Diocese, Valley Interfaith team up to offer a new kind of ID

By PAUL BINZ | The Valley Catholic

PHARR — Bishop Daniel E. Flores joined Valley Interfaith leaders Sept. 24 in Las Milpas to introduce the "parish identification strategy," a program to provide all members of Diocese of Brownsville parishes a way to identify themselves to local law enforcement regardless of their legal documentation or status.

Speaking to a packed room of nearly 500 people at the Pharr Research and Development Center in Las Milpas, Bishop Flores said the need for identification has a profound significance in people's lives – and more so for the marginalized immigrant.

"I would like to emphasize that the ID means something more than simply its implication that you have an identification, an address, a picture or something to show perhaps if you're stopped at a red light or for some other reason," Bishop Flores said. "It means something much deeper: 'I belong to a parish, and so in this community, I am not living in the shadows.'"

Several local officials joined in the effort, including police chiefs and officials from Pharr, Edinburg and McAllen. Emceeing the event, Oblate Father Kevin Collins, pastor of St. Eugene de Mazenod Parish in Brownsville, asked them to respond to three questions:

"First, will you accept a parish ID as part of the identification process in your department?"

"Second, will you train your police officers on how to identify parish ID cards?"

"Third, will you continue to work with us to build trust and to address crime together?"

In turn, Edinburg Police Chief Cesar Torres, Pharr Police Chief Jose Luengo and McAllen Police Captain Irene Luna all agreed, affirming broad governmental support at the local level.

The parish ID program originated about a year and a half ago in Farmers Branch, a suburb of Dallas.

"They noticed that very few people were going to Mass," said Joe Hinojosa of Valley Interfaith and a parishioner at Holy Spirit Parish in McAllen, recounting the origins of the program. "They asked the people why, and they said they were afraid to leave their homes."

So many of the residents of the city were undocumented, they seldom ventured out other than to go to work or to the grocery store, and avoided contact with police even when they became victims of crime.

The police chief there was asked if his department would accept a local parish ID with photo, name and address, and the chief said yes, Hinojosa said.

Today, some 10,000 people in the Dallas area are carrying the parish ID cards, Father Collins said.

A similar situation exists in the Valley.

"We spoke with immigrant members of our parish, St. Eugene (de Mazenod)," Rosie Hinojosa, a Valley Interfaith leader from Brownsville, said. "They are afraid to drop off their children at school or buy groceries."

"When we asked them what they most need, they told us they need an identification," she said. "Now that they know the diocese and their parishes are working with them on this strategy, we see hope in their faces."

Father Collins explained the card's limitations to the crowd.

"The ID is not a get-out-of-jail free card; it does not give you permission to drive; it is not a government ID in any way," he said. "It is simply an ID that says you are a member of the parish that's on there; your date of birth is there; your address is there. It expires. You must be a member of the church at least three months ahead of time before an ID will be issued."

During the meeting, Sister Norma Pimentel, director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, presented a check for $10,000 from that organization as starter money to finance the program.

Those issuing the card will not be limited to Catholic parishes, Father Collins said. Other denominations and organizations will also be able to participate in the program.

"Too much of the focus is on the national and state conversation regarding immigration," said Franciscan Father Tom Luczak, pastor of Holy Family Parish in Edinburg. "This is a local strategy that gives my own parishioners the dignity of being able to identify themselves to a police officer."

"This will positively affect them. That is what excites me," Father Luczak said.