



Faithful citizenship sparks nonpartisan voter rallies at Houston parishes

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By Jo Ann Zuñiga, Texas Catholic Herald

HOUSTON — While 2020 will be seared in many memories because of the pandemic, parishioner Bettys Arenas de Ruiz of All Saints Catholic Church in the Heights will remember becoming a U.S. citizen this year, voting for the first time in the Nov. 3 presidential election.

She also helped the church form a phone bank to recruit parishioners to call “low-propensity voters,” urging them to vote to make their voices heard no matter

which candidate they chose. The phone bank called more than 1,000 people to offer encouragement, answer any questions about polling places and even offered transportation referrals if needed.

“I was so happy after I voted! But now I’m sad that the results are still being fought over,” she said.

Arenas de Ruiz, formerly of Venezuela, had been among parishioners in Harris County, Fort Bend and Brazoria counties who took the three-day leadership training offered by The Metropolitan Organization (TMO), a nonprofit grassroots group. In mid-summer, more than 1,250 TMO leaders from 30 churches and other institutions convened on Zoom and Facebook watch parties for a virtual “Get out the Vote Rally” and made thousands of phone calls to 16 Harris County precincts that traditionally had low voter turnout.



St. Leo the Great Catholic Church parishioners organized voter caravans to encourage faithful citizenship and voting in the community. After driving through the neighborhoods with signs, they supported voting to make sure local citizens made their voices heard. (Photo: St. Leo the Great Catholic Church)

At St. Leo the Great Catholic Church, parishioners after Masses in October formed car caravans through nearby neighborhoods, said St. Leo's Social Services Director Sorina Serrano.

"They wore masks and gloves and held up signs to motivate people to vote for whomever they supported," Serrano said.

The caravans then drove to an early voting polling place and cast their ballots at the Baker Ripley community center in Aldine.

"Our whole point was to provide faithful citizenship," she said. "First-time voters were nervous, but they asked good questions like 'what type of identification do I need to take to the polls?'"

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has offered a teaching document on the political responsibilities of Catholics called "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." The document urges all pastors, lay and religious faithful and all people of good will "to help form consciences, teach those entrusted to their care; to contribute to civil and respectful public dialogue and to shape politics."

Father Rodney Armstrong of Our Mother of Mercy Catholic Church in Fifth Ward and his parishioners set up a voter registration table at a nearby McDonald's fast-food restaurant with owner approval. The pastor also made a video that TMO placed on its Facebook to encourage voters.

Dr. Fernando Scaglia, a parishioner at Assumption Catholic Church off Airline Drive, said he participated in the church's phone bank as well despite his busy schedule as a researcher and professor of genetics at Baylor College of Medicine.

"I believe in social justice, which is one of the tenets of the Catholic Church," Scaglia said. "Although I live and work in the Texas Medical Center area, I belong to Assumption Church, and a lot of people in need go there."

He also participated in "Virtual Accountability Sessions," where TMO invited candidates from Democratic and Republican parties to discuss how they stood on a variety of issues.

"There are so many important issues that impact all of us — health and the pandemic; economic issues like evictions and even the DACA issue for dreamers," Dr. Scaglia said.

He concluded, "Leadership training is an important teaching on how to work together even if others think differently than us."