Ten-year-old Shawnee Berke cheerfully hands out missalettes to parishioners entering Sacred Heart / Saint Dominic Church in Portland. Shawnee and her mother are regulars at the 12:30 p.m. Sunday Mass, which is celebrated in Spanish.

“I want to keep my Catholic faith up, so I can believe in God and teach my kids how to believe in God,” says Shawnee.

Nelida says she has brought Shawnee to Mass ever since her daughter was still in the womb. She says she tries to put faith into everything she does at home, while also serving at the parish.

“I am very active, proactive in my church. Whatever they need, I help them.”

Nelida isn’t alone. Members of this growing Hispanic community share not only a similar culture but a deep love for Jesus Christ.

“My heart belongs to Him!” says Reina Perozo, who serves on the parish’s property and budget committee. “I want to do the best that I can for the Church.”

The Hispanic community is one of the fastest growing segments of Maine’s population. According to U.S. Census figures, the number of Latinos in the state nearly doubled from 2000 to 2013.

“There are Hispanics in every single county in the state,” says Sister Patricia Pora, RSM, director of the diocese’s Office of Hispanic Ministry. “The biggest populations are in Cumberland, York, Androscoggin, and Penobscot counties.”

Sister Patricia says the Latino community at Sacred Heart / Saint Dominic Parish has tripled since she began working in Hispanic ministry here nearly a decade ago. Mass is also celebrated in Spanish on Saturday evenings in the chapel of the Basilica of Ss. Peter & Paul in Lewiston, and Sister Patricia says that community is growing as well.

“We have people coming to Lewiston from Augusta, from Naples, from Lisbon, from Brunswick, and Jefferson,” she says. “In Portland, we have people from Brunswick, from York County, mostly Biddeford-Saco and Old Orchard Beach, from Windham.”

Members of the Latino community say being able to attend Mass celebrated in their native language has helped their faith flourish.

“It is very important. Now, we have first Communions. We have more baptisms, more confirmations, more religious activities that we didn’t have before. So, yes, it is a very important thing,” says Javier Valencia, who serves as an extraordinary minister of holy Communion at Sacred Heart / Saint Dominic Parish.

Mass is offered in Spanish through the Office of Hispanic Ministry, which includes Sister Patricia Pora, the director, and Rosario Sanchez Starratt, an outreach coordinator based in Lewiston. They provide both pastoral ministry and social advocacy.

“It’s presence and accompaniment and orientation, helping, guiding, whatever,” says Sister Patricia.

Through the Office of Hispanic Ministry, pastoral care is provided to those who are ill, to families of those who have died, and to Spanish-speaking inmates at the Cumberland County Jail. The Office of Hispanic Ministry offers sacramental programs including baptism and marriage preparation, and it provides guidance for Spanish-speaking parish lay leaders. It provides bilingual missals for non-English or limited-English speakers in different parts of the state and provides other worship materials for parishes. The office also offers Protecting God’s Children safe environment training in Spanish and provides translations of important ecclesial or civil documents such as baptismal, birth or marriage certificates.

Sister Patricia and Rosario also try to address some of the social welfare needs of the Latino community.
Sister Patricia says Latinos in Maine face a number of challenges. Speaking limited or no English, even those with professional backgrounds are often employed in low-paying, entry-level jobs. She says they are often unaware of health care or other services available, and with no Spanish media in the state, it is difficult to get the word out. Additionally, she says many are hesitant to turn to the government, even in times of trouble, fearing it could jeopardize their immigration status.

“It’s a complicated set of issues,” says Sister Patricia. “It really is.”

She says the Latino community is an underserved and sometimes unserved segment of population, which is why social outreach on the part of the Church is so important.

Latinos in the Portland area describe Sister Patricia’s work as invaluable.

“People who just arrive here, if they don’t know where to look for help, for housing, food pantries, even clothing, Sister Patricia will help them,” says Nelida.

“Whenever there is somebody with questions, where to go, how to do it, they ask her, and if there is something she can do, she will, and if not, she will direct them to the place they have to go to get the help they need,” says Javier. “It’s a big, big help for all the people, especially for people who just got here, and they have no clue where to go or what to do.”

To help educate the community, programs and presentations are regularly offered in the Sacred Heart / Saint Dominic Parish hall, for instance from the Immigrant Legal Advocacy Project or the Department of Labor.

Sister Patricia says Hispanic ministry needs to be a ministry of presence, which she and Rosario try to provide both through travel and through telephone contacts.

“It’s a big, big help for all the people, especially for people who just got here.”

— Javier Valencia

But, unfortunately, it is also why Sister Patricia fears that some Catholic Latinos in Maine may turn to other churches.

“Evangelicals are attracting so many of them because they’re personally invited; they’re personally welcomed,” she says.

Sister Patricia stresses that is why funding the Office of Hispanic Ministry through the annual Catholic Appeal is so important.

“I know some people say, ‘Why spend so much money on just over one-percent of the population?’ But that is where the Church is coming from. That is the fastest growing piece of the Church.”

**Prison Ministry**

Deacon Robert Curtis serves a congregation whose actions have put them behind bars. Some of the crimes they committed are terrible, yet he says, that doesn’t mean they don’t deserve to know the love of God.

“They need to be loved, the love that God loves us with, something that is unconditional,” he says. “You’re not judging, and I don’t, regardless of the crime.”

Deacon Curtis leads a Communion service at the Maine State Prison in Warren once a week and another at the minimum security Bolduc Correctional Facility. He also assists Father Richard Malo who celebrates Mass monthly at the prison.

In addition, Deacon Curtis holds Bible study classes, and his wife, Phyllis, leads the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults for inmates who wish to become Catholic.

They both are also there just to talk.

“Having that communication with them, to let them see that there is a God who loves them and that they are loved; that’s the big thing,” he says. “I am convinced that, many of them, if they had been shown that love, wouldn’t be there.”

Deacon Curtis says while some inmates were baptized Catholic, in many cases, their faith development stopped there. He says, now that they are behind bars, many are seeking answers.

“They are trying to realize that, o.k., there has got to be something better than what I’m doing. They’re searching, and any way that I can be of help in that search is really why I’m there,” he says.

Although Deacon Curtis receives no salary for his ministry, the annual Catholic Appeal provides a housing allowance and pays for books and other worship materials that are used at the prison.