

# Oh Come, All Ye Faithful

BY JENNIFER MARIE PELFINI

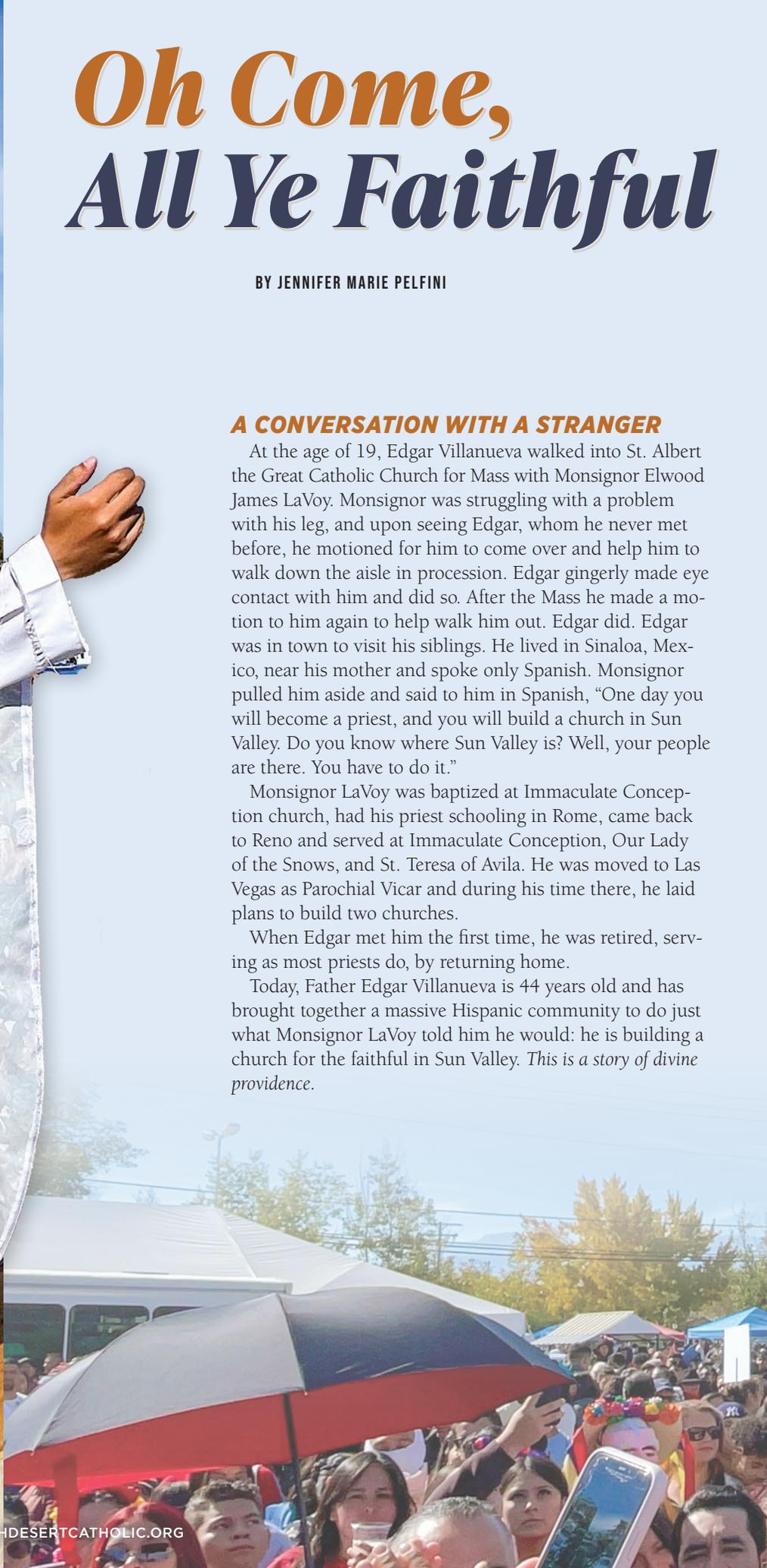
## A CONVERSATION WITH A STRANGER

At the age of 19, Edgar Villanueva walked into St. Albert the Great Catholic Church for Mass with Monsignor Elwood James LaVoy. Monsignor was struggling with a problem with his leg, and upon seeing Edgar, whom he never met before, he motioned for him to come over and help him to walk down the aisle in procession. Edgar gingerly made eye contact with him and did so. After the Mass he made a motion to him again to help walk him out. Edgar did. Edgar was in town to visit his siblings. He lived in Sinaloa, Mexico, near his mother and spoke only Spanish. Monsignor pulled him aside and said to him in Spanish, “One day you will become a priest, and you will build a church in Sun Valley. Do you know where Sun Valley is? Well, your people are there. You have to do it.”

