

Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel photos

Renovation and reconciliation are at the heart of the Rev. Hector Cruz's ministry at Our Lady Star of the Sea Church in Santa Cruz.

Crossing the Bridge

Churches 2000 1403
 Mexican priest translates the unifying message of Mary at Our Lady Star of the Sea

By **NANCY REDWINE**
Sentinel staff writer

Father Hector Cruz wants to be a bridge.

As priest at Our Lady Star of the Sea Church in Santa Cruz, his hope is to create a community from two cultures: Latino and Anglo.

There are other Catholic churches in Santa Cruz that hold Mass in Spanish, but Our Lady Star of the Sea is now the only one with a Mexican priest.

In the past two years, since Cruz took over the role of pastor from the Rev. Rene Iturbe, the Spanish-speaking congregation has grown.

"People come to the United States looking for new opportunity," Cruz said.

"But they feel disconnected from the Central American church's way of worshipping. There is a lot of difference in how Catholicism is practiced here."

Catholics in Central America, according to Cruz, are more devoted to the saints. There is more emotion in their worship.

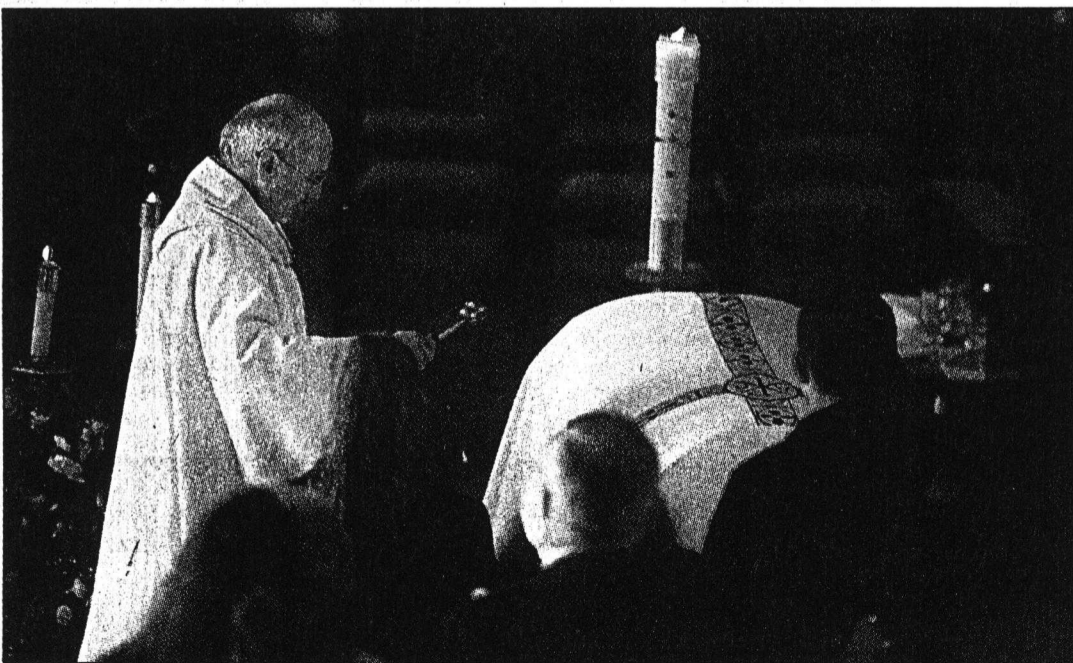
"The particular need here is to worship in their own language," he said.

"This way, they feel more of a connection to God, their history, their culture and background."

Connection to God is intimately tied to the connection to culture.

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THE REV.
 HECTOR CRUZ



Cruz blesses the casket during a Salvadorian funeral at Our Lady Star of the Sea.

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"One of the main needs of the Spanish-speaking congregation is to feel welcome and not rejected by the mainstream," Cruz explained.

To meet these needs, the church offers a bilingual liturgy, as well as English- and Spanish-language masses. Though he is not the first priest at Our Lady Star of the Sea to give mass in Spanish — the Rev. Ken Lavarone created the church's first bilingual liturgy in 1984 — Cruz is the first native Spanish speaker.

Due to his increasing popularity, he has added a second Spanish-language Mass on Sundays.

