



THE ARCHDIOCESE OF
GALVESTON-HOUSTON

Parish leadership training focuses on pope's call for 'Recognizing the Stranger'

MARCH 28, 2023 By Jo Ann Zuñiga, Texas Catholic Herald



Among those on a regional panel in San Antonio in March discussing “Recognizing the Stranger” were from left to right: Galveston-Houston Auxiliary Bishop Italo Dell’Oro, CRS, Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Daniel Cardinal DiNardo and Archbishop Gustavo Garcia-Siller of San Antonio. (Photo courtesy of Industrial Areas Foundation/IAF)

HOUSTON — Local parish leaders followed up with training March 17 to 18 on Pope Francis's call to organize with immigrants and those at the margins to encourage "participation of the Christian in public life."

About 80 people representing multiple local Catholic churches and other denominations met at All Saints Catholic Church in the Heights with training sessions in English and Spanish on being called to be "One Body." They also learned how to lead small groups and listen to identify new leaders. They focused on practical measures such as "pressures on families."

"Do we really know who sits around us in the pews?" asked a group leader with The Metropolitan Organization (TMO), a non-profit helping to train parishioners.

Talking about organizing "house meetings" with four to six fellow parishioners, Gina Reynoso said relationships can be built on sharing pressures impacting families. Some house meetings even take place in the parking lot of a trailer park, wherever the people are, she said.

"My husband works in the construction field, and they have been laying off. His team is down from 20 to only five workers," Reynoso said. "If people don't feel heard, we are amputating part of our One Body."

The local training followed up on a regional conference in San Antonio earlier from Feb. 28 to March 1 where Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, Bishop Italo Dell'Oro, CRS and other bishops attended among 300 leaders and clergy at an Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) West/Southwest training.

Founded in 1940, the IAF is the nation's largest and longest-standing network of local faith and community-based organizations. It currently works with thousands of religious congregations, non-profits, civic organizations and unions in more than 65 cities across the U.S. and in Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom and Germany.

Cardinal DiNardo, who welcomed both regional and local trainees, said, "That's the good practical work that this organization does. It helps people recognize their solidarity and their ability to work together."

Pope Francis also spoke to the regional group via video, thanking them for participating in the ongoing synodal process.

The Holy Father told the crowd, “My heart rejoices when I see that pastors, priests and laity — leaders in their communities — together with civic organizations meet to discuss the best ways to overcome serious situations of injustice suffered by the excluded. I encourage and urge you to continue to do so.”

The pope has also been recently meeting with local leaders, inviting them to the Vatican. Among them, Elizabeth Valdez, Texas IAF director and Houston’s The Metropolitan Organization, said, “It has made us better organizers and leaders, and we are eager for the next phase of deepening and expanding parish organizing.”

In the local training sessions, Father Cyriaque Sounou, SVD, pastor of Holy Name Catholic Church, called himself “a single dad of 1,000 kids.” Among issues that parishioners are concerned about are homelessness, crime, and the takeover of the Texas Education Agency of the Houston Independent School District impacting their children, he said.

Sister Maureen O’Connell, OP, Archdiocesan director for the secretariat of social concerns, said, “Historically, people have seen the Church as a refuge. But that has eroded. Now we need to go out to the people and help them with their issues of education, transportation, and housing.”

Bishop Dell’Oro, also spoke to the local trainees, said, “God is in Heaven, but when we look at Him up there, we find out that He has come down here on earth.”

He added, “Through TMO activity, we can grow in a spirit of solidarity that brings us together. When we represent as a group, we have more sway to make people’s lives better.”

For more information, www.tmohouston.org.