Monsignor LaVoy was baptized at Immaculate Conception church, had his priest schooling in Rome, came back to Reno and served at Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of the Snows, and St. Teresa of Avila. He was moved to Las Vegas as Parochial Vicar and during his time there, he laid plans to build two churches.

When Edgar met him the first time, he was retired, serving as most priests do, by returning home.

Today, Father Edgar Villanueva is 44 years old and has brought together a massive Hispanic community to do just what Monsignor LaVoy told him he would: he is building a church for the faithful in Sun Valley. *This is a story of divine providence.*



## SAYING YES TO GOD'S PLAN

Upon returning to Mexico, Edgar didn't think much about this conversation with Monsignor LaVoy. But it must have been filed in the back of his mind. At the age of 20, he realized he wanted more purpose in his life. Inspired by an article he'd read about the shortage of priests, he enrolled in seminary in Tijuana, Mexico. "I had always known there was a need for priests that could minister in Spanish. I read that in America there were 11 million undocumented Hispanic immigrants of which 90% were Catholic. That they abandon their faith, just because there is no way for them to communicate and feel accepted." Edgar's visits to his family supported this. The Diocese of Reno's largest ethnic group is Hispanic. And in the diocese, those of Hispanic descent comprise the biggest population of those who receive sacraments.

During one of his visits while at seminary, he had an interview with Bishop Straling. After the meeting, the bishop offered him the opportunity to study at the University of Nevada Reno in the English program, with the understanding he would apply for seminary in the United States to serve in Reno as a priest. Edgar relocated to Reno and attended the program, and upon graduation he applied to become a seminarian at Assumption Seminary in San Antonio, Texas. He was ordained in Reno in 2008, and his first parish assignment was to St. Teresa of Avila, which serves a primarily Hispanic population. He was then assigned to St. John the Baptist in Lovelock, a rural community church. After six years, during the usual period of reassignment, Bishop Calvo encouraged him to apply to be assigned to St. Peter Canisius in Sun Valley. Father Edgar ignored the request and had faith he would be placed where he was supposed to be. Months later, before attending Chrism Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral, he made a quick visit to Monsignor LaVoy, who was now residing at St. Mary's Hospital. What he didn't know was that the monsignor was very ill, and this would be his last visit and confession. The monsignor said to him, "Bishop [Calvo] is going to call you and ask you to go to St. Peter in Sun Valley." Father Edgar shared that he had asked him to apply but said he was not interested.

Bishop Calvo called Father Edgar a few days later and said, "I think you are going to Sun Valley. Aren't you surprised?" Father Edgar replied, "I knew you were going to call me." Monsignor LaVoy passed away on April 15, 2011.

Father Edgar was brought to tears when he was told that he was to be the recipient of Monsignor LaVoy's chasuble made from Korean fabric that he wore during his ordination and his breviary. He realized that this Sun Valley assignment was inevitable. He had to do this.

When he arrived at St. Peter Canisius full of anticipation of what would it be like, he found that there were the same number of parishioners as he had had at St. John the Baptist. Between 25 and 35 people attended Mass even though the church was located in a well-populated, though impoverished, area. During his first Mass, it was pouring rain. He was taken aback by the condition of the church as rain dripped from the rooftop. Parishioners showed up at Mass with buckets in tow. He couldn't believe it. The church had no pews, just folding chairs, and the carpet, which was likely 20 or 30 years old, smelled of must and was ripped and torn. There was only one bathroom, and it had no toilet seat. How could this be? As he dug in, he found there was no staff, no ministries, no pastoral council, no financial council, no altar servers, no eucharistic ministers — he was the only person to support it all. The people had come to accept that one priest would do it all, and the people did not trust the church's longevity, so their commitment was weak. Father Edgar changed that by recognizing need for and building the infrastructure of the church. Over the course of a few years, the parish grew and kept growing as he consistently ministered in Spanish, connecting with the people, really seeing them. He expanded church services from one to four Masses, and three out of the four were in Spanish. The congregation grew as he developed trust with the people, and they filled the church. The church and parish in both its poor condition and size could not support the thousands of people showing up for Mass every weekend. For context, it is estimated that in 2023 this parish is



the largest in the diocese, with many thousands of people. In 2022, it alone comprised one third of all Confirmations in the diocese.

