THOUSANDS ARRIVE FROM MEXICO, HONDURAS AND GUATEMALA. CHURCHES TRY TO KEEP UP WITH THE INFLUX. / IN N.C., LATINO IMMIGRANTS REMAKE CATHOLIC PARISH

The Philadelphia Inquirer

SEPTEMBER 22, 1997 Monday SF EDITION

The Philadelphia Inquirer
Found on Philly.com

Section: NATIONAL; Pg. A03

Length: 1340 words

Byline: Mary Otto, INQUIRER WASHINGTON BUREAU

Dateline: CLINTON, ***N.C.***

Body

Sometimes history can take a person by surprise.

That's the case with the Rev. John Williams of sleepy little Immaculate Conception ***Church***, his desk wedged into a corner of the ***parish*** hall, laden with paperwork, the Bible, the jar of unconsecrated hosts, the flyswatter.

Back in 1990, he was pastor to the far-flung ***Catholics*** of three counties in tobacco country, fewer than 300 souls in all. In diocesan headquarters ***up*** in Raleigh, there was talk of phasing out his job.

Then the Mexican and Guatemalan and Honduran workers started coming. And coming. And staying. Now Father John is pastor to at least 2,500 people. Other ***churches*** are growing, too.

Driven by collapsing economies south of the border and drawn by a boom in steady, if low-paying, jobs in the tobacco fields and food-processing plants, ***immigrants*** have settled in rural ***North Carolina*** by the tens of ***thousands***. Most are Hispanic and ***Catholic***.

Their arrival in this deeply Baptist state has amazed the ***Catholic*** priests, nuns and laypeople who have worked and prayed here in relative isolation for years.

"It's a huge wave of history taking place in ***North Carolina***," says Father John, in a quiet voice, characteristically tinged with a mixture of exhaustion, laughter and awe. "It's a historic moment. We barely know what to make of it."

The story of American religion is a story of diaspora, of spirits moving, scattering, gathering. Faiths have confronted waves of new believers all along.

Nineteenth-century ***Catholics*** came from Europe with their own priests, pooled their nickels, and built ***churches*** in big cities. Chicago had five St. Michael's ***churches*** - one Polish, one Italian, one Slovak, one Lithuanian and one German.

The ***churches***, temples, synagogues and mosques of ***immigrants*** serve not only as places of worship, but as ethnic community centers, shrines of culture and custom.

Yet ***churches*** take different approaches to the strangers in their midst. Some go out and evangelize the ***immigrants***. Others greet them, while making sure nothing changes at ***church***, says Charles Foster, a professor of religion and education at Emory University.

Still others throw open their doors to the strangers, knowing full well that life at ***church*** will never be the same. "They embrace the differences as a gift to the common life," says Foster, "and expect to be changed by them."

* Nearing 60, Father John is struggling with Spanish. His colleagues and parishioners say that what he lacks in fluency, he makes ***up*** for in dedication.

"There was no community here five years ago," he says, looking out over the flat land where trailer homes cluster on former farm fields. "This was all raising corn. Now it's raising people."

There are about 70 densely populated trailer parks in the ***parish***. A single trailer can hold a half-dozen young Latinos. They work, sleep and send money home.

The priest started out just ringing a bell in the trailer parks and saying Mass in Spanish. Now he's gotten help from the diocese to do marriage-preparation classes and social work. He's added bilingual Masses on special feast days and four Spanish Masses each weekend.

One is a field Mass offered at a table under three trees. The trees grow on six acres of land donated by a nearby turkey-processing plant. The spot has been named La Posada Guadalupana, Mary's little inn.

A few folks at the ***parish*** grumble they never see Father John anymore, he's so busy. A few grouse about the cost of candles, air conditioning, toilet paper. With the weddings, the baptisms, the extra Masses, the ***church*** never seems to close anymore.

Amid the chaos, the once-quiet ***parish*** seems to have burst into bloom, says one parishioner. Some lapsed ***Catholics*** have even come back to the ***church***. "Ash Wednesday we were like sardines!" a parishioner, Renee Giraldo, recalls. "To me it was beautiful."

The new faithful bring a stoic work ethic and beautiful dark-eyed children, as well as the predictable problems with language and poverty and immigration laws.

Father John doesn't ask whether they are legal. That's not the ***church***'s job, he says. What he is here for is their faith, a faith steeped in history and a calendar of saints, rooted in the home and in homeland shrines.