"Father Cruz has worked harder than previous priests to bring the congregations together in social activities," said Ann Kreyche, a member of the parish since 1975.

"It's not easy to sit with someone at a potluck or festival who speaks Spanish with my minimal Spanish. But he's helped that by offering classes in basic Spanish. Now we can at least say 'Hello, how are you.'"

In her spirit

By nine years old, Cruz knew he wanted to be a priest. Raised by devout parents in Mexico City — the oldest of nine — he attended Catholic school, which focused on serving the poor in the surrounding countryside.

As a student he traveled through the states of Mexico, San Luis Potosi, Oaxaca and Veracruz, teaching catechism and helping to set up sewage and drinking water systems.

At 12, he came to Victoria, Texas, for four months in a language exchange. After that, his parents enrolled him in an after-school program to continue his language training.

"When I became a priest, my dream was to go someplace else," Cruz said. "Somewhere I could use another language."

A priest in the Society of Mary, a Roman Catholic order, Cruz's life is dedicated to helping the poor.

"Our founder told us to look at the world as Mary looked at it," Cruz said. "To feel as Mary, to act in her spirit in everything."

Taking the example of the Virgin Mary in her simplicity, mercy, humility and willingness to do what she had to do, Marist priests travel from place to place serving ministries and missions which are difficult and demand special language skills.

"All of our parishes are specialized in some way," he said. "The focus of this parish is to integrate a multicultural or bicultural Hispanic population and an Anglo population."

The Rev. Rene Iturbe, the Marist priest who served before him, was called to work in an inner city parish in San Francisco.

The Spanish-speaking congregation at Our Lady Star of the Sea are mostly immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador.

"The Salvadoran community has many sad stories," Cruz said.

"Even if a Mexican is in Chicago or Alaska, they can feel that their homeland is right across the river. But Salvadorans know they are far from home."

Walking against violence

Cruz's first calling as a priest was to a parish in Mexico City, near the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where he served a very poor congregation.

When he finished his contract there, he was offered a position in the United States.

"It was very appealing to me," Cruz said. "I get to serve my country men and women in this country, and use my English language skills at the same time."

For two years, he went door to door ministering to the Spanish-speaking immigrant community in San Jose.

After that, he was in El Paso for six years, serving a border ministry. It was during that time, that Rene requested that Cruz join him in Santa Cruz, where he assisted for two years before becoming head priest.

As a citizen of México, Cruz can't vote in the United States, but that hasn't stopped him from being a strong voice for social change.

Last year at Lent, he and members of Holy Cross walked the Stations of the Cross against violence in Beach Flats.

He has been a spokesperson for economic independence for coffee growers, advocating free-trade coffee that is cooperatively farmed and sold. He urges political consciousness in his mass.

"Recently, in an English-speaking mass, I referred to scripture about dealing with civil authority," he said. "I told the congregation that for 70 years in Mexico there was only one party. Elections were not really elections, and only recently, with Fox, have things begun to change."

"Here you have this kind of freedom, this kind of democracy, and very few people go out to vote. We would be happy to have a tiny bit of what you are offered here, and you don't even use it."

Cruz stresses renovation — spiritual and physical — as a main theme in his ministry. For 20 years, the congregation talked about making renovations to their Spanish-style building, which was built in the '60s.

"When you have a new pastor every three or four years, it's hard," said Kreyche. "But we're finally making it happen."

Changes include new paint, building a raised platform and a handicap-accessible bathroom, and opening up the foyer.

"There is a connection between the material renovation and the spiritual renovation of the church," Cruz said.

The physical renovation should be complete in December. While spiritual renovation is ongoing, Cruz, assistant priest Percy Kimball of New Zealand, and the parish council are organizing an assembly for early summer, for discussions about the direction of the church.

"People will have an opportunity to speak out and hear each other," Cruz said.

"What are their fears and expectations? What do we want to do with the parish? How do we see the next five years?"

How does he see the next five years of his own life?

"These are the most productive years of my life," Cruz said, who recently turned 50. "On the one hand, I have the best accumulated experience, and on the other, I still have the energy to make the best of what I can do."

"I want to be a bridge between people and God," he said. "To do my best to speak to God about the needs of the people. And to do my best to speak to my people about the needs of God."

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