

A Community by INVITATION

A GROUP OF VINCENTIAN MEN, RESPONDING TO THE NEED IN A COMMUNITY that lacked support for its faith, started a revolution of immigrants returning to their Catholic faith.

When people think of the Hamptons, they initially envision affluent residents vacationing on beautiful beaches, donning floppy straw hats, and living in mansions. But upon a closer look, there lives an immigrant population nestled in the midst of this popular beach town, a vibrant and strong community not always associated with the area's prosperity.

The Congregation of the Mission, more commonly known as the Vincentians, has a ministry on the eastern end of Long Island, which serves the Hispanic-American community. The genesis of this Hispanic apostolate, also referred to as Hispanic ministry, began around

1990 on the western perimeter of Long Island. Fr. Kevin Lawler, CM, a missionary priest in Panama, was transitioning back to the United States and hoped to continue working with a Hispanic community. He identified a need in Long Island, where many underserved communities in the area of Nassau County could benefit from a Hispanic ministry.

In the fall of 1992, a plan of Hispanic evangelization was put into place, and the ministry commenced. In 1993, Fr. Gregory Semeniuk, CM, joined Fr. Lawler in this ministerial work. It began with a simple gesture—a knock on the door of potential parishioners—that ended with an invitation to

participate in Sunday mass. From there, this ministry expanded to administer the sacraments, organize lay faith formation programs, preach God's word in Spanish, and, most importantly, evangelize and spread the Good News within the community.

Fr. Semeniuk recounts how he, his fellow *confreres*, and leaders in the community reached out to the Hispanic population and invited them to participate in the ministry.

"There were about 20 people dedicated to that service, and once a week they would go out at night to visit the apartment buildings and areas where the Hispanic population lived."

This direct contact and invitation ignited the community to grow grassroots style into the thriving, active community it is today.

Hesitation and skepticism were commonly felt by those on the receiving end of this Hispanic ministry, who had been overlooked before, resulting in a lack of trust and confidence. Therefore, Fr. Semeniuk, along with the entire evangelization team, knew their words needed to be backed by action. Connecting with the community, training the leaders, and visiting every home in the parish were top priorities. The team drew a map of the community and divided it among themselves. Weekly, they paired up to knock on doors and visit Hispanic

parishioners delivering their simple introduction and invitation to participate in the faith.

"I didn't know Catholics did this," says one parishioner, who was caught off guard by the visit and invitation.

What happened next is nothing short of a miracle.

People were returning to church and participating in the lay faith formation programs. During this early time of the ministry, Fr. Semeniuk recalls visiting a young woman and her two-year-old child. While the visit was short, it was effective. The following week, he saw her in the communion line. Their eyes met, and she

was smiling. It affirmed to him that the simple gestures of visitation and invitation served as bridges to bring her back to the faith. It may be hard to say what the final outcome of that specific visit was, but it proved to Fr. Semeniuk that they had discovered the basis for developing a true community, where people socialized, came together to volunteer and deepen their faith.

Fr. Semeniuk reminisces about the changes he has witnessed over the years.

"We began with only 25 people in the church, a church that could fit 650 people. There was a lot of empty spaces at that time—a ton of potential but a ton of empty space. Now when I go back, the church

“We are all Catholics, but the way we express it is very unique to the people.”





Hispanic-American parishioners participate in cultural festivals to help raise funds that support fellow parishioners experiencing financial difficulties.



A PARISHIONER PROFILE

Young parishioner Andrey has been a part of the Hispanic apostolate for 24 years. A native from Costa Rica, he began coming to the Long Island community at the age of five and became more involved over the years. From being an altar boy, to a lector, to catechist, he credits the Vincentian Priests and the welcoming community with deepening his faith.

“Growing up in this community and being involved with all the activities of the community was a great influence,” says Andrey. “It sets certain values in me that helped me understand to be humble, to be honest, to love God, to be loving toward others, and to help others as much as possible. That’s what the Vincentians are all about—helping others.”

is full, and there is standing room only. It attests to the power of the Spirit and God’s providential care that He wanted this community to grow and flourish; it was our investment, as Vincentians, in planting the seeds that allowed this community to flourish and develop. It shows the importance of being committed to a community.”

What is so special about the community and the people is how they support each other during tough times. Fr. Stephen Grozio, CM, Provincial of the Congregation of the Mission Eastern Province, recounts his many years serving the apostolate.

“I worked with the people who mowed the lawns, trimmed the hedges, were carpenters and painters, those who cared for the children as nannies, those who cooked and cleaned houses. They were such hard workers and good people. Those were the people whose work allowed the Hamptons to function and to go forward. It is hard working in Long Island for the people. It is an area that thrives in the summer, but there is not much work in the winter. Many people had to struggle through the winter. So while they did well in the summer, it wasn’t enough for the whole year.”