The pastor can't replace the shrines, but he helped organize the feast-day procession honoring the dark-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe. It wound through the middle of Clinton, past the courthouse, with its Confederate war memorial.

The ***immigrants***' practice is an ancient strain of Catholicism much different than seen here ***up*** till now, says Paul Brant, a circuit-riding Jesuit who ministers to 12 more counties beyond Father John's ***parish***.

"It's brought me in contact with a profound faith that doesn't need reasons," says Brant. "It's in the blood, not a head thing."

These days, Brant travels about 1,200 miles a week saying Mass in Spanish, doing baptisms and hearing confessions. On a Sunday morning he parks his blue bus with the Virgin of Guadalupe taped to the window at a coin laundry. He sets ***up*** his makeshift altar between a pool table and the dryers.

Two little altar girls light a couple of citronella candles with a stove lighter and pass out the hymnals to a small crowd of the faithful. As the washers churn, they pray that the Holy ***Church*** might extend to the ends of the Earth.

The chalice is a drinking glass. But they are believers.

After Communion, someone needs change for a dryer, and the priest rummages in his pocket for a quarter. By the end of Mass, the scuffed yellow laundry is full of people praying.

* Not every ***immigrant*** seeks out the ***Catholic Church***. All across the state, says Tom Tweed, professor of religion at the University of ***North Carolina***, ***churches*** are holding Spanish services and evangelizing in Spanish radio broadcasts. "They are competing for religious consumers," Tweed says.

After Mass at La Posada Guadalupana, Father John's parishioners sell tamales to make money for their new ***church***. But right across the road, the Baptists have already built a Hispanic ***church***, on land also donated by the turkey plant.

Don Gordon, senior pastor of the First Baptist ***Church*** in Mount Olive, can't conceal his satisfaction that the ***Catholics*** are far behind. "They are ***trying*** to ***keep up*** with the Joneses," he says.

In Newton Grove, the next town over, the Episcopalians just added a sacramental component to their long-established social ministries. Besides providing legal referrals, after-school programs, and assistance with citizenship, a Spanish-speaking Episcopal priest offers Masses and organizes soccer games.

And in Dunn, farther ***up*** the road, the folks at Gospel Tabernacle Pentecostal Holiness ***Church*** have put ***up*** a big sign, "La Casa De Esperanza." They've hired a Costa Rican minister to preach to their Spanish-speaking flock of two dozen and to muster new believers at Wal-Mart and Food Lion.

The ***church*** has also invested in bongo drums and maracas, and the choir is learning choruses in Spanish.

"We want to give them Christ. That's the best thing," says Eddie White, the associate pastor. But first they have to come. "You put bait on the hook. The fish will bite."

For Father John, life gets so complex these days he sometimes wishes he could go back to those simple times when he just went to a trailer park, rang a bell and said Mass.

But then he is heartened by one thing or another. For instance, one of the readings on a recent Sunday focused on the story of Elijah in the desert. "Under a broom tree, he wanted to die, like all of us sometimes," the pastor says. Then along came an angel and a heavenly hoecake. And Elijah got the strength to travel 40 days and 40 nights to the mountain of God.

It was a strong message to the faithful, working on the blood-washed floors of the turkey plant and doing the hard labor of the tobacco harvest. The message also went out to Father John, who finds the songs of the Mayan choir about as good as a hoecake from heaven. Listening, he says, "I feel like a priest again."

@MAP

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (93%); RELIGION (93%); ***CATHOLICS*** & CATHOLICISM (90%); CLERGY & RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS (90%); RELIGIOUS FACILITIES (89%); IMMIGRATION (88%); RACE & ETHNICITY (78%); PROTESTANTS & PROTESTANTISM (78%); BIBLE & CHRISTIAN TEXTS (77%); POPULATION DENSITY (74%); RURAL COMMUNITIES (73%); ETHNIC GROUPS (73%); RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (72%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%)

Industry: MOBILE HOMES (85%); TOBACCO FARMING (76%); TRAILER PARKS (67%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (60%)

Geographic: RALEIGH, NC, USA (57%); ***NORTH CAROLINA***, USA (92%); ***HONDURAS*** (79%); GERMANY (79%); SLOVAKIA (79%); ***GUATEMALA*** (77%); LITHUANIA (54%)

Load-Date: October 18, 2002

End of Document