News

Samuel Jiménez proclaims the first reading in Spanish during the installation Mass of Archbish

Samuel Jiménez proclaims the first reading in Spanish during the installation Mass of Archbishop Ronald Hicks as the new archbishop of New York at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City Feb. 6. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by Rhina Guidos

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Samuel Jiménez never expected he would one day be part of one of the most watched Masses in the country this year. But there he was Feb. 6, walking toward the pulpit at the exalted Cathedral of St. Patrick in New York.

The cathedral, along New York's tony Fifth Avenue, is a long way from the dusty patch of land where he first met Ronald Hicks in El Salvador in 1999. It was Hicks who asked him to do the first reading at the installation Mass where he was pronounced the 11th archbishop of New York.

Jiménez, who was saved from a trash heap as an infant in El Salvador, is part of a family Hicks still cares for in Latin America called Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, where he was director for Central America from 2005-2010. Since the 1950s, the nonprofit, founded by a U.S. priest in Mexico, has cared for orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable children in Latin American countries.



Samuel Jiménez attends a reception Feb. 6 for New York Archbishop Ronald Hicks at Hilton Midtown in Manhattan. (NCR photo/Rhina Guidos)

"I was one of many children there. I never imagined being able to come here and to be an ambassador, so to speak, of El Salvador, to be in a celebration of this kind, but he [Hicks] said: 'I need you to do this.' And that's why I'm here. It's a privilege to be an ambassador of El Salvador but also of Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos and the countries where it exists," a soft-spoken Jiménez told the National Catholic Reporter Feb. 6 in New York.

Hicks seemed to smile directly at Jiménez, as he saw him walking toward the altar, headed to the pulpit to read in Spanish from the Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians. The story of his life, as told in the book Do Not Discard, is one where suffering continued after the man who rescued the infant Jiménez from the trash died. But Jiménez found a stable and happy way forward with Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, as he was later able to attend college in the U.S. and settled in Chicago.

Just as the archbishop has watched him over the years flourish from a boy whose life began in abandonment and violence to a life as a math teacher, Jiménez said he, too, has watched Hicks' journey as a young priest caring for vulnerable children like himself in a tiny town to one who now has accepted a great responsibility in "a much bigger city."

Despite the change of scenery, Jiménez said that Hicks, whom he calls Padre Ron, has "always been the same" and it's plain to see who he is.

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It certainly seemed that way at the installation Mass. During his homily, Hicks thanked Cardinal Christophe Pierre, the U.S. papal nuncio, "for giving me the advice to just be myself," something he seems to have taken to heart as he included lyrics referencing a Bad Bunny song. It apparently made his installation homily go viral across the Spanish-speaking world.

"Here in Spain, everybody is talking about it … I've never seen anything like it," said José Beltrán, editor of Vida Nueva Digital, a prominent publication that covers the Spanish-speaking Catholic world.

Beltrán said even his non-Catholic friends are talking about it, "saying he should become the pope now."

And that style is why Hicks was so loved in El Salvador and why they pleaded with him to stay, Jiménez said.

"He meant a lot to us because of his charisma, the way he talks, the way he treats people individually and in a group. His personality is always the same."

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