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Father Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, and Father Enrique Herrera, recipient of the papal society's 2017-2018 Lumen Christi Award, pose inside Holy Trinity Church in Greenfield, Calif. Father Herrera was honored for his "loving service as pastor" and his "great personal and passionate commitment to nurture the light of Christ among Greenfield's most vulnerable citizens." (CNS/Ron Wu, Catholic Extension)

by Catholic News Service

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Fr. Enrique Herrera, pastor of a thriving farmworker parish in California's Salinas Valley, received Catholic Extension's 2017-2018 Lumen Christi Award Dec. 10.

Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, presented his organization's highest honor to Herrera during an outdoor Mass at Holy Trinity Parish in Greenfield. The Mass followed the parish's annual Our Lady of Guadalupe procession through the town.

Lumen Christi is Latin for "Light of Christ." This year marks the 40th anniversary of the award, which honors an individual or group who demonstrates how the power of faith can transform lives and communities.

Recipients are recognized not just for the light and hope they bring to forgotten corners of the country but for inspiring others to be "Lights of Christ" as well.

Catholic Extension is a Chicago-based papal society that works to build up vibrant Catholic faith communities in the poorest regions of the United States. It raises and distributes funds to support the work of the Catholic Church in America's 90 mission dioceses, many of which are rural, cover a large geographic area, and have limited personnel and pastoral resources.

"Like pilgrims of old, we have traveled from the East, from Chicago, to Greenfield to proclaim to you that we have seen Christ's light shining brightly among all of you in your love, your care, and your compassion for one another in this wonderful community," Wall said in presenting the award.

He told the priest Catholic Extension was honoring him for "for your loving service as pastor and for your great personal and passionate commitment to nurture the light of Christ among Greenfield's most vulnerable citizens."

"We are especially touched by your devotion to the poor, to youth, to families, to students, to Dreamers, to workers, to migrants and to immigrants," Wall said. "In your ministry, you ignite the spark of faith that truly transforms hearts and communities and our very society."

The award, a crystal cross, was presented to the priest, along with a $25,000 check for him and another $25,000 to the Diocese of Monterey. Bishop Richard Garcia of Monterey, who also participated in the celebration, passed the diocesan check on to Herrera as well.

Herrera said he would use the money to expand the parish's evangelization and Bible study programs to further align people's lives with the values of the gospel and thereby further transform their community.

The Mass included several call-and-response "viva" chants celebrating Our Lady of Guadalupe, St. Juan Diego, St. Junipero Serra, Pope Francis, Christ the King and "our Catholic faith."

Catholic Extension's history with the Greenfield parish reaches back to 1934, when Catholic Extension helped with the construction of the original Holy Trinity Church.

A city of 17,000, Greenfield is home to many migrant families who come to harvest lettuce, broccoli, grapes and strawberries in the Salinas Valley, which has been dubbed "America's salad bowl." Nearly half the city's population is under age 25, and the annual per capita income is about $14,000.

In his homily, Herrera emphasized Our Lady of Guadalupe's comforting presence, her tenderness, her accompaniment, her loving embrace and her mediation of God's love, especially in the many life challenges the community experiences.

Herrera especially lifted up those suffering from the "slavery of drug addiction," domestic and other violence, and family separation resulting from deportations.

In an interview after Mass, Garcia said: "It's been a great gift to have Father Enrique as the pastor in this parish, because he's opened these doors for the people and extended a warm welcome. He works very well with the youth here, and he really is one of those shining lights of Christ. It's so wonderful to have this recognition of the Lumen Christi Award for him."

Herrera said, "I am so happy for the community because this is a great opportunity for them to reflect on their experience of the light of Christ in their own lives and in their families."

The day's procession, Herrera said, was "a march that publicly expresses our faith."

"We always look forward to this annual event because we get the opportunity to walk down the Camino Real and to manifest our Catholic faith and then to celebrate in a big, big party Our Lady of Guadalupe," he said. "Ninety percent of this community have their roots in Mexico."

He added that the procession also was an opportunity "to ask and to pray to God for a good rainy season. Here in this agricultural area, we need the water and a good rainy season."

He added, "This morning showed that there is a lot of hope and a lot of opportunity here, especially with our youth here in our community. I am so happy and thankful for Catholic Extension's presence here today because you are helping us to continue our mission here in town, and your recognition is a good sign, an encouragement for us to continue on this path."

The colorful procession through Greenfield honored both Our Lady of Guadalupe and Our Lady of Juquila, the patroness for people from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The feast day of Our Lady of Juquila is Dec. 8, and the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is Dec. 12.

Holy Trinity has welcomed and integrated the large Oaxacan migrant population, who speak Triqui and other indigenous languages. They are the most recent large group of immigrants to come to work in the fertile fields of the Salinas Valley, and in recent years there has been some tension in the valley between them and some of the longer-established Mexican immigrant groups.

Dressed in bright red traditional garb, an Oaxacan parish group marched behind a banner that read "Triqui Community, Oaxaca" with a statue of Our Lady of Juquila that was dressed in the same traditional indigenous dress.

Thousands participated in the procession, which included 25 parish and community groups -- ranging from first Communion and confirmation classes to a large Aztec Dance Group made up of several hundred teens and children and some two dozen caballeros on horseback.

The procession followed the route of the historic Camino Real, the same road on which Serra had traveled. In fact, Serra participated in the procession in the form of a relic of the saint that the Diocese of Monterey brought to the celebration.

When he arrived at Holy Trinity in 2008, Herrera saw that the residents of Greenfield were struggling, immersed in poverty and with few opportunities for a brighter future.

He said, "My bishop told me, 'Take care of your people. They suffer a lot. They have come from another country. Many are here without documents. They don't have a decent place to live. On the fields, they are not treated well, and they are not paid enough.'"

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Herrera believed that the Catholic Church could make life better. He understood that his parish had to go beyond just the spiritual needs of the residents and also address the economic and social challenges of their daily lives. And he learned that the best way to reach his parishioners and to motivate them, particularly the young ones, is to respect them.

"The people know that I am here to serve them," Herrera added, "I am the son of a migrant farmworker myself. I am part of the family. We are brothers and sisters. And if I have a voice as a priest, I would like to be a voice for the voiceless."