



The Rev. Conran Runnebaum, top left, blesses Emilio Abeyta while giving him communion at Abeyta's home at San Ildefonso Pueblo. Above, Runnebaum during Mass at Tesuque Pueblo. At left, Dorothy Pecos, godmother, holds Amanda Pablita Naranjo during baptism at Santa Clara Pueblo church.

Photos by Mario Villaverde

## Hallelujah! No rest for busy pueblo priest

By ROSANNA HALL  
The New Mexican Staff

The Rev. Conran Runnebaum stepped from a small and shiny gray Pontiac car at San Diego Catholic Church in Tesuque Pueblo at 8 a.m. on a chilly December Sunday.

The boyish and ebullent 33-year-old man lagged at his long, brown Franciscan priest's robe as he lit his first Mass that morning at three northern Indian pueblos.

As he arrived, 45 Tesuque Indians drifted into the old church built between 1875-1882. The adobe walls and creaking wood floor spoke of an earlier time when priests and Indians may have lived at a tenuous pace.

It really, Runnebaum leads a hectic life as the only one of the approximately 25 Franciscan missionaries in Santa Fe. At children who serve more than one Indian reservation. He also serves San Ildefonso and Santa Clara pueblos.

On this Sunday, he arrived at Tesuque with a message on Advent. The priest aligned, donned a purple and gold vestment over the brown robe and entered the old church through a side door. He crossed to the center of the altar and greeted the worshippers.

The old church may not see many more years, though. So the priest reminded the parishioners that they should work harder at collecting money through a raffle to build a new church in the main

plaza near the present edifice.

"Come home for Christmas this year," he told his congregation. "Return to God." He told the congregation that they may, at times, wonder why God allows 12,000 people to die in an earthquake in Italy allows Americans to be held hostage in Iran and permits a gang of four to be tried for treason in China.

During a hymn, a dog wandered in but was found and ushered out of the long white room.

The priest offered communion. A young woman came, a blue and a pink angel hung overhead at the back of the main altar. Two choir boys dressed in white robes, trimmed in red were at the priest's side.

Then, at 9:15 a.m., with only 15 minutes to drive nearly 15 miles to his second Mass at Santa Clara Pueblo, the priest left the sanctuary. Outside, he rang the old church bell as the congregation sang "Oh Come, Emmanuel."

The Santa Clara church is larger than the Tesuque sanctuary. The sanctuary walls are painted in orange with pottery symbols of birds and oak on the altar walls. A large crucifix hangs in an altar above painted baroque. The altar cloth of white is designed with geometric patterns in turquoise and black. Runnebaum in his purple vestment added more color as he approached the altar.

He spoke the same service in rapid distinct words which, at times, lapsed into a sing-song rhythm. He moved briskly around

the altar with a bounce in his step.

"Let us continue to serve one another," he said. And 120 people sang "God's Blessings Send Us Forth."

At 10:30 a.m., Runnebaum performed two baptisms. He looked nervous and probably wondered how he could get to San Ildefonso church by 11 a.m., the church is a mile away.

As he drove into San Ildefonso Pueblo at 11 a.m., the church facade was intensely lit by the southern sun. In contrast, the front wooden door was shaded by a long wooden hallway. The grave stones in the cemetery in front seemed to stand guard over the imposing adobe structure. The bright blue sky intensified the sandy color of the water walls.

The church bell rang in a bell tower as parishioners filed inside. Inside the walls are stark white. Above the crucifix at the back of the altar is an oyle de Dios. Santos stand on wall brackets. A flagstone floor lends a richness and solemnity to the decor.

The San Ildefonso Mass is the last church service for the priest each Sunday. But his day does not end there. Each Sunday afternoon Runnebaum returns to Santa Clara or Tesuque Pueblo to attend baptismal dinners and make house calls.

Finally, Runnebaum's Sunday mission work which begins when he serves at 8 a.m. ends at 8:10.

Indians are people of God and too long they have been treated as

second class citizens," Runnebaum said during an interview at his apartment at the San Ildefonso Catholic Church.

"I am fascinated by these people. Their pace of life is not rush, rush. They take time to know Christ. They take time to appreciate God in nature."

One of his parishioners described him as friendly and relaxed person who takes interest in each person, and family.

Runnebaum said he also is fascinated by the way church and Indian religious ceremonies are blended. "