



Newsday / Kathy Kmonicek

Rev. Sobalvarro: He enjoys much interaction with poor people

## PROFILE

# The 'Flying Priest' Has Tough Flock

He was a fugitive from Guatemala, he regularly consorts with drug addicts and criminals, and is so much on the run he's known as the "flying priest" to his flock.

Rev. Alfredo Sobalvarro is a no-Roman-collar type of working priest. His Hispanic ministry for the Rockville Centre Catholic Diocese takes him from the migrant farm fields of the North Fork to behind Riverhead's prison walls, from helping non-English speaking immigrants with documentation at his Riverhead office, to conferring with his aide, Barbara Archbold, at home base, La Vida Christiana at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church in East Patchogue.

He and Archbold set up teams to address social needs — from providing Spanish-speaking HIV counselors to talking tough love to drug-addict prisoners or urging others to take college courses.

Sunday may find him officiating at Coram's tambourine Mass at St. Francis Cabrini Church, preaching in Spanish at St. Joseph the Worker in East Patchogue, delivering the Eucharist at Wading River's St. John the Evangelist, or conducting Bible school at Riverhead's St. John the Baptist.

Sobalvarro holds that churches

are people rather than buildings and draws on his people's help. "We have a presider, catechist and preacher. When I'm not there, they carry on."

Each of his churches, he explained, has a communion service that is not a full Mass. "They'll already have a consecrated Host, which the priest leaves behind, because there isn't a Hispanic priest for all these churches. The presider says the opening prayer and gives out communion."

On Friday, his day off, he's out on yet another mission, as coordinator for Suffolk County's charismatic movement.

Born and brought up on a cattle ranch in Guatemala, Sobalvarro was dispatched as a troublesome teen to a military academy in the United States. Later, after some turbulent years back on the ranch, Sobalvarro's bishop suggested he apply for a little-used U.S. college scholarship for Third World students for the priesthood. He protested that he had no vocation. But by then the seminary outlet seemed the healthiest escape for a social activist by now persona non grata in his homeland. "I was given forty-eight hours to leave," he said. He left, was subsequently ordained and later went on to earn a degree in American history.

Now 57, he has found his maverick niche. "I'm very much interested in the social gospel being preached in Latin America . . . I'm blessed with a ministry that affords me a great deal of interaction with poor people who are really the hope of the church. . . . It has opened my eyes to what we're not doing in the church — caring for people."

— Eileen Swift