

The Father IN THE Fields

His parish has no boundaries, his pulpit no home.
His parishioners are the immigrants who make up
Long Island's invisible population.
And while the Rev. Alfredo Sobalvarro can't always
solve their problems, he does bring them faith.

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Sobalvarro shows Adolfo Hlesces how to spot bargains.



A young parishioner at St. Francis Cabrini Church in Coram offers Sobalvarro boxes of cereal that will go to needy families.

BY ISAAC GUZMAN
STAFF WRITER

A THICK, WARM RAIN is sweeping over the corn, berry and onion fields of the East End when a black Geo Tracker makes an abrupt stop in the driveway of the Briermere farmstead in Riverhead. A burly man of 58 steps into the gray afternoon wearing imitation Birkenstock sandals, purple nylon shorts and a red polo-style shirt with an AIDS ribbon pinned to the collar.

A simple ivory cross, hung around his neck on a silver chain, is the only sign that Alfredo Sobalvarro is a priest — the pastor of a far-flung parish that stretches from Patchogue to Riverhead, from the western border of Suffolk County to the most rural points of the North Fork.

Today, Sobalvarro's congregation consists only of two men, Rodrigo Oliva and Nelson Peres, farmhands who have spent an hour huddled under a tree waiting for him and Barbara Archbold, his co-director in Vida Cristiana, an omnibus outreach program for Suffolk's Latino immigrant community.

As the rain dribbles from the tree's branches and Briermere's strawberry pies perfume the air, Father Sobalvarro ministers to his flock. Oliva — revealing the tattered sleeve of his blue denim work shirt — holds up a letter from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Sobalvarro translates: The INS has granted Oliva, a Guatemalan refugee, an appointment to take the citizenship test. Oliva tucks the letter into his shirt pocket and smiles.

Sobalvarro, left, in shorts, speaks to members of his parish at Briermere Farm in Riverhead. As for his secular pastoral garb, he says, "I never thought a habit made a monk."

Sobalvarro and Archbold's mission is so important to a man who sleeps in a barracks at the farm, does not own a car and, despite having lived in the U.S. for years, has not yet figured out how to maneuver through its perplexing bureaucracy.

"How about in Spanish?" Sobalvarro asks. "A little."

"Well, you will have to learn." Oliva's face falls until Sobalvarro places a calming hand on his back. For men who escaped a war-torn country where the word "disappeared" described tens of thousands executed by a military junta, learning enough

English to pass a test is just another challenge to be met with faith and perseverance.

For the past 10 years, Sobalvarro has applied to Long Island the principles he learned first as chaplain to Cesar Chavez' United Farm Worker movement in California in the 1970s and then as a "liberation theologian" in his native Guatemala. Last week, he celebrated his jubilee: 25 years a priest.

For a man with so many years invested in the Church, he has little interest in its traditional trappings. The son of a cattle rancher who declared that black-frocked priests resembled *zopilotes* — vultures — Sobalvarro has a distaste for clerical garb. He never

wears a clergyman's collar, walks out of masses in shorts with his vestments folded over his arm and is fond of saying, "I never thought a habit made a monk."

Sobalvarro keeps a room at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in Patchogue, but unlike a parish priest, he does not have one place that he can call home. His mission as co-pastor, with Archbold, of the Brookhaven Spanish Apostolate, takes him from weekly Spanish-language masses at St. Frances Cabrini in Coram to the Vida Cristiana storefront offices in Patchogue and Riverhead. He hears confession in the waiting room of Yaphank's county prison and consecrates the Eucharist on impromptu altars in the fields of the North Fork.

His approach to the priesthood is as unorthodox as his dress, but Sobalvarro is not alone in his belief that it is the only way to make himself available to the farm workers, day laborers and housekeepers he serves.

"We live in a very individualistic society and when immigrants come here from small villages, coming here can be a real shock," said Father Robert O'Connell, pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. "Vida Cristiana helps them to support each other in

acculturating. They take an active role in achieving social acceptance."

