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Recognizing lay gifts bears fruit in Las Cruces, bishop says

by Tom Roberts



Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M.(CNS/Bob Roller)

LAS CRUCES, N.M.

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez, 72, a member of the Congregation of St. Basil, was appointed founding bishop of the Las Cruces diocese in 1982. He is widely recognized as a skilled pastoral leader who has great rapport with the people of his diocese, which remains among the poorest in the country. It depends a great deal on financial help from outside the diocese and has had to be creative in tending to parishes with few priests. Ramirez sat down the morning of Aug. 11 for an interview with NCR at the diocese's Pastoral Center.

The following is a slightly edited version of that conversation.

NCR: Las Cruces is one of those dioceses that have always had to manage with less and deal with circumstances that other dioceses are just beginning to work with. Do I have that right?

Ramirez

: Oh, definitely. This, like so many dioceses in the Southwest, including West Texas, they have always been missionary [dioceses]. They have always depended on resources -- human and otherwise -- from the outside. It's the same thing today, even though now the difference is that I think the gift of the laypeople, our recognition of their gifts and talents and potential, now is bearing fruit in the kind of activities they get involved in, working side by side with the clergy.

Give me an example that didn't exist 15 years ago.

Well, 15 years ago, I think that whatever chanceries there were in the dioceses, they were staffed by priests and by women religious. Nowadays -- this is a good example -- it's almost typical of the diocese that there is no full-time priest, clergyman, at the pastoral center. ... The vicar general is not here full-time. Our chancellor is a layman; our vice chancellor is a laywoman. I'm the only one that's full-time, and even I am part-time because I'm out a lot.

How much does the immigration issue affect the work of the church here?

One thing, for example, is our religious education programs, because whether you're documented or not, whether you're a legal resident of the United States or not, you can still get the call to ministry, so we have people who don't have their documentation, but they're called to be catechists and to other ministries. One of the problems has come up when we do the background checks, and also getting the information from those people. And they're reluctant to sign anything. They're reluctant to give too much information about themselves.

They worry about every institution, including the church, that they might be turned in at one time or another. Occasionally, we have trouble with the Border Patrol. They get too close to our churches. They'll park their vehicles too close to the churches. It's been said that sometimes they'll pick on people coming out of Mass. We haven't seen that in particular, not in this diocese, but there are the usual raids that happen, especially in the area of Roswell.

They were starting around here, and the local law enforcement officers were doing the work of the Border Patrol, which they're not supposed to do unless they have explicit permission from the Border Patrol to do that. In this case they didn't, so they were fined. The neighboring county was fined because the sheriff was doing federal law enforcement work that they should not have been doing, and also the way they treated people, in a very insulting kind of way.

How do you teach about immigration?

Mainly when there are, I guess you'd call them, "little crises" like these raids, I feel compelled to say something, and I did in that case, and it was published in all the little papers around here.

Of course, I received a lot of flak for it because we have a good number of rednecks, a good number of people who'd just as soon drive all of them out, regardless of what it would do to the economy and for families here. Then of course, we have our immigration service that we struggle to implement.

Has your local income been affected by the economic downturn?

You mean the Sunday collections? From what we understand, some parishes are doing better than before the downturn. ...

The economy here doesn't get affected by the downturn as much as elsewhere?

That's right. Our economy doesn't depend [on] a lot of manufacturing. It's many government jobs. We have a couple of military bases and then a lot of federal things happen around here, Border Patrol is one of them, so people have those kinds of jobs. Of course, the schools, the university and so on -- a lot of it is just government.

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There may be Border Patrol as members of parishes?

A few, yes.

That must be a bit of a conflict.

I don't want to give that impression, because I do have a good regard for the Border Patrol. The National Training Center for the Border Patrol is in this diocese, in Artesia, N.M., near Roswell, and they come from all over the country to train there. ...

