



A life for the Church

By José Astúa | Photography by Rob Schumacher

Over the years, the Hispanic community in the Diocese of Grand Rapids has grown significantly. During this time, it has been a blessing to have many people who have collaborated with this growth. The Catholic community, in particular, has had many priests who have nurtured not only the spiritual but also the personal growth of our community. Fr. Stephen Dudek is a man of faith who has given his life to the service of the community in the

Diocese of Grand Rapids. He has a special affection for the Latino community to which he has dedicated a large part of his ministerial life. He tells us that like many of us, his grandparents immigrated to the United States from Poland and Lithuania, so that as a child he had already lived a multicultural experience where much importance was given to the customs of their countries of origin, as well as to their faith. Here he learned to value what immigrants can offer both to society and to the church.

The first experiences Fr. Stephen recalls with the Hispanic community were during the summer when he was about 14 years old, working as a blueberry picker. He says, "What impressed me most at that time was hearing them speak another language, their ability to work and the unity of their families.

Vocation

His vocation to the priesthood arose while studying at West Catholic High School, where he met Father Bill Walters who planted this seed in him. During his priestly formation he had the opportunity to study at St. Thomas Seminary in Denver,

Colorado where he took advantage of his free time to teach English as a second language to people from different parts of the world. There, he once again experienced a close encounter with the Hispanic culture which made him reflect on the needs of Hispanics in his own diocese. When he returned to Grand Rapids while still a seminarian, he began visiting migrants while collaborating with Father Ted Kozlowski in his ministry. "Some of the families I met working in the migrant camps in those days are now pillars of their parishes here in Grand Rapids, I know their children and grandchildren and have seen them get married," he says.

Fr. Stephen completed his theology studies at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico and was ordained in 1984. His first parish was Holy Spirit Parish where he spent one year as vicar and from then on he was always in parishes with Hispanic ministry beginning at St. Francis de Sales in Holland and ending at Holy Name of Jesus Parish where he retired this year after 18 years of service.

Advice to the Community

As our community grows in West Michigan we must be open to sharing our gifts and charisms with others. Father Dudek reminds us, "It doesn't matter if we are poor or rich, no matter our social or educational status, we will always have a lot to give. We have to recognize that we are part of the Body of Christ, but sometimes as Hispanics we do not feel worthy enough to offer something to our community, or we have not realized how important our role is in this Body, or maybe someone has made us feel that we are not part of it. In these cases, Fr. Dudek points us to the quote from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians: "But there are many members, and there is only one body. The eye cannot say to the hand: I have no need of you. Nor can the head say to the feet, 'I have no need of you'". (I Cor 12:20-21;) Fr. Dudek tells us: "The Latino community is very important in our diocese and they can bring a lot to our local church, such as the sense of solidarity, resilience, sacrificing everything so that their children can have a better life and how they continue to transmit faith in God through devotion to the Virgin Mary. It is important that everyone accepts that we have something to offer to the church which will enrich our communities. Everyone has something that can be of great value to our parish no matter how humble it may seem - some may have the gift of cooking, teaching, or music etc.

In speaking with Fr. Stephen Dudek, one realizes that despite the challenges that life has presented to him, he has lived a full life and his life example becomes an invitation for us to seek and live our lives to the fullest as he did. That is why he offers us some recommendations to achieve this goal: "Value your culture, your history, your traditions, your popular spirituality because there is a wealth in all of that for the church and for society. These are very important values for the future and the well being of the church and society and at the same time we must take and learn the positive aspects of the society of the United States and we must look for a new crossbreeding of cultures, but always starting from a position where one values one's own and also be open to the new. It is important to look for this new synthesis".

Message to the Youth

Finally, Fr. Stephen leaves a message for the young people in whom he has placed his hope: "Hispanic youth, especially those who are bilingual, have a tremendous gift because they are bridge people, they are people who can serve as bridges in a divided society and a society where sometimes there is no dialogue and communication, where people do not understand each other. They have the blessing of being able to swim in two waters or two cultures. This is a special gift that they should share and above all he recommends them not to forget their Catholic faith because it is part of their heritage. We cannot change our faith, but we should share it with joy and devotion as their fathers and mothers did."