

Flores ordained to lead metro Detroit Catholics

Hispanic bishop a diversity symbol in growing church

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FREE PRESS RELIGION WRITER

November 30, 2006



Cardinal Adam Maida lays hands on Daniel E. Flores, the first Hispanic Catholic auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Detroit, during the ordination Wednesday. (Photos by RASHAUN RUCKER/Detroit Free Press)

At 3:13 p.m. Wednesday, Detroit Cardinal Adam Maida poured a small pitcher of holy oil over the bowed head of a priest from Texas and, with that final act in a long ordination ritual, Michigan finally had its first mainline Hispanic bishop: Detroit Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Flores.

Flores' first job is assisting Maida in supervising 298 parishes that serve 1.3 million Catholics in metro Detroit. However, most people who know Flores -- and many of the 1,000 people who attended the ordination mass at Blessed Sacrament cathedral seemed to know him -- say that this 45-year-old bishop is headed for even higher office.

The cardinal himself mixed up his words at the end of the mass, turning to Flores and declaring: "Welcome to the College of Cardinals!"

Embarrassed at the flub, the cardinal slapped his forehead, but his next words were swallowed up in surprised laughter that quickly turned into sustained applause.

It was a day of firsts.

On Wednesday morning, Flores met with reporters in the first English-Spanish bilingual press conference held by the Archdiocese of Detroit. Then, Flores was installed in the first English-Spanish ordination mass in Detroit.

Between 2000 and 2005, Michigan's Hispanic population rose an estimated 15%, to about 372,000 people, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The six-county archdiocese serves an estimated 128,000 Hispanic Catholics -- though church officials

believe the number may be higher.

Flores' appointment to Detroit by Pope Benedict XVI has become a major symbol of global diversity in the 1-billion-member Catholic Church, which now is growing most rapidly in the southern hemisphere.

Maida stressed that point in his homily at the mass.

"This is a great and historic moment for our church of Detroit and especially for the ever-growing Hispanic population throughout Michigan," Maida said.

Moments later, Maida added that, in an ideal world, "all cultures, together, are woven into the beautiful tapestry that is the church."

Flores talked about the same issue with reporters on Wednesday morning. He said he's proud to serve as a living symbol of the diversity within Christianity.

"There is a catholic impulse that beats in the human heart, and I mean a catholic impulse, not just a Roman Catholic impulse. The impulse is that we all are enriched when we participate in a variety of cultural experiences," Flores said.

Born in Texas to a family with two centuries of history in the region north of the Rio Grande River, Flores said he is proud of his Mexican-American heritage. That's why he included the winding symbol of a river in his new coat of arms as a Catholic bishop.

But Flores also said that he wants to encourage Catholics to explore other cultures as well, including those from the Middle East, where he has traveled extensively.

At the mass, Maida's mistaken reference to cardinals caused Flores to look embarrassed, as well.

But, sitting in the congregation, John and Caroline Biskner of Ann Arbor said they weren't surprised at the reference to higher office. The Biskners are so thrilled by Flores' ordination that they even brought their 29-day-old baby girl, Catherine, to the mass.

Caroline Biskner, a Hispanic Catholic, once lived in Corpus Christi where Flores worked as a priest from his ordination in 1988 until he moved to Houston to teach at St. Mary's seminary in 2001. She recalls him as "a very holy, very caring, very clear teacher" from talks he gave to a youth group she attended in the 1990s.

He won't be an auxiliary bishop for too many years, Biskner said. "He'll do even more important things someday. Back in Corpus Christi, people used to say about him, 'That one certainly will be a bishop someday.' "

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