We have two little parishes in Artesia and the trainees go to Mass -- they bus them to Mass -- so there are always some of the trainees at our churches over there. They're people with spiritual needs like everyone else. But then the program also -- I was very impressed. First of all, the program is six months.

They have to be fluent in Spanish if they want to get out as Border Patrol officers. Also, they are trained in immigration law. They become almost immigration lawyers when they come out of there. They study immigration law every day. That's why I don't like local law enforcement officers -- police departments, sheriff's departments -- doing that work because they haven't had the training that these other fellows have had.

Is the use of the Border Patrol in this manner a long-term solution or does the law have to change?

Of course, the law has to change. It must change, just out of humanitarian concern. It's so un-American for our country to be doing what it's doing with families of the undocumented, and with families separated, with even spouses not even able to be together or with their children, or children with their parents -- that is unpardonable.

And then there have been reports lately about the way some of these detainees are treated. They're not criminals, they're not dangerous, they haven't committed criminal acts of violence, but yet they are treated as if they were.

Many would say crossing the border without documents is criminal.

Some people would say that, but it's certainly nothing violent. ... There is a place near Austin [Texas] that has been in the news lately, where families are incarcerated, and here they're maltreated. Children see their dads being treated so terribly, when they really haven't done anything terribly wrong. They're trying to remedy that. In fact, there was an announcement last week, I read it in *The New York Times*, that we will be revamping that whole detainee system.

But what do you see as the answer?

The laws definitely would have to change. I think there has to be some control at the border, and probably there should be more binational approaches to some of these problems. Our government should be working more closely with the Mexican government.

The bishops came out with a joint letter between the American bishops and the Mexican bishops, and the first things we say is that we don't want people to migrate, not for undocumented immigration -- we don't want that. In fact, we'd rather people just stay where they are, especially people from Mexico, from a pastoral standpoint.

Many of them are much better off there because they're in a very Catholic culture and their Catholicism is imbued in their bones and souls. For them to leave, their faith is put at risk terribly. When they come

over here, many of them will be gobbled up by the evangelicals. So for many reasons, they should really stay there.

But if they do come, they should be received with respect and they should be received with welcome arms, especially the church. And the church has pretty well done that. I'm very proud of the American Catholic church; we've done a good job in welcoming the stranger and I think probably every diocese has some kind of immigration service.

What do you do to keep people staying in place? What are the issues of justice on both sides?

I would just say this, that one of the reasons people come in illegally is because they may have tried to come in legally, but the climb was so high and so difficult that they got discouraged and said, "We'll just go in illegally." One of the answers is that you open the door a little wider for legal immigration so more people can come in legally; therefore, that lessens the number of those coming in illegally.

Also some of the people come illegally and then they don't dare leave, because how are they going to get back if they have a family here? So they just stay. If they're legalized, they can go back and forth. They can even go back to Mexico and live there.

There would also have to be incentive in Mexico, right?

That's definitely the thing to do. I've worked with the bishops' conference all the time I've been a bishop and I've served on many committees. One of my favorite ones has been the International Policy Committee. I've been with it about 10 years. There was a time when Catholic businessmen were urged to invest in Ireland because of the terrible conditions there and lo and behold, they did and it really did make a difference and Ireland came back.

I think the church probably should do the same thing with Mexico and encourage people from Mexico, and anyone who wants to be a good neighbor, to invest in Mexico and bring that economy up because Mexico has many resources. It's one of the richest countries in Latin America.

We were talking about laypeople. I have met many who are doing things that they would not have been doing even as recently as 10 years ago, but it is always with a sense that their careers could end at any moment, if there's a priest found for the parish where they're a pastoral associate or if a new bishop is appointed who doesn't want to see women in charge of parishes. What do you see as the future of laity?

We've learned some hard lessons over the years and one of those was connected with what you just said -- we would have a layperson running the parish and all of a sudden we found a priest, "Oh, we found a priest," so immediately he was sent there to take over. We hurt that layperson; he just had to move out of the way, and we will never do that again.

