Ethnically diverse parish seeks to grow as ‘one family’

Building unity and educating children are emphases at St. Frances Cabrini Parish

LAKEWOOD

BY KEVIN BIRNBAUM

The explosion of the Hispanic community at St. Frances Cabrini Parish has largely shaped the parish in the last five years.

When the parish first offered a Spanish-language Mass in October of 2003, “there were about 20 people” who would show up, said Gabriela Grossman, the parish’s pastoral assistant for Hispanic ministry, as well as youth ministry and adult faith formation. Just seven years later, the 12:30 p.m. Sunday Mass in Spanish regularly draws “between 900 and 1,000,” she said.

The parish is also home to a large Filipino community, as well as many military families stationed at Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

Growing as one community

Since arriving at the parish as priest administrator in 2008, Father Peter Mactutis has put an emphasis on bringing together the different groups within the parish.

When he arrived, “the Hispanic community here was growing so fast that they were developing a lot of programs exclusively for the Hispanic community, and there was separation,” he said. “When I came, I made it very clear that we were going to try and grow as one community and as much as possible have programs together, so I’ve really emphasized that. And that’s been a growing pain.”

While the process hasn’t always been easy, the parish’s many multilingual celebrations help bring everyone together.

Namesake ‘would be very happy’

The Filipino community hosts the celebration of the Immaculate Conception on Dec. 8; the Hispanic community organizes the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe on Dec. 12; and during Lent, bilingual Stations of the Cross, Friday night fish fries and Wednesday soup suppers draw parishioners from all the cultural communities. All Masses during Holy Week are bilingual.

Such efforts are beginning to bear fruit, said Father Mactutis.

“I think people are really appreciating the fact that we’re one family, and that’s the terminology I often use: ‘one family,’” he said. “And sometimes we can’t always talk to each other, sometimes we need an interpreter, but it’s something that I think is really starting to blossom.”

Faith formation a focus

Father Mactutis has placed “heavy emphasis” on religious education since arriving at St. Frances Cabrini. Last year he combined the Spanish and English religious education programs into one bilingual program, the number of children receiving faith formation at the parish has doubled to more than 300 since his arrival. About 90 percent of the children are Hispanic, Grossman added.

“We changed the program such that the parents are intrinsically involved,” Father Mactutis said. While students attend their monthly classes, parents receive instruction from Father Mactutis and Deacon George Mounce — both of whom are bilingual — which the parents then pass on to their children at home.

Three youth groups have been merged to form one bilingual group composed of junior high and high school students. Fifty-three teens showed up for the first meeting this September.

The RCIA program is also vibrant, with 32 adults seeking sacraments this year, along with 25 unbaptized children ages 7 to 14.

“We have about 30 baptisms every month,” said Grossman, noting that about 90 percent are from Hispanic families. “So we’re pretty busy.”

Father Mactutis said the parish school has 240 students this year and is nearly at capacity.

Serving the community

The parish also works to reach out to the larger community. The parish periodically plays host to homeless families for two-week stints through the Phoenix Housing Network, run by Catholic Community Services of Western Washington.

A contingent of 30 to 40 parishioners volunteers each summer to paint the homes of low-income seniors and people with disabilities as part of the Paint Tacoma/Pierce Beautiful project.

“And we have an active St. Vincent de Paul [Society] that’s really stepped up to the plate ever since the recession really kicked in,” Father Mactutis said. “They’ve really done a good job in helping people around here. They’ve been stretched to their limits, but they’ve really, really done a good job.”

Named for a new saint

The parish was established Jan. 18, 1952 by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly and named after St. Frances Cabrini, the Italian-born founder of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. Mother Cabrini had spent time in Seattle and had become the first American citizen to be declared a saint by the Catholic Church just five and a half years earlier.

Father Andrew Squier, the parish’s founding pastor, celebrated the first Mass on Jan. 22, 1952 in the gym of the Visitation Villa High School for Girls, where Masses continued to be celebrated until Archbishop Connolly blessed the new church and school buildings on Dec. 13, 1953. Father Squier remained the pastor at St. Frances Cabrini for 25 years.

The parish school opened in the fall of 1953 with 253 students and was staffed by five Holy Names sisters and two lay teachers. Enrollment peaked at 720 in the 1960s. The school’s last Holy Names teacher, Sister Therese Martin, retired in 2004.

With the establishment of St. John Bosco Parish in 1968, St. Frances Cabrini lost about 300 of its 1,000 families.

During the 1990s the parish planned and raised money to build a new worship space, which was dedicated by Archbishop Alex J. Brunett on Dec. 5, 1999.

The parish’s original church building was blessed on Dec. 13, 1953 by Archbishop Thomas A. Connolly.

The interior of the parish’s current worship space features a prominent baptismal font.

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