

neighbors

SUMMER 2012

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FOR OVER 20 YEARS, *Tyler* CONTINUES TO DO *a Lot* WITH *a Little*

by Beth Griffin

In the past 20 years, the Diocese of Tyler has established 26 new parishes and missions in East Texas by setting up shop in available, if unconventional, locations in remote areas. These include a hay barn, an abandoned Rexall drugstore, the chapel of a funeral home, the front office of a propane dealership, a day care center, a farm bureau office, private homes, and a community center.

Jim Smith attended the first Masses offered by Bishop Emeritus Edmond Carmody in each of these places and has watched the parishes grow and flourish. Jim is the chief financial officer for Tyler, one of the dioceses that receives critical funding from the Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

“We’ve used a variety of avenues to bring Catholics together and allow the work of the Holy Spirit to grow the community,” Jim says. “The growth required dedication by the bishops and priests, but even greater dedication on the part of the people, who bring innumerable gifts.”

The Diocese of Tyler was established in 1987 from mostly rural areas in the Dioceses of Beaumont, Galveston-Houston, and Dallas-Fort Worth. At about the same time, the Dioceses of Victoria and Lubbock were also drawn in, in response to the Texas bishops’ abiding concern for the spiritual needs of a growing population geographically distant from existing bishops.

Jim describes how Bishop Carmody pledged to create a parish in every town that had a population of 2,000 people, Catholic or otherwise. “Through parishes in the vicinity, we announced an organizational meeting and scheduled a weekend Mass with the bishop. We asked people to invite any Catholics they knew. Turns out, they were there all the time but were not practicing, either

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Bishop Corrada ordaining Fr. Nolan Lowry in July 2010. Fr. Lowry is from Gilmer, TX, a town 30 miles from Tyler. He and his family converted to the Catholic faith when he was a teenager.

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Friends,

The Diocese of Tyler in Texas has a lot in common with other home mission dioceses. The diocese

itself is rather large and rural, and parishes are quite a distance away from each other. Catholics make up only a small percentage of the total population.

However, Tyler is unique. Unlike most home mission territories, it has a large number of priests and seminarians and is not facing the foreseeable future with a lack of priests to serve its people. While this is a great blessing, it is also a challenge. The cost for parishes to cover the expense of a resident priest is quite high, and a number of Tyler's parishes simply cannot afford a full-time priest. The cost to educate a large number of seminarians is a major expense for the diocese, but who can turn away the men who have been called by God to serve?

An additional challenge is providing adequate ministry to the growing number of Hispanics moving into the diocese. Although the diocese is responding well by bringing in Hispanic priests from Latin American countries, much help is needed at the diocesan level.

As you read more about Tyler in this issue of *Neighbors*, please remember that it is your support of the Catholic Home Missions that allows us to provide grants to Tyler and to 83 additional dioceses struggling here at home. Where would they be without you?

With gratitude,

Most Rev. Michael W. Warfel
Bishop of Great Falls-Billings
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee
on Catholic Home Missions

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because of distance or because they were marginalized," Jim says.

He says there were fifteen people at the first Mass at the day care center in Frankston. "We were sitting on little bitty chairs, surrounded by colorful pictures and the ABCs.

Now they have their own church, rectory, parish hall, and a congregation of 125 families."

Jim says the diocese helps new parishes purchase a piece of land. The parish raises funds for a multipurpose building; some have replaced the initial structure with a church. Catholic Home Missions grants have been used to establish parishes and support resident priests.

He says that St. Boniface Church in Chandler was built on property donated by two Hispanic sisters with deep family roots in the community. "They gave their entire inheritance, two acres, to the bishop. It was incredibly moving to be present there and see that type of generosity," Jim recalls.

Catholics make up only five percent of the population in the 33 Protestant-dominated counties of the Tyler diocese, but their numbers are growing and they are enthusiastic and involved. According to Jim, more than 6,000 church volunteers have undergone background checks associated with the safe environment program, and 2,500 certified catechists are currently working in the diocese.

Parish-based religious education is the secret to the successful development of the faith in Tyler, Jim says. "It's the only way to do it in a diocese of 25,000 square miles. I'm proud of what we've accomplished, and it's due to the love



Before: Mass at St. Celestine Church in Grand Saline, TX. The structure was an abandoned storefront.

that the people have for the Church," he says.

Catholics are spreading that love through example and invitation. Each year, the diocese's Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (RCIA) program brings 600 to 800 people into the Church. "It's directly related to the Catholic presence in East Texas and what people see. By and large, we're happy people," Jim says.

