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Building Bridges in Youngstown
BY BETH GRIFFIN

Mention of Youngstown conjures images of bustling steel mills and 20th-century Midwestern prosperity. But the sharper focus of contemporary reality reveals a proud chunk of northeastern Ohio whose people are still adapting to life without the steel industry that sustained the region for generations.

The Diocese of Youngstown, which receives funds from Catholic Home Missions, encompasses six counties tucked along Ohio’s borders with Lake Erie, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. Some of its 3,404 square miles also cover the northern end of Appalachia.

Youngstown, the largest city in the diocese, reflects the changes in the area after the steel industry relocated overseas in the 1970s. There were 166,000 people in Youngstown in 1960. By 2010, an aging population of 66,900 was still searching for a new economic engine. The average household income in the diocese is $25,000, which is less than half the national average. There are pockets of poverty throughout the diocese, which includes both urban and rural parishes.

Fr. Edward Brienz, director of Propagation of the Faith and the missions office for the diocese, says the Catholic Church has evolved with the people it serves. Parishes built in the 1900s to accommodate worshippers of European heritage are now welcoming Hispanics from Mexico and Guatemala. Catholics once filled 114 churches; now there are 88 parishes and missions.

“Folks who have traveled hundreds or thousands of miles to be here rely on the Church,” Fr. Brienz says. “We’re supposed to be the beacon, and we are.”

The ongoing challenge in a changing demographic and pastoral landscape is to “help people realize the Church in the future will be different than what we knew growing up,” he says. “We may not pass on all the buildings and customs. And you don’t expect people with the same background to be gathered around you every Sunday.”

The changes come with opportunities for evangelization, lay empowerment, and service to those in greater need. “We’re giving good attention to folks in the pews, but we need to start looking at the people across the street,” Fr. Brienz explains. “Just because they’re not registered, we don’t write them off. We can build community, transform lives, and build bridges.”

continued on page 2
Newcomers may be culturally Catholic but not “plugged in,” Fr. Brienz says. “Not all immigrants can get to church, so we conduct Masses and penance services in Mexican restaurants, the break rooms of meat packing plants, fields where migrant farmworkers are gathered, and even a converted chicken coop.”

“There is a lot of intervention behind the scenes,” he says. “We send people into the workplace to advocate for the workers. It’s to the manager’s advantage to have a stable work force whose human needs are met.” He describes the process as a subtle negotiation that entails compromise, native speaking skills, and recognition of what works. The diocese uses Catholic Home Missions funds to sustain the bilingual, multi-talented lay outreach workers.

It also employs creative methods to ensure that priests can minister effectively to Spanish-speaking parishioners. These include recruiting a priest from Peru, calling missionary priests out of retirement who served in Latin America, and helping local priests learn pastoral Spanish. Fr. Brienz says, “I’m thrilled that, across the board, our priests have worked diligently to get the training they need. One told me he was moved by the patience of his parishioners as he struggled to learn their language and ways.”

Fr. Brienz says technology is a common language for communicating with teens of different backgrounds. He recalls comparing cell phones with a young woman who interspersed descriptions of her phone’s features with informed opinions on the national elections. “As I spoke to her, I noticed her heavily calloused, muscular hands and was struck by the realization of the labor she was accustomed to at such a young age,” he says.

“The young people in the diocese are not as numerous as before, but every bit as exuberant as we remember,” Fr. Brienz says. Their faith thrives with active practice, particularly through direct service to others, performed locally, nationally, and internationally.

In a refreshing twist, Youngstown youth have spent spring breaks in post-Katrina New Orleans or helping people in Appalachia. They have also helped drill water wells in Tanzania. Fr. Brienz describes the logic of helping out the fellow mission diocese of Lexington, Kentucky. “A mission church is one that needs help from beyond until it can reach out on its own and help others. There’s no definable tipping point. The church is missionary,” he said, and emphasized that the Catholics in both dioceses benefit from the interaction.

Half the parishes of Youngstown have sent volunteers to help in
The Diocese of Youngstown was established in 1943. The area was previously part of the Diocese of Cleveland.

Catholics make up 17% of the population of the diocese. They worship at 88 parishes and missions.

There are 28 parochial elementary schools and six Catholic high schools. More than 13,000 students are enrolled in parish religious education programs.

The diocese is served by 98 active priests, 25 senior priests, and 69 permanent deacons. Eight men are studying for the priesthood in a nine-year program of academic and spiritual formation. Most seminarians attend Mount Saint Mary of the West in Cincinnati.

More than 200 women religious and 11 religious brothers live out the varied charisms of their congregations. Among them, the Humility of Mary Sisters and the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine care for immigrants in four hospitals and several clinics, the Ursuline Sisters serve in pastoral ministry, and the Christian Brothers teach in schools.


Looking ahead, Fr. Brienz says the diocesan population is not likely to grow substantially, and the Church will be challenged to build community across counties with a smaller concentration of Catholics. Nonetheless, the diocese remains committed to evangelizing and uplifting the People of God in its care.
Once part of a thriving region built on the steel mill industry, the Diocese of Youngstown now helps its parishioners, which include many migrant workers and their families, navigate a changing economic and social environment.

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