



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Eager People of Faith in El Paso



Bishop Mark Seitz speaking to Mexican citizens after celebrating a border Mass.

By Beth Griffin

The Diocese of El Paso in rugged west Texas nestles at the border of three states and two nations. The city of El Paso is home to more than 800,000 people, many of whom are Catholic, but the diocese stretches into nine rural, sparsely populated counties. Travel is difficult, and pastoral resources strain to meet the needs of parishioners.

Yet the region is deeply Catholic, and the faith is strong. Catholics make up 80% of the population. Many people are Hispanics who trace their lineage to Mexico and countries in Central America. The Church is a central part of life in El Paso, and sacramental rites and

feast days are often celebrated as neighborhood and community events.

Even so, west Texas is economically challenged. So the Diocese of El Paso relies on Catholic Home Missions funds to support its ministry. Two extraordinarily successful programs, Tepeyac Institute and the diocesan vocations ministry, train lay ministers and candidates for the priesthood.

Bishop Mark J. Seitz says, “The holy work that is being accomplished throughout the Diocese of El Paso by Tepeyac Institute and our vocations ministry has provided us with a solid foundation of future lay spiritual leaders and priests. It is through these ministries that we can truly strengthen our parishes and provide servants of Christ in the life and mission of the Church.”

LAY MINISTRY

Tepeyac Institute is a 30-year-old formation school for lay ministers. Students come from each of the 57 parishes in the diocese to prepare for parish ministry service.

Deacon Jesus Cardenas, director of Tepeyac Institute since 2015, says parish ministry students begin with a program of Christian formation that includes basic theology. This program “is the foundation of everything we do,” he says. More than 15,000 people have taken the Christian formation program since 1988.

Deacon Jesus says Tepeyac “trains the trainers” by helping them to start or strengthen ministries in their own parishes. Classes to train ministers of the Eucharist, hospitality, and the Word are most prevalent among the

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Neighbors

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A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
Happy New Year 2019! This year, we hear Jesus tell the disciples to “put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch” (Lk 5:4). Despite their doubts and uncertainties, the disciples set out in faith and found an immense catch.

As the new chairman of the Committee on National Collections and the former chairman of the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions, I have the pleasure to present this issue of *Neighbors*, in which you will learn how the Diocese of El Paso is following Christ’s command in its efforts to form tomorrow’s lay leaders and priests despite economic and geographical challenges. With the assistance of Home Missions funding, the diocese trains lay parish catechists, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, and others in theology, doctrine, Bible study, and spirituality at the 30-year-old Tepeyac Institute.

But casting out nets for this catch does not stop with lay parish ministers in El Paso. Priestly vocations are also on the rise in this rural diocese, where Catholics make up about 80% of the population. The number of seminarians has more than doubled in the past several years, in part through the efforts of vocations staff to visit parishes, celebrate monthly Masses for vocations, and maintain contact with potential seminarians and candidates for religious life through social media and other outlets. In this issue, you will hear from two seminarians and learn how your prayers and support help strengthen their vocations as they look forward to their future ministries.

Their stories of faith are also part of your own, as you make possible the abundant catch in El Paso and other home mission dioceses across the country. It has been a great pleasure for me to serve you as chairman of the Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions. In the next issue of *Neighbors*, you will hear from the new chairman of the Subcommittee, Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight, bishop of Jefferson City, Missouri. Until then, thank you for your continued spiritual and material support.

In the Heart of Christ,

Paul D. Etienne

Most Reverend Paul D. Etienne, DD, STL
Archbishop of Anchorage



Bishop Mark Seitz Celebrating Mass along the Rio Grande River that separates the US from Mexico.

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4,000 annual registrations. Other course offerings include the liturgical environment and men’s spirituality. Tepeyac’s most popular program each year is a summer institute that examines a Church doctrine or theme. In 2018, the summer institute studied the theme “Impact of the Second Vatican Council on the Laity.” In 2019 the institute will focus on the theme “Open Doors of the Church.” Tepeyac balances academic training with spirituality by adding one-day retreats to many of the programs.

Tepeyac faculty are priests, religious, and laypeople, most of whom hold advanced degrees in their field of instruction. In 2019, Tepeyac will team with the Mexican Pontifical University to offer a 96-hour class about Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Juan Diego, the man to whom she appeared. Deacon Jesus explains, “We struggle with urban legends and want to have people who are truly trained to spread information across their community” about this popular devotion.

Jose A. Maldonado, an usher and extraordinary minister of the Eucharist at his parish, has studied at Tepeyac for three years. “The parish is strengthened by Tepeyac, because more people are trained and can participate. People who were shy have become more involved in the church,” he says.

