

To serve Spanish-speaking Priest pressing for change in Church

By Marita Hernandez
Staff Writer

Ricardo Garcia, born and raised in San Francisco's predominantly Mexican-American South of Market Street district, nearly forgot the Spanish taught him by his Mexican-born parents during his long years of preparation for the Catholic priesthood in Bay Area seminaries.

Father Garcia, a diocesan priest, is the only Chicano priest in Santa Clara County. He is the only Chicano diocesan priest ordained in the San Francisco Diocese in recent history.

"We had a great celebration," he said, laughing at the recollection of his ordination day at Sacred Heart Church in the Gardner district of San Jose in 1973.

But the smile faded as he explained why there are so few Mexican-Americans in the priesthood.

He described the seminaries which prepare young men for the priesthood as "Anglo" institutions, which make no allowances for differences in cultural backgrounds.

And he adds: "The (Catholic) Church has not worked long or hard enough with the Spanish-speaking."

But the tide's changing, he said, and he's part of it.

Fr. Garcia, along with a handful of other Mexican-American members of religious orders, operates a religious center in downtown San Jose dedicated specifically to serving the Spanish-speaking community in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties.

Centro Pastoral, as the organization is called, sponsors a variety of religious and spiritual activities for Hispanic Catholics in the two-county area. But the group does not draw the line there. It also involves itself in social issues of importance to the people it serves. Members of the group have participated in demonstrations, picket lines, community organizing efforts, and have taken stances on such issues as Proposition 13, the Bakke decision and farm workers matters.



The Centro Pastoral, which operates out of Notre Dame High School, at 596 S. Second St., was established about four years ago. It was part of a national push within the Catholic Church to respond to the needs of its Spanish-speaking members.

Fr. Garcia noted that in California, Hispanics make up 60 percent of the Church's membership.

"Our people have always been a people

of deep faith," he said. "They should get more from the Church than what has been done so far."

This philosophy is reflected in the growing number of services provided the Spanish-speaking members of the Church in recent years. In 1972, every Catholic diocese with large Hispanic populations were required to establish centers, such as San Jose's Centro Pastoral, to serve the Spanish-speaking.

The centers were given the responsibility of coordinating services in the areas and acting as advocates on behalf of the Spanish-speaking, Garcia said.

In San Jose, the Centro Pastoral coordinates religious programs and activities, and augments services provided by church parishes serving Hispanics in the area, he said.

Another role, he added, "is to establish a Christian perspective in the community, to bring Christianity to our relationships with one another and to help empower people who are oppressed."

In the process of working toward these goals, the group has earned acceptance by the Chicano community in the area, he said.

"The leadership in the community has come to recognize us as a viable sister group. Some come for counseling, others just to kick back and think with us for a while," he said.

The center runs a variety of religious programs, most of them offered in Spanish or in Spanish and English. These include marriage encounters, Spanish classes, marriage preparation counseling, family and youth groups religious activities, "cursillos" or weekend courses aimed at reinforcing a religious commitment among participants and study groups that get together for prayer and to discuss means of

putting their religious beliefs into practice through social action.

Organizations like the Centro Pastoral are a step in the right direction, Fr. Garcia said. But he added: "I'd like to see more reinforcement of our culture and our religious upbringing by the Church and the seminaries."

"When I was in the seminary, I felt myself losing my culture," he said. "I was definitely a minority, but there were good friends to help me along and help me keep my perspective. It also made me feel that I should do more to bring more (Chicano) people into the seminary."



Staff photos by Marilyn Odella
Ricardo Garcia . . . Crusade for change