

St. Camillus opens its doors to all

Silver Spring church a sanctuary for the area's newest residents

by Olivia Bevacqua | Special to Silver Spring Gazette, August 2007



When Sandra Perez came to America in 1986, the first place that felt like home was a building full of strangers: St. Camillus Catholic Church.

It sometimes took Perez two hours to commute to St. Camillus by bus and Metro from her Washington, D.C., home, but the welcoming atmosphere, she said, was well worth it.

Today, she describes her fellow parishioners as a **A g** second family and has become the parish secretary after working in a variety of volunteer positions for the Silver Spring church, located just off New Hampshire Avenue near the Beltway in the midst of an area heavily populated by immigrants.

“I didn’t feel anywhere else the way I felt here,” said Perez, remembering her first day at St. Camillus. “It’s easier to blend in because they welcome people from all over.”

Perez is one of thousands of first-generation immigrants who have found a home in St.

Camillus, a parish that has made many efforts to facilitate their transition to a new country. As immigration increasingly becomes a sensitive issue in Montgomery County and the rest of America, St. Camillus’ parish is working to serve the needs of a largely immigrant community without getting embroiled in the political controversy.

Growing parish

Saris, jeans, business suits and traditional African dress were visible among the crowded pews of St. Camillus on a recent Sunday. The congregation is a collection of world cultures and ethnicities. Many of the 4,500 parishioners who attend Mass on Sunday are native Spanish speakers, and there are also strong bases of French-speaking Africans and Bengalis from the India subcontinent.

In the past seven years, the number of registered French-African families has grown from 50 to about 400, and the registered Bengali families

have similarly grown from a mere handful to about 300, according to Perez.

At St. Camillus, there are Masses offered in Spanish and French — and occasionally Bengali — as well as a Mass featuring gospel music and a “multicultural Mass” with music from all over the world.

“Some people said the Spanish Masses might not attract many people when we came up with the idea,” remembered Perez. “We started giving the Masses in a small chapel that fit about 60 people, and all of a sudden so many people were coming that we had to move the Mass.”

Now, she says, there are 500 parishioners at the Spanish Mass on Saturdays — and during Spanish Mass on Sundays, the church is almost always filled to its capacity of 1,200.

People are able to connect to the parish not only because of its appeal to diversity, but because of the loving atmosphere in which parishioners minister to one another, said Mary Mudd, a parishioner for over 26 years.

“When I walked into St. Camillus, I said, ‘This is where I want to live,’” said Mudd, who subsequently bought a house in the area. “I wanted my kids to grow up in a place where I knew they’d be loved.”

Praise in nine languages

Every Sunday, the church pulses with rhythms from all over the world. It echoes with melodies that span oceans, lyrics filling the air in multiple languages. The music comes from one of St.

Camillus’ most spectacular tributes to societal diversity: the Multicultural Choir.

“The congregation here is kind of like a mini-United Nations,” said choir director Tracy McDonnell. “And the music needs to reflect that.”

When McDonnell came to St. Camillus in 1991, there were separate choirs — a Spanish choir and a traditional choir — that only performed together on major holy days.

“I said, ‘If we only integrate ourselves on the holy days, we’ll all be dead before we have integration,’” McDonnell said. “I wanted to bring it all into one choir.”

The Multicultural Choir was the result. Every Sunday, the choir performs songs in English, Swahili, Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, French, Bengali and Nigerian languages.

“Basically, our idea is, it’s all good, from Gregorian to gospel,” McDonnell said. “And with such a diverse community, it’s appropriate to do all of it.”

One nation under God

St. Camillus has an extensive social justice ministry that addresses the needs of recent immigrants through services that cater to education and health issues. One example is its ministry in Langley Park, a neighborhood featuring many first-generation Guatemalans and Salvadorans. The ministry provides after-school tutoring for children and English classes for adults.

Organizers are attempting to coordinate a sewing co-op and a bilingual Alcoholics Anonymous program; they are also recruiting Spanish-speaking consultants to help Langley Park residents open their own bank accounts.

Many of the church's ministries are designed to accommodate immigrant cultures. When stocking an emergency food supply for needy families, parishioners are encouraged to donate culturally appropriate foods, according to Karen Simon, who helps coordinated the church's ministries.

“Other churches might have cranberry sauce and pumpkins in their pantries — foods that many immigrants wouldn't use in their cooking,” Simon said. “We ask for donations of rice, beans and masa harina, a flour used for making tortillas and pupusas.”

The church also offers nutrition classes in Spanish and ESL classes twice a week; however, many other services are provided in an unofficial capacity.

Every day, people come to the church for help with “all kinds of life problems,” Perez said. “Sometimes they need financial help, or they're looking for a job, or they have no place to stay, or they want a doctor, or they have immigration issues — absolutely anything. They knock on our door hoping to find some kind of help, and we always try to provide it, even if it's just a phone number.”

Bilingual church employees help make phone calls and fill out forms for immigrants who cannot

speak English, according to Perez. Many staff members were hired in part for their ability to speak more than one language. They often refer people in need to charities, clinics, homeless shelters and organizations that provide legal counsel.

Other aspects of the ministry emphasize communication between diverse groups in the attempt to foster new perspectives on old issues. This is an annual activity of JustFAITH, an education program on the church's social justice teachings. Through the program, people have listened to the stories of undocumented immigrants.

“It's one thing to read about immigration but it's very different to sit in a room and listen to an undocumented immigrant tell their story,” Simon said. People who have spoken with the immigrants, she said, “understand their stories a lot better and have more respect for them.”

As the parish continues ministering to local immigrants in the midst of an intensifying debate on immigration policy, the church's leaders maintain that their focus is helping people in need. “It's a very complicated issue but from the pastoral point of view, we're children of the same God,” said Father Lawrence Hayes, the church's pastor. “I don't see labels; I see human beings.”