud the Mormons for living their faith. But it’s a different way of life and culture from us. We choose to be Catholic, not LDS.”

While most Catholics do not experience the hostility he felt as a child, Msgr. Fitzgerald says it is still challenging to live the faith as a minority. “It requires Catholics to be doubly strong and it is critical for the Church to help families strengthen their Catholic pride and identity,” he says.

“The greatest challenge for us is bringing people together in community and being the glue that holds them together. The home and the community of the
FROM THE CHAIRMAN

The Diocese of Salt Lake City serves over 300,000 Catholics spread throughout the entire state of Utah where the religious population is predominantly made up of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Distance and isolation are ongoing challenges for the diocese. Priests travel widely to celebrate “Sunday” Masses over a 3-day weekend stretch and there are three counties without a permanent Catholic presence. Small mission churches are the norm and CHM grants help pay gas and travel expenses for priests, deacons, and lay leaders to reach remote areas.

While some dioceses have dramatic stories that easily make headlines, home mission dioceses quietly struggle with the daily reality of having small, over-taxed staffs and insufficient funds to cover their pastoral ministries. What is inspiring about the Catholics of Salt Lake City is their strong faith, despite many obstacles. This is a testament to the hard work of those in the diocesan offices and far-flung parishes and can serve as a witness to those of us who live in more prosperous areas of the country.

This year, Catholic Home Missions provided a grant to the Diocese of Salt Lake City that provides program support and helps them travel all over the state to minister and share the Good News. We are able to make this grant because of the great generosity of Catholics like you who willingly give each year to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal. I offer you my humble thanks for your prayers and financial support. With your help, we will continue to support struggling dioceses like Salt Lake City and strengthen our Church here at home.

In gratitude,

Bishop Peter F. Christensen
Diocese of Superior

small mission churches will provide sustenance and help families meet the challenge of raising children in the faith,” Msgr. Fitzgerald says. Despite their modest numbers, he says, “My experience is people are so faithful and energetic. They have absorbed the spirit of evangelization, especially in mission areas. We have something in our faith to offer, so why shouldn’t we be out there with everyone else?”

One of the diocesan efforts to support and sustain the faith is an intergenerational Saturday afternoon event for couples, run by the Marriage and Family Life director. Participants hear a speaker, share an optional dinner and games of bingo, and interact with older couples who serve as role models. This complements the regular Marriage Encounter programs and a newer pilot “survival workshop” for divorced Catholics. It also helps younger couples get advice on helping Catholic children resist pressure to join the majority church to be with their friends.

The director of the office, Veola Burchett, is a dynamic one-woman operation typical of the dioceses Catholic Home Missions helps. Working part-time, she nonetheless manages Natural Family Planning training programs in English and Spanish, a vibrant Respect Life program, and a bereavement initiative that incorporates parish nurses and social workers.

Distance and isolation are ongoing challenges for the diocese. Utah’s population is concentrated in the north, but Catholics are spread throughout the 85,000 square-mile state. Priests travel widely to celebrate “Sunday” Masses over a three-day weekend stretch and there are still three counties with no permanent Catholic presence.

Small mission churches are the norm and in some areas, Masses have been offered in private homes, a firehouse, and even the library of a rural college. CHM grants help pay gas and travel expenses for priests, deacons, and laity to reach remote areas.

The help is critical to keeping parishioners connected to the greater Church, Msgr. Fitzgerald says, because, “Faith is something you don’t just inherit. You have to own it to continue to practice it.”

He adds, “Some families who want to go to church may have Mass in their community at 7 pm on a Thursday. But people do it joyfully. I am humbled so often and edified by what so many families sacrifice to live the faith.”

Hispanics are the fastest-growing element of the Catholic Church in the United States and now comprise more than 60 percent of the church community in the Diocese of Salt Lake City. Many work in the agriculture, mining, and hospitality industries.

“Hispanics bring a Catholic culture with them, a life of care for the extended family, a life of devotion, and a commitment to be Catholic.
We are being enriched culturally in our faith by the Hispanics,” Msgr. Fitzgerald says. “Our challenge is to keep them strong in the faith and give them the background and knowledge they need to help their children. As in many communities, there is a tension between parents and the youth who are drawn by the material aspects of our culture.”

Msrgr. Fitzgerald recalls that the first scheduled Spanish-language Mass was held in Salt Lake City in 1974. Today, he says, “Spanish Masses are overcrowded and people come out for any kind of church community event. Now we have to support them in the faith.”

CHM helps the diocesan Hispanic Ministry program, which trains lay leaders to share the faith in parishes, prisons, youth groups, and diocese-wide initiatives. The director, Maria Cruz Gray, incorporated Mass, a living Rosary, and a multicultural potluck dinner into Year of Faith events that drew more than 800 people.

The tremendous growth of Hispanic Catholics has also given new urgency to Salt Lake City’s vocations effort. The diocese requires all seminary candidates to be bilingual and Msgr. Fitzgerald says, “The Hispanic community needs to own responsibility for providing priests in the future.” There are eight men from Mexico and Utah studying for ordination at seminaries outside the diocese.

Vocations director Deacon Ricardo Arias relies on parish priests to identify men as potential candidates and he has also deployed 50 vocations promoters in parishes. These are lay people who maintain contact with the pastor and Deacon Arias, and invite young men to attend Mass, adoration, and small discernment gatherings.

CHM supports the vocations effort, which also includes a robust bilingual training program for deacons, conducted in monthly overnight sessions at diocesan headquarters in Salt Lake City.

“‘We’re very meat-and-potatoes in terms of our resources. That’s why Catholic Home Missions support is so helpful. It helps us empower people with the tools they need to be outstanding examples of faith in their communities,” Msgr. Fitzgerald says. ■
As a religious minority, Catholics in the Diocese of Salt Lake City face the danger of spiritual and physical isolation. Many people have infrequent access to Mass and the sacraments. However, local Catholics respond to these challenges with faith and joy. Read to see how your donations are making a difference in Utah.

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