So now, whenever we have a layperson running a parish -- or even a permanent deacon or a woman religious -- we do a contract. We assign them first. They get a term. Like a priest gets a six-year term, the layperson or pastoral life coordinator will be assigned for two years, three years, four years, five years -- whatever it is -- and we respect that.

You're saying there's no permanent career here, perhaps?

It's difficult, but I do see the possibility of that happening, especially in small parishes and small missions that are very hard for us to get a priest for. I think in the future, there will be permanent situations.

Do you ever see a future where priests are essentially sacramental ministers and laypeople do the running of the operation?

We have situations like that now. La Union is a perfect example of that, where we have Rudy Franco, a

layman who has been there about four years, and before that, it was a laywoman, the first laywoman to run a parish. Before that, there were sisters who ran those parishes.

You're talking about a region or a parish?

A parish -- Our Lady of Refuge in La Union. That parish was interesting. First of all, it's been a mission. It's still canonically a mission. It's what the canon law calls a quasi-parish and eventually it could become a parish.

But anyway, it was a little mission and then this sister, Mary Ellen Quinn, a Sister of Mercy out of Omaha [Neb.], came and she wanted to run a parish so we gave her the parish. She became the best pastor we've ever had in this diocese. She was dynamic. She organized and she trained, so now what's there is the legacy that she left. She passed away last year, but the legacy she left were these trained laypeople.

When I didn't have a chancellor and I didn't know who to get, I asked her to be the chancellor. She was already the pastoral life coordinator of this quasi-parish, and she said, "OK, well, you are poorer in this diocese, not only materially, but you're poor in personnel, and that's why I'm here, so I'll do it." She became the chancellor and the parish life coordinator at La Union. She made it a point to train people.

What is your understanding of why there is an increase in lay ministry? Is it, as some say, simply a matter of necessity because of the priest shortage? Or is it because of a rethinking of the lay state since the reforms of Vatican II that says greater roles should be open to laypeople by virtue of their baptism?

The theological explanation ... has to be taken into consideration all the time. We would have lay ministries here regardless of whether there is a scarcity or not, because they're called, and you have to respect that call and provide the opening of doors so they can respond to that call.

But the other side is practical. I think both things are true. I don't think it's either one or the other approach; I think both have to be in the mix.

Are we heading toward a time when we'll have to rethink what ordination means?

It doesn't seem like it's going to change soon. We have the example of the Protestant churches and especially of the increasing number of evangelical Hispanic churches around the country, and, boy, they are effective. They are powerful, they're smart, they're articulate, and it's not just that they entice them by helping them materially or by being nice to them. They have something to offer, they have something to give.

And what is that?

They have the charisma, they have the passion, they have the excitement of the Gospel and they're able to put it across. For me, it's kind of an inspiration as far as saying, "If they can do it, why can't we do it?" We have the fullness of truth, we have the fullness of the life of the sacraments. We have so much more. Why can't we be as excited or even more excited? I really think with the Hispanic people, there's a lot of great potential that we have not begun to even tap into. We're talking about people who have very, very strong faith. I mean, the Latino people are fundamentally people of faith. It has been, up to now, handed on from generation to generation.

Now Christianity has been handed on down; nowadays, we say, "Well, too bad it's not all Catholic." We've got to make sure that the Catholic faith is handed on.

You can't manufacture that kind of enthusiasm ...

You can't manufacture it, but you nurture it and you recognize it and you appreciate it. We have some wonderful preachers among our permanent deacons. Somewhere along the way, they were encouraged to

do what they're doing. I think our priests do it, the laypeople do it, I do it. I tell them, "You're a great preacher," and I tell the priests, "Make sure that this deacon preaches at least once a month. Hand him over the speaker's stand. Let him preach. Let him do his stuff," and some of them are doing wonderful work.

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