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New CLINIC chairman a 'pastor of souls'

Elisabeth Deffner Catholic News Service | Dec. 27, 2013

ORANGE, CALIF. -- Candelaria Pizano was leading the Pennies From Heaven campaign at her parish, striving to raise funds to support pro-life centers across Orange County, Calif. -- and waiting to learn whether she had been given an extension to stay in the United States.

"I was praying to my Lord, 'Please, let me finish what I started with Pennies From Heaven,'" recalls the Santa Ana, Calif., resident. But at the same time, she was instructing a friend about her responsibilities; if she was deported to Mexico, Pizano wanted to make sure that the pro-life campaign would not suffer without a leader.

An active parishioner and supporter of her parish school, which her two daughters attend, Pizano appealed to the diocese's Office of Respect Life, Justice and Peace for a letter of recommendation to support her efforts to stay in the U.S. She got her letter and a one-year extension.

Pizano credits the letter -- and much prayer -- for receiving the extension. She already is praying that she will be able to stay permanently with her family in the U.S., working toward permanent citizenship without having to leave her husband and children to return to Mexico. Meanwhile, she enthusiastically attends immigration reform events organized by the diocese and listens attentively to what Bishop Kevin Vann has to say on the subject.

"I'm so glad that the bishop is doing this," she said, "because all our people need to pray for this, to have a reform."

Last month, Vann was appointed chairman of the board of directors of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., culminating a busy first year as bishop of Orange. It has been a year filled with diocesan events, advocacy and prayer in support of undocumented immigrants.

"Any concern about immigration reform takes into account the whole person," Vann said, explaining that he approaches the issue as "being a pastor of souls."

"How do we as pastors help our people find homes here in the United States, find a place where they can truly contribute to our society?"

As CLINIC chairman, Vann will provide leadership and strategic guidance, explained the organization's executive director, Jeanne Atkinson.

"In addition to having served for three years on CLINIC's board as a representative of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, Vann brings to the position extensive experience in serving in the diverse dioceses of Orange and Fort Worth as well as a strong pastoral commitment to ministering to immigrants," she said.

As he starts his term with CLINIC, Vann expects to rely on his experience working with immigrants in the Diocese of Springfield, Ill., where he was ordained a priest, and the Diocese of Fort Worth, where he served as

bishop before his appointment to Orange.

As pastor of Our Lady of Lourdes Church in Decatur, Ill., Vann taught himself how to speak, read and write Spanish after a Spanish-speaking family asked him for help finding a Spanish-language Mass. When he admitted he didn't know of any in the area, they responded: "Can you help us? We want to stay Catholic."

A few years later, he was heading the diocese's Hispanic Ministry.

As bishop of Fort Worth -- where the Catholic population is more than 50 percent Hispanic -- he and his staff organized an advocacy program designed to inform Texas legislators that Catholics are supportive of immigration reform as well as people who are undocumented.

"(He is) 100 percent supportive of any move we made to help the undocumented, (and has been) an outstanding supporter of the Hispanics who are here and have no documents," said Franciscan Fr. Stephen Jasso, pastor of All Saints Catholic Church in Fort Worth. "There's no doubt he was really concerned about them."

Now as bishop of Orange -- home to the largest Vietnamese community outside Vietnam and encompassing one of the 10 U.S. counties with the greatest Hispanic population -- he has met with elected representatives to speak about immigration reform and recently presided over a prayer service that drew more than 3,000 to the campus of the future Christ Cathedral.

"Let us go in love and courage, praying that the love of God -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit -- may be poured out on all here in our country these days," he said at the conclusion of the service, "to guide all in the government to come to right and just decisions, where families may be united, and that the talents, work and good will of all may, wherever we may come from, continue the history of building and strengthening our country."

[Deffner is editor of the *Orange County Catholic*, the online publication of the Diocese of Orange, Calif.]

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