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Latino bishop keeps the faith

Flores will lead Metro Catholics

Gregg Krupa / The Detroit News

DETROIT

-- Seldom does a bishop begin his service with the fondest aspirations of so many Catholics so heavily vested in him. But, for the faithful in Metro Detroit, much is hoped from the Rev. Daniel Flores.

When Flores, 45, of Corpus Christi, Texas, is ordained an auxiliary bishop of the Archdiocese of Detroit at 2 p.m. today at Blessed Sacrament Cathedral, he will become both the youngest Catholic bishop in the United States and the first of Latino descent in the Archdiocese of Detroit.

To strengthen and grow the flock, the church is seeking to increase the participation of Latinos and youths. Flores, who is of Mexican descent, is positioned, according to local Catholics and church leaders, to be integral to both tasks.

"The response to this guy has been like the second coming," said Victor Venegas, who is active in many roles at Most Holy Trinity Church in Corktown. "Everyone you talk to is so excited that we finally have someone of our own ethnicity."

Venegas and other Catholics of Hispanic descent recall that the Rev. Clement Kern, the late pastor of Most Holy Trinity and a spiritual beacon to many in Metro Detroit's Latino community, called for the ordination of a Latino bishop before his death in 1983. They also say that the closing of Holy Redeemer High School and others in southwest Detroit and the reorganization of parishes because of a shortage of priests throughout the archdiocese leaves their church short of resources.

"I think he will help with the vocational aspect," said the Rev. Jaime Hinojos of St. Gabriel in Detroit. "Young men will get more encouragement, having a young bishop, to pursue the priesthood."

For Flores, whose manner and resume provide evidence of an educated, spiritual man, the weight of the hopes is not entirely daunting.

"The hopes of the church, whether it is the Hispanic community or various others, are in the work of the grace of Christ," he said. "And a bishop, a priest, everybody is kind of at the service of that. I think the first thing you have to do is be who you are because grace kind of works through."

While Latino Catholics predominate in southwest Detroit, they are a substantial presence in other areas of the sprawling archdiocese, including Ecorse, Imlay City, Monroe, Pontiac, Port Huron, Ray Township and Romeo. Among the factors preventing a full flowering of the faith is the influence of Protestant Pentecostal churches. Latinos have flocked to them, in North and South America, for a generation and more, seeking a more fulfilling faith, readily accessible services and more direct contact with preachers they believe are more like them, experts say.

"Pentecostalism is a much more individualistic and expressive movement away from the large, ritualistic, anonymous setting where you can have thousands of people worshipping," said Arlene Sanchez-Walsh, author of "Latino Pentecostal Identity: Evangelical Faith, Self and Society" and an associate professor at Asuza Pacific University. "Particularly for Latinos, there are so few priests who can spend personal time with families, and the stock is not being replenished enough to meet the growing demands of an immigrant population."

For Juan Jose Martinez, the director of the Cesar Chavez Academy Schools in Detroit, switching to the Word of Faith International Christian Center in 1998 was a matter of "hearing the word."

He still loves the nuns who taught him in Catholic schools. "But, from a personal relationship with Christ, understanding the word, and what is expected of me, and all of the stories in the Bible, I'm getting something now I never thought I was getting from my entire childhood and adulthood," he said.

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About the Rev. Flores

Who: The Rev. Daniel Flores

What: Auxiliary bishop-elect, Archdiocese of Detroit

Age: 45

Education:

University of Texas, Austin, two years of undergraduate work; Holy Trinity Seminary at the University of Dallas, bachelor of arts in philosophy, 1983; master of Divinity, 1987; doctorate in theology, Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas, Rome

Career: Ordained in January 1988

Previous position: Parochial Vicar at Corpus Christi Cathedral, Corpus Christi, Texas

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