As the priest and the congregation's relationship strengthened, together they began to identify projects for repair and contributed funds, time, talent, and service to patch up the growing list of issues. Capacity at the church was 227, and on any given Sunday it would overflow with people out into the parking lot. It was normal to see parishioners kneeling in the hot summer heat or the cold snow outside the church, filling the parking lot with their families and lining several streets with cars.

### **THE TIME IS NOW**

Father Edgar worked with parishioners to start raising money as he now understood why he was sent to this parish. He could see how meeting Monsignor LaVoy and the vision he shared with him was his undeniable destiny from God.

The parishioners, most of whom survived on meager cash-basis jobs without benefits, supported multigenerational families, and living in rented homes, responded by contributing what they could. They started to hold kermes (a Mexican fiesta) once a month and raised money by selling tamales, tacos, and other food, sharing their culture and love of entertainment and worship in the community. Father Edgar made a promise to God that they would never raise money by selling alcohol, so the fundraising was a slow process, but it demonstrated the dedication of the parish and people.

In a sermon one Sunday he told the parishioners, "We are going to build a bigger church, and that means we need you to help even more than you already have. If you feel comfortable with it, speak with your bosses and employers and invite them to come and share the good news about what we are trying to do here." This was now everyone's mission.

As parishioners shared with their employers and brought them to Mass, they immediately understood the situation and were touched in their hearts by the attendance at Mass, far greater than any parish they had ever seen in the diocese of Reno. Two of those parishioners happened to work with Tom Dolan as landscapers and at his Dodge dealership. Tom Dolan, owner and founder of Dolan Auto Group in Reno, is a known benefactor to the diocese and has contributed millions of dollars and many hours to schools, churches and people within the diocese. The parishioners shared their concern, passion, and the purpose with the church with him and invited him to come to Sunday Mass.

When Tom pulled up into the parking lot, he was shocked by what he saw. As an Irish Catholic (with a brother in the clergy in San Diego), he was raised in a family of strong faith. He'd been in churches and attending Mass all his life. He walked into the church and was seated at the front of the parish in a folding chair. As a community leader in business, he could see all the problems before him. But what brought him to tears were the people who had overflowed the church into the parking lot and were kneeling



St. Peter Canisius Catholic Church Front Entry Elevation

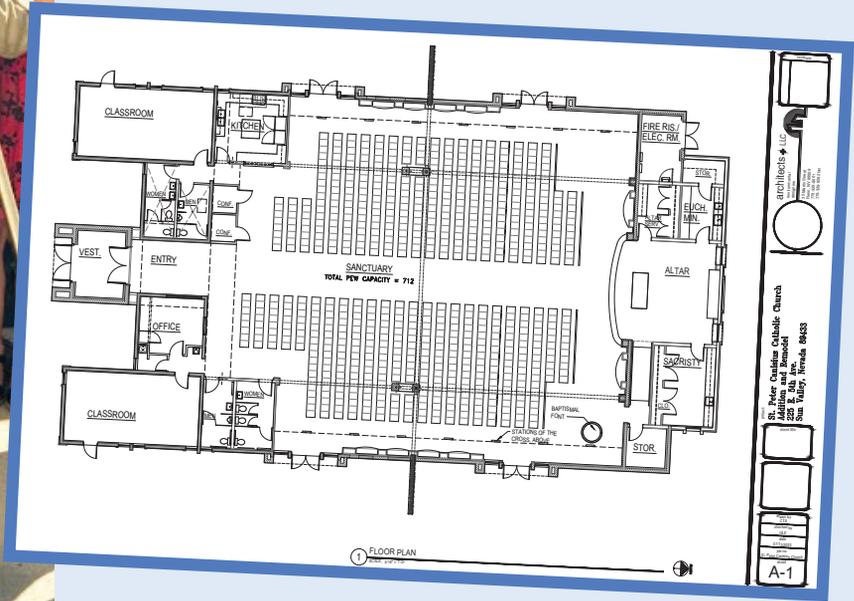
on the dirt and rock-hard asphalt. After Mass, he met Father Edgar. He went home, unable to shake what he had seen. He decided that he was going to help.