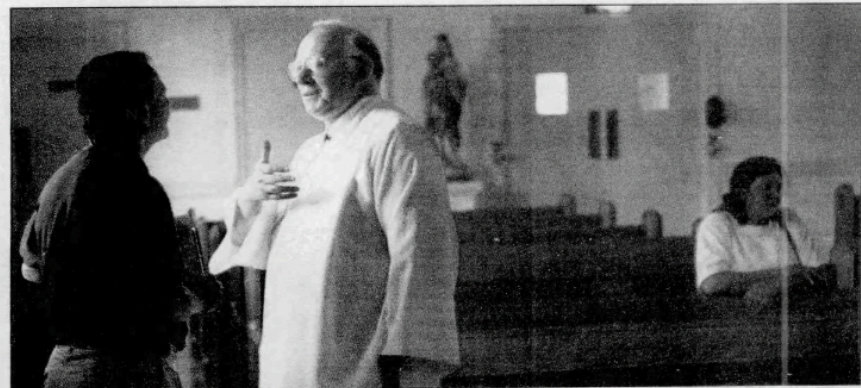
It is Sobalvarro's contention that he cannot sit in an office waiting for things to happen. "People do not come to the rectory where everybody speaks English and you have to make an appointment," he says in an accent laced with traces of Spanish. "At la Vida you just arrive."

Each day, in fact, they arrive by the dozens at Vida Cristiana, especially when Sobalvarro is present: Mondays and Tuesdays in Patchogue, Wednesdays in Riverhead. Their problems read like a catalog of the trials faced by many immigrants — especially those who have arrived illiterate, undocumented and, all too often, despised or discounted by the citizenry.

On a recent afternoon, Juan Romero comes because his boss owed him more than \$1,000 for seven weeks of roofing work. As a spider crawls across the leg of his dusty dungarees, Romero describes how his hammer arm is stiff from overuse and lifts his pants' leg to show a shin scarred by an on-the-job accident.

Maria Gonzales arrives unemployed and four months pregnant. The day before, her

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Sobalvarro celebrates mass in Spanish at St. Francis Cabrini Church. "There are a few things you can only do in your native language — one of them is worship."

Father Alfredo's Mission

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bosses at a cosmetics factory in Holtsville fired her because she left work to keep an ultrasound appointment. "They fired her because she was pregnant and, after working there a year, had vacation time coming," Sobalvarro says. "Things like this happen all the time."

Romero gets a letter signed by Sobalvarro requesting payment. If it doesn't work, Vida Cristiana will find him a lawyer. Gonzales has volunteer Elba Garcia call her supervisor to find out what happened. The supervisor says that Gonzales left work without permission. Garcia, a retired Suffolk County probation officer who is one of about 20 volunteer staffers, then calls the labor relations board to demand an investigation.

After being told "si tiene problemas, regrese" — if you have problems, just come back — both Romero and Garcia drop a few dollars in the glass jars that keep the offices open. Sobalvarro and Archbold receive modest stipends from the diocese for their work, and Our Lady of Mt. Carmel has pledged \$100 each month, but the bulk of the \$1,200 needed for rent and utilities comes from the tithing of their clients.

"We get most of it from the people," says Archbold, who has continued to work this week despite her husband's being hospitalized for a stroke. "It's not like the government, where everything has to be solved with programs."

Although it is a quasi-social service agency, providing HIV counseling, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, English classes and explanations of voluminous government paperwork, Vida Cristiana receives no government or diocesan funding.

"We are between the devil and the deep blue sea, but we prefer it that way," Sobalvarro says. "We can't do spiritual work with government money, and we can't do condoms with church money. We go from crisis to crisis."

Since Sobalvarro and Archbold transformed Vida Cristiana from what was essentially a social club for established Puerto Rican Catholics, it has earned a reputation that gets calls returned promptly from police and government officials and attracts clients from as far away as Queens.

"A lot of these people have just arrived here and they're afraid of coming to a hospital for medical care," said Jeri Eten, a nurse at South Brookhaven Health Clinic, to which many of Vida Cristiana's clients are referred. "Father Alfredo sends the patients here with a little note, and the people feel a lot more comfortable. He sends us people who never would have come to us otherwise. There is not one Latino person in the Patchogue area where you mention 'Padre Alfredo' and their eyes don't light up." The priest has seen his share of resistance from Long Islanders who aren't necessarily disposed to seeing the Church cater to the nation's most controversial population: undocumented immigrants.

Characteristically, Sobalvarro has little concern for the prejudices of others. "Some of the Americans wonder why we have mass in Spanish," he says. "It's the same crap that they use for the English-only laws. Some people might resent it, but there are a few things you can only do in your native language — one of them is worship."



Newday / Dick Yarwood

Sobalvarro helps the nation's most controversial population: undocumented immigrants.

