

From Mexico to Dundalk to Manhattan, Guadalupe runners carry torch for faith, immigrants

By Kit Cross

Special to the Review

DUNDALK – A journey of more than 2,500 miles from Mexico City to New York City will end Dec. 12, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, when the 15th annual Carrera Antorcha Guadalupana (The Guadalupe Torch Run) concludes its extended message of faith and support for immigrants.

Nearly three months ago, on Sept. 18, the pilgrimage set out from the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Mexican capital for St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan.

It has come through the Archdiocese of Baltimore before, but on Dec. 3 it visited St. Rita Parish in Dundalk for the first time.

For Jose Rosas, coordinator of the torch run through Maryland and a parishioner of St. Rita, Our Lady of Guadalupe holds a special significance.



Dancers from the Danza Azteca group perform outside St. Rita in Dundalk Dec. 3 ahead of the arrival of runners participating in the 15th annual Carrera Antorcha Guadalupana-Guadalupe Torch Race, from Mexico City to New York City. (Kit Cross/Special to the Review)

"She has the greatest association with our faith," he said. "Clearly my faith is in God, but I credit that to the Virgin (Mary)."

Some 8,000 runners will participate in the pilgrimage, across an international border and 13 states. For Lucia Romero, a seven-time race veteran and captain of the Guadalupe Torch Run, the Saturday night stop had particular resonance.

"I began because my son, who was working in Maryland, died in a car crash while visiting me in Mexico," explains Romero, who resides in Mexico City. "I offer my race and the carrying of this torch for my son in heaven, people who are suffering and for families who are separated and fighting for a better life."

Arriving in Dundalk after dusk, the Guadalupe pilgrims were greeted by dancers in indigenous Aztec garb. A small truck provided illumination and carried two large paintings, of Our Lady of Guadalupe and St. Juan Diego, to whom the Virgin Mary

appeared leaving her image on his cloak as confirmation of her apparition. After carefully unloading the images from the truck, the celebration began. As Romero passed the flame from the torch to an altar candle held by Rosas, an Aztec dancer blew his whistle starting a drumbeat that led dozens of dancers down the center aisle of St. Rita Church. Groups revered the tabernacle and the images to the left and right of the altar.

Mass was concelebrated by Redemptorist Father Orlando Gonzalez, associate pastor of Sacred Heart of Jesus/Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Highlandtown, and Father George Gannon, pastor of St. Rita and Sacred Heart of Mary in Dundalk.



Father George Gannon, left, pastor of St. Rita and Redemptorist Father Orlando Gonzalez concelebrate Mass in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Dec. 3. (Kit Cross/Special to the Review)

A standing-room-only crowd that exceeded 300 was just one sign of St. Rita's burgeoning Hispanic community. Marie Marucci, who maintains the parish's Facebook page, said St. Rita began its Hispanic ministry just a year ago with a bilingual Mass; now 60-100 attend it every Sunday.

The celebration continued with a fiesta of food and dance in the parish's Carnes Hall. As the crowd feasted on traditional Mexican fare including chicken and beans, a handful of dance groups entertained on the hall's stage. Dances ran the gamut from ritualistic Aztec dances with incense to the more modern, yet traditional, Mexican Hat Dance, performed by a group of young women from St. Clement I in Lansdowne.

Parishioners and others in the area welcomed runners into their homes for the night. Enrique Rosas, a torch run volunteer, says New York is a natural destination, as it is home to the Statue of Liberty, a beacon for immigrants.

"(We aim) to help show that we're not all criminals or bad people," he said. "There are a few bad apples in our culture, but the majority of the people are good people, and that is what we are trying to spread."

Rosas noted that the Catholic Church has assisted immigrants throughout history. "Back 100 years," Rosas said, "the Irish, Italians, they all used the Catholic Church to benefit them coming to this country."

To that end, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has declared Dec. 12 a Day of Prayer, with, according to a news release, "a focus on the plight of refugees and migrants ... It will be a time to place before a merciful God the hopes, fears, and needs of all those families who have come to the U.S. seeking a better life."

Also see:

Archbishop Lori introduces new auxiliary bishops for Archdiocese of Baltimore

Nomination as auxiliary bishop took Monsignor Brennan by surprise