The Vincentian Priests noticed this specific struggle during the winter months and worked with the parishioners to create

what they call, *Encuentros de Cultura* (Cultural Festivals), special fundraisers hosted in the fall in which community members bring authentic food, dress in traditional garb, celebrate Mass in their native tongue, and share their culture with others. The communal support, generosity, and money raised is then distributed to those who struggle financially in the wintertime, helping to pay for heat, car expenses, rent, or groceries.

Fr. Marvin Navas, CM, the new director of the ministry, is currently in his second year serving the community. When talking about these fundraising events, he says, “The reason we do these fundraisers and activities is because many of our people don’t work in the winter, or can’t make ends meet, so they come to the church looking for help. The money we are able to raise allows us to provide help. The people are very generous; they know they are contributing to something that will help us carry out our mission to be generous to those who need it in the wintertime.”

Fr. Grozio shares a story about a parishioner who sought help with her rent. When asked why she needed assistance, the woman responded, “During the summer, I cleaned five houses each week. Then one of the women whose house I used to clean passed away. So then I only cleaned four. I lost one fifth of my income, but I still have enough to get through the winter. Then my car broke down,

and I needed to pay \$2,000 to repair it, and I don’t have enough to pay the rent this month.” The Long Island apostolate quickly came to her aid.

Tania Maza, originally from Ecuador, has been a part of the Long Island apostolate for 16 years. She was invited by friends to visit the apostolate and quickly realized how different the Vincentian priests are, and how valuable the apostolate is for the community.

“Vincentian priests for me are gifts from God,” professes Tania. “They live the way they preach and follow in the footsteps of St. Vincent de Paul. They are like angels. Our priests are open to the people and ask us what we are looking for. They love to help [and] are very compassionate with what a person needs. They take care of everyone and are looking out for those who really need help.”

Tania was on the receiving end of that help back in 2005 when her husband was murdered, and she was left a widow, raising her daughters on her own. It was Fr. Grozio who supported her throughout this difficult time, and who held her hand as she navigated this life without her spouse. He taught her to be different, to be tough, to be a strong woman, to be a strong mom, and, most importantly, to be a servant. She will never forget the kindness and support he gave her and her daughters. Her eyes are glassy, holding

back tears, as she says, “He is like a father figure. To have him is to have God with me as a person. I respect him so much, and he is greatly missed by the parish.” Moments like this are testaments to the impact the Vincentians have had on individuals within the community.

The ministry in Long Island is very diverse. While all are Hispanic, each has its own culture. Fr. Navas notes, “We are all Catholics, but the way we express it is very unique to the people.”

Parishioner and Pre-Cana instructor, Tania Pillco, has been a part of the apostolate for eight years. She appreciates how the Priests understand the differences in cultures. “It is important because we are people coming from different cities, different countries. We are Hispanic, but that does not mean we have the same values as every culture or family. When we understand each other, we have the tools to work together.”

“One of our pastoral principles is if they ask and we can do it, then we will do it,” reflects Fr. Semeniuk. “We are an international community, so we have resources that go beyond what a diocese would have. Therefore, we can call upon another province when we are in need of a specific language to support our mission, such as the Vincentians in Colombia, who can provide additional personnel to support Long Island. That made a big impact because not only were the people

being served linguistically, but now they are being served by one of their own. It makes a difference [to the community] to be preached to by a native speaker.”

The Vincentians serving in the Long Island apostolate are truly working in a missionary style. While they minister to seven parishes in Long Island, they use a missionary spirit in the institutionalized parishes. They are successful in this manner, because they ask the people exactly what they need and meet them where they are. An example would be how the Hispanic youth groups are organized. It was noticed by the Priests that the Hispanic population was not attending the normal weekly youth programs provided by the parish. The Vincentians questioned the parents why their children did not participate, and discovered that most parents were still working at the time the youth group met and were unable to provide transportation for their children. Based on their input, the Vincentian Priests organized a youth program that took place at eight on Saturdays mornings, at a time requested by the majority of the apostolate. The result: parents, youth, and children quickly began participating in this and other programs during a time that worked for their schedule.

Fr. Semeniuk is proud of the Vincentian impact and how his missionary vocation re-ignited the Long Island apostolate.

“The Vincentians have a missionary call; being called to serve the Hispanic immigrant population is a realization of that call. The time I spent in Long Island was my experience being a Vincentian missionary.”

The Long Island ministry has grown into a vibrant community of Hispanic-American immigrants coming together to express their Catholic faith by organizing faith programs, bringing together different cultures, and supporting those in need during tough times. However, it is the people who make the Long Island ministry a remarkable community. They open their hearts to the faith, to the Vincentian teachings, and to their neighbors and the traditions of others.

Tania Pillco sums it up best. “This is my home. The people that are here, the Priests, it feels like friends. It is a family. It motivates me to continue to learn and grow in the faith.”