Each Sunday morning, several hundred parishioners fill the pews for Sobalvarro's mass at St. Frances Cabrini Church in Coram. Many of them shake tambourines to the polyrhythms of the guitar choir. In 1987, Sobalvarro asked the former pastor for permission to use the church for Spanish masses. Yes, the pastor told him, but there aren't any Latinos around here.

In those early days when Sobalvarro was the only priest in Suffolk who spoke Spanish, he once stopped in at a Riverhead café where his bishop told him he might find some prospective parishioners. "We have been waiting for two years for a priest," they told me," Sobalvarro recalls.

At the guitar mass, families present boxes of cereal for the impoverished along with the gifts of wine and bread. Still in plastic shopping bags, the boxes are placed at the foot of the altar while Sobalvarro prays over communion.

The atmosphere, like the congregation's clothes, is casual. For every man wearing a fresh-pressed *guayabera* — a traditional shirt — there is another in a clean T-shirt. For every woman in a pair of patent leather pumps, another wears spotless white sneakers that have been set aside for such occasions.

When the time comes to present the sign of peace, the aisles take on the look of a class reunion. It seems as if the whole congregation has left its seats to

hug, kiss or shake hands with friends who have been sitting on the other side of the church. Before the mass ends, Sobalvarro invites all of them to attend his jubilee party. "Please come, because you are all my family."

Sobalvarro's intimate relationship with his parishioners takes his mission to unexpected places. A department store, for instance.

Under the fluorescent lights of the Middle Island Wal-Mart, Sobalvarro elevates a bag of Fruit of the Loom socks as if it were a chalice. He inspects the price tag and with his other hand hoists a similar package of Dickies socks.

Fruit of the Loom offers 10 pairs for \$7.47, a better bargain than the six pairs of Dickies, which go for \$6.96. Sobalvarro turns to Adolfo Illesces, 21, and tells him which package is more economical. A cook in a Greek restaurant, Illesces lives with his two older brothers in Southold. Sobalvarro occasionally brings him to Wal-Mart to show him that he can get better bargains than at the overpriced bodegas where many Latino immigrants feel more comfortable shopping.

Illesces is a gentle young man who has lived in the United States for three years. When he finds a shirt that has fallen to the floor, he puts it on a hanger and places it back on the rack. Like Sobalvarro, he fled political repression in Guatemala, but was not lucky

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—Jeri Eten, South Brookhaven Health Clinic

enough to escape unscathed.

"I was afraid to go to sleep in my own house," Illesces says. His subsequent "disappearance" and torture left his body covered in scars. Soldiers dumped him in the mountains believing he was dead.

Shortly after he arrived here and found a job as a landscaper, he fell out of a tree and could not work for nine months. For more than a year, Sobalvarro drove him back and forth to Manhattan so that he could apply for political asylum, which has since been granted.

After the shopping trip, Sobalvarro blesses Illesces' "new" car: a shiny gray 1986 Toyota Celica. Sobalvarro mutters a prayer and with his thumb makes the sign of the cross on the hood. Then he embraces Illesces and retraces the sign on the young man's forehead. "This is not in place of maintenance," he warns.

For the first time since he fled Guatemala, Sobalvarro returned to visit his family in December. He cut his trip short after four days, however, because he could not stand the atmosphere of fear that pervaded his countrymen. To prevent their children from being kidnapped, middle-class families must hire bodyguards. The outspoken, he said, are still awarded an assassin's bullet.

Those four days convinced Sobalvarro that he can never return to his homeland.

"If I was threatened before, they would shoot me now. I would probably pick up arms and go on a revolution. My thinking has changed so much that I would get shot."

If nothing else, the journey renewed Sobalvarro's dedication to struggle for the rights of the poor and bring the gospel to places where the Church hierarchy can find no purchase. In addition to the teachings of Christ, he calls on his memory of the men he describes as modern prophets: Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. Their spirits, he says, also inform his mission.

"Liberation theology tries to free man from the oppression of sin," he says. "Hunger, illiteracy and prejudice are the products of sin and greed. It can be applied to the city and applied in a place like Long Island. People who don't understand forget that Jesus came here as a liberator."

Sobalvarro is reluctant to concede that his own charisma has transformed the lives of many. He credits Archbold and the parishioners themselves with making Vida Cristiana work.

"It's a community involvement that goes beyond the priest," he says, leaning forward to emphasize his point. "Stories like mine are a dime a dozen. This is what is important to tell: It can be done!" •