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The Daily Journal

THE DAILY JOURNAL, WEDNESDAY EVENING, JANUARY 9, 1980

Empathy essential for assimilation

A priest views Cuban community

By KATHLEEN LONGO
Journal Staff Writer

There is a touch of sadness in the way Rev. Raul Comesanas, a Roman Catholic priest, speaks of the Cuban-Americans he has been serving so faithfully for more than a decade.

Perhaps it's loyalty to his own heritage or a sense of compassion for those in need of spiritual renewal, but Father Comesanas has combined both into an all-out search for identity of a people who are gradually becoming assimilated to a new country, language and culture.

He was brought to this country at the age of three, and although he arrived here before the refugees from Castro's Communist regime, Father Comesanas decided "at an early age" to devote his life to helping the growing needs of the Spanish community.

"We were and still are in dire need of improved communications, both bilingual and multicultural," the 36-year-old priest said of his reason for such dedicated involvement with the Cuban community.

Father Comesanas, formerly of Elizabeth, has been politically as well as religiously active, serving the Red Cross, United Fund and the Elizabeth Human Relations Commission, to name a few, and ran unsuccessfully in 1970 for U.S. Congress, the first Cuban-American to have done so in the history of the country.

In addition, he was the first native Cuban to serve as a presidential elector and also served three years as adviser to the U.S. Commissioner of Education, Washington.

"I never, as such, looked at politics for myself. To be able to gain the respect of Americans, the Spanish-speaking had to demonstrate that they could put up candidates and support them economically," he said.

The political concern was solely to bring out community issues such as human rights, not for self-aggrandizement, according to Father Comesanas.

He left his people shortly thereafter to join a missionary institute, traveling to Africa and Venezuela, where, as director of communications, he set up institutes for publi-

cation, mission animation and vocation promotion.

He was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1977 while in Kenya, and growing pressures from Cuban-Americans to have Comesanas return to the U.S., however, increased in May when he was invited to speak with Cardinal Nunzio Calabresi of Caracas and exiled Cuban Bishop Eduardo Boza Masvidal.

It was because of the problems that had taken place in the Spanish-speaking communities that he decided to return to New Jersey this summer.

"There is a lack of communication between the Cuban community and the larger American society where we live, and I want to help bridge that gap," Father Comesanas explained.

He also pointed out that tensions have been growing as a result and the "pastoral" needs of the Cuban-Americans are neglected.

"There is a short supply of Spanish-speaking priests," he said of another problem, adding that multi-cultural priests are needed as well as multi-lingual.

Since his return, Father Comesanas has toured all the Cuban communities in Puerto Rico, Canada, New York and New Jersey in an attempt to assess the situation of his people.

In August, Newark Archbishop Peter L. Garaty requested that he establish a permanent residence in the archdiocese.

"I was invited by 15 other dioceses to join them, but decided to come home," he said.

He is presently assigned to St. Joseph's R.C. Church, West New



REV. RAUL COMESANAS

York, a location he finds advantageous in carrying out his mission for the Cuban-Americans.

"Its huge percentage of Cuban natives is second only to Elizabeth, and I feel I would be in the center of all Cuban-American activities," Father Comesanas explained.

He has joined in the formation of the Union of Cubans in Exile, with chapters throughout the New York metropolitan area in developing sta-

bility for communities in the Northeast.

"Even though I was away for a while, I feel I know every problem of my people by being kept informed of their anxieties and desires to be heard," he said, adding, "I have their confidence and respect and have been able to build a spiritual union based on love and brotherhood in sharing the burdens of those in exile."

He asserted that the Cubans living in the U.S. have not been adequately understood because of the lack of communication.

"It's not due to anyone's fault, but it is just a lack of empathy — a lack of understanding of the history, culture, hurts and suffering," the priest explained.

He attributed this communication problem, in part, to limited or biased press coverage presenting a "bad" image of the growing numbers of Cuban-Americans.

"My major concern is with their pastoral and spiritual needs — to meet them and bring them together in deep brotherhood," the priest noted.

He said he believes that the Holy Spirit guided him back to his people by being saved from injury or death while in Zaire during its invasion.

"My main concern is to keep the Cuban-American people together as a unit by stressing common ideals and principles," the priest said.

"We must look to God and Jesus for the answer as to the life we are to lead and avoid the irresponsibility in ministry which keeps our flocks away from churches and consequently disunited," he said.

*Ve incluy^o
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Raul