### **DEMONSTRATING EMPATHY AND INVESTING IN PEOPLE**

Tom invited Father Edgar to his home along with Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg, key staff from the diocese, and the two parishioners who had brought him to the church. He needed to know more and understand. The people invited would have answers for him.

At the time, Father Edgar was on crutches. Tom could see his pain and knew that the priest had probably never been to a home such as his. "He immediately made me feel welcome. Got me a chair and pillow for my foot. After dinner and hearing the details of our parish struggles, he took it upon himself to call friends he knew that were doctors. At midnight he knocked on the doors of friends of his to care for me. After he arranged for me to see doctors to help me. I felt that he saw me, he was invested in me, and he genuinely cared for me." Father Edgar was right.

Tom would demonstrate this by personally investing his own money into the project and by reaching out to his business friends to come to the church and experience the devoted people. All of this supplemented the \$866,000 the parish had raised. There are no words to describe how committed he is to this project. He attends every meeting, is involved in every permit, and has hired Pinecrest Construction (a parishioner-owned business) to ensure that people who live in Sun Valley are doing the work on the contracts. Tom has spoken with the parishioners, and attends all of the kermes. He loves and embraces the community. He also asks a lot of them, "Instead of \$1 throw in \$5. I have contributed \$1 million to this project, and we must all work together to secure the rest needed. *You* belong here, this is *your* church." He's been repeatedly stunned to see families



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cleaning the church, including each one of the folding chairs, before Mass and how they work to keep the church cared for. “The people in this parish work so hard, for so little.” As Father Edgar says, “There are poor Hispanics in the diocese of Reno, but this is poverty. When they give \$5, it takes away from something they need.”

St. Peter Canisius held the groundbreaking Mass, ceremony and another fundraising kermes on October 15, 2023. Fifty thousand (\$50,000) was raised in one day in food sales and it estimated over 6,000 people were at the celebration supporting the event. On that day, 3,025 people attended Mass.

### **A FUTURE FOR THE FAITHFUL**

Sun Valley is one of the most disadvantaged communities in our diocese. During the pandemic, they suffered great sickness and tragic deaths. When Father Edgar invited a vaccine clinic to the church for 150 people, 300 showed up. Sun Valley has the perfect storm of poverty, drugs, and crime. Father Edgar has worked with the diocese to identify and secure grant money for programs to support the people in these circumstances. Father Edgar has both a YouTube channel and Facebook page of his own, which he uses to share his communications in Spanish, and he works tirelessly to ensure the trusted relationship continues to thrive. Every week, he receives thousands of views and comments simply because the parishioners want to be connected with him and the parish in the language they can understand. He is out with his parishioners solving problems and guiding them in their faith every day of the week.

During this transition and building of the church, Tom Dolan purchased a property across from his Dodge dealership to support the parish with a place to worship. The first floor will be the church, and the second floor will provide space for the many children and families who are receiving sacraments. St. Peter's currently has 875 students between the ages of 7 and 17 enrolled in faith formation classes for 2023-2024.

Upon completion the church, its capacity will more than double in size from 227 to 755. That means in a weekend, close to 4,000 people will be able to attend Mass and have a pew to sit on, a kneeler to kneel on, and a roof to protect them from the elements, so they can worship in peace.

“

**SEE, THEN! THE LORD HAS CHOSEN YOU TO BUILD A HOUSE AS HIS SANCTUARY. BE STRONG AND SET TO WORK.”**

(1 CHR 28:10)

Despite multiple challenges, every weekend the faithful come to church and overflow it. This is what the faith of the first and second generations of Mexican Americans looks like. Their faith is what they live by, and in some cases, it is all they have. To have the opportunity to go to this parish and witness the love, commitment, and hope they have in God is providential, just like the journey that brought Father Edgar and Tom Dolan together to build a church in Sun Valley. †



### **WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP SUPPORT THIS PROJECT?**

Please take the “ONE CHURCH COLLECTION: THE ST. PETER CANISIU CHURCH REMODEL AND ADDITION PROJECT” envelope in this issue to Mass on Christmas or use the QR code printed on it to donate. Through your contribution, you will be a part of the rebuilding of St. Peter Canisius church and will support the faithful who attend there.