His wife, Erlinda, says, “It’s a good, good place to go to learn about your faith.” She and her husband recently completed a three-year Bible study at Tepeyac. Erlinda shared much of what she learned with fellow members of a parish group that crochets hats and scarves for those in need. Several of the other crochet artists now study at Tepeyac.

“I started at Tepeyac because I wanted to know more about the Church,” says Jose Montes de Oca. “I love it. The instructors are really knowledgeable and my faith has been strengthened.” Jose and his wife belong to a small worship community for couples within their parish. He has shared his insights with other members of their group, and two more couples have now enrolled in Tepeyac.

VOCATIONS

Vocations to the priesthood are on the rise in El Paso. “We have 27 seminarians, up from 12 just a few years ago,” says Fr. Mariano Lopez, director of seminarians and vocations. “It’s a

big blessing and it's God's grace, but it's also being responsive to people who are discerning a vocation."

Fr. Mariano and his small team use email and social media to keep in contact with young men who have expressed an interest in the priesthood. "We send small messages letting them know we are praying for them and sharing links to spiritual sites. We invite them to events and also invite them to ask questions and share their struggles with us," he says. The team also conducts a monthly Mass for vocations and publishes regular articles in the diocesan newspaper.

This young vocations director visited every parish in the diocese in 2015, his first year in the post. "We offered a blessing at Mass for men and women considering a vocation. You're planting seeds; there's no immediate result, but the word spreads," Fr. Mariano says. He and the admissions team communicate with potential seminarians, and a religious sister follows up with young women interested in consecrated life.

The path to priesthood begins with a propaedeutic year at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in El Paso. This time of preliminary inquiry and study is required by the Holy See and follows the direction of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "It's especially helpful for millennials to know they can come for a year to learn about the commitment and consider their future," Fr. Mariano says. "The formation team at St. Charles includes men and women, religious and lay

people, in a Vatican II model."

After the initial year, seminarians study at one of five seminaries outside the diocese, but spend one week together at the beginning of each academic year. Fr. Mariano says one-third of the current seminarians are from El Paso or neighboring communities in Mexico. Others hail from Colombia, Venezuela, Philippines, and Benin in west Africa.

Javier Valles, 21, is in his second year of seminary studies. He is an El Paso native whose parents came from Chihuahua, Mexico. "We're a very religious family. I don't remember a Sunday we didn't go to Mass," he says. The music his mother shared with her four sons was a constant in his life. Javier and his brothers all play instruments, and his Confirmation gift from his mother was a guitar. Sadly, it was her last gift to him before she died during his senior year of high school.

His youthful aspirations to be an astronaut, a firefighter, or a chef morphed into teenage interest in mechanical engineering and cinematography. Then in high school, Javier was drawn to the priesthood by an invitation in a homily from Bishop Seitz: to be open to the call of God. He began to attend daily Mass and became a catechist. His parents were supportive of his vocation. But before her death, his mother suggested he take time before applying to the seminary.

So Javier started college studying engineering and music. He stepped away from school to deal with his grief at the loss of his mother.

Then at the 2016 World Youth Day in Poland, he was inspired by Pope Francis' message to be brave, go forth, and try out the world.

Today, as a seminarian, he looks forward to a priestly ministry of helping people, especially teens, deal with contemporary challenges as they try to mature and grow

in their faith. "I want to be a spiritual guide for my people," he says.

Javier relies on his father for guidance. "He takes theology courses at Tepeyac and spends his time reading. He's a walking encyclopedia and a big nerd when it comes to the faith," he laughs.

Fellow seminarian Alfonso Coronado, 28, likewise credits his family. "All of my vocation comes from my family," he says. "They taught me how to pray. We prayed the Rosary every day at home and attended Mass and holy hour every week at church."

As a 17-year-old, Alfonso entered a seminary formation program in Chihuahua and later took a break to do missionary work and help in the religious formation program at his parish. The former Director of Vocations in El Paso invited him to enter the seminary in El Paso, via a two-year English as a second language course at the University of El Paso. Alfonso studied at St. Mary Seminary in Houston and is now serving a pastoral year at a parish in El Paso.

He credits a priest in his childhood parish for helping him discern a vocation. "I thought priests were angels and only special people could become priests," he recalls, "but he showed me their humanity and the importance of kindness and a smile."

"I fell in love with God from the first time I knew him and I asked what I had to do for Him."

Alfonso became an altar server, youth minister, and catechist. His parents and his sister support his vocation, although his mother had some early reservations. "She wanted a lot of grandchildren but changed her mind and realized she can't fight with God," he says.

Anticipating his ordination to the priesthood, Alfonso says, "I fell in love with God from the first time I knew him and I asked what I had to do for Him. I want to be the guy showing the happiness of God to the people, and I want them to be comfortable with me." 🌿



Installation celebration at Most Holy Trinity Church, April 2018



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