The diocese runs two well-attended Cursillo programs each month. A recent diocese-wide marriage preparation program attracted 39 English-speaking and 30 Spanish-speaking couples.

There were 40 active priests when the diocese was established. There are now 90 priests, with an average age of 51. Most are from outside the diocese, and Jim says there are 14 countries represented among the priests. There are 40 vowed religious women and more than 100 deacons.

Vocations are soaring. In the past three years, nine men have been ordained for the diocese, and 15 are currently in the seminary. Eight women recently took final vows as sisters. The diocese completed its third diaconate class.

Tyler has neither a seminary nor a permanently staffed vocations office. Jim attributes the vocations to an increased Catholic presence in East Texas and the joy that young men and women see in the priests and religious from other countries.

Candidates for the priesthood attend seminaries in Dallas, Houston, Illinois,

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Ohio, and Florida. Jim says the diocese tries to match each candidate with a program that best meets his needs. Bishop Alvaro Corrada, the former bishop and current apostolic administrator of Tyler, visited each seminarian several times a year, Jim says.

Hispanics are a fast-growing element of the Catholic population and now comprise more than half the households in the diocese. The majority of the priests are fluent in Spanish, and all newly ordained priests are required to be able to celebrate Mass in Spanish. Of the 68 parishes in the diocese, Jim says only three do not have Spanish-language liturgies.

Tyler is a place of both natural grace and economic challenge. Jim says, "There's a lot of beautiful windshield time driving through the piney woods of East Texas," but the median annual income of \$27,000 leaves many families in poverty. The recession hit the construction industry hard.

People in the Diocese of Tyler make their livelihood in the timber, poultry, nursery, and retirement community businesses. The fastest-growing sector of the local economy is the medical field. The largest single employer is one of the four hospitals in the city of Tyler. Three of the hospitals are Catholic.

The Diocese of Tyler is financially strapped. The central office laid off people in 2010 to manage a budget shortfall. Now, the remaining 21 employees wear multiple hats. Programs for Hispanic evangelization, youth, and campus ministry are either underfunded or still an ardent hope. Jim says the diocesan headquarters acts as a service bureau, providing training and assistance to the

parishes and "only as much governance as is necessary to maintain order. But people take it to heart and make it come alive."

"We don't have a lot of money, but we have a vibrant faith. People show up and they roll up their sleeves."

Jim Smith, Chief Financial Officer,
Diocese of Tyler

There are not a lot of places for the diocese to turn for help. Twenty-five percent of its parishes have annual offertory incomes of less than \$50,000. And 70% of the Annual Bishop's Appeal is earmarked for seminary education.

Catholic Home Missions provides annual grants to the diocese. Bishop Corrada says, "CHM funds let me say 'yes!' to bright, aspiring seminarians and help me support priests in low-income parishes. They literally ensure the physical presence of a Catholic priest in small towns throughout East Texas. No one does anything in a vacuum, and CHM makes a huge difference here in the Bible Belt."



- The Diocese of Tyler covers 25,000 square miles in 33 East Texas counties.
- There are 23,500 Catholic families, which comprise five percent of the population.
- Tyler, the largest city in the diocese, has a population of 100,000. Much of the diocese is rural.
- There are 68 parishes and missions in the diocese.
- Seventeen parishes (25%) have annual offertory incomes of less than \$50,000; seven parishes bring in less than \$25,000 a year.
- The Diocese of Tyler is 25 years old and has been led by three bishops.
- Ninety priests, 40 religious sisters, and more than 100 deacons serve the diocese.
- Three hermits (two priests and one sister) bless the diocese with their lives of solitary prayer.
- Spanish missionaries brought Catholicism to East Texas in the 1700s.
- Eight four-year colleges and a dozen community colleges are located in the Diocese of Tyler. Both the University of Texas and Texas A&M are represented.
- There are four Catholic grade schools and one Catholic high school. Another Catholic school is being established one grade at a time.



After: Mass at the new St. Celestine Church, which was dedicated in the winter of 2012.



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IN THIS ISSUE

The Diocese of Tyler, TX, has had a rich history, with few financial resources. Read about how dedicated bishops, priests, lay people, and supporters have helped make this Catholic Home Missions diocese one that continues to do so much despite challenges.

Your generosity to the Catholic Home Missions Appeal supports essential ministries in poor dioceses across the United States and its territories. **THANK YOU** for being part of our efforts to strengthen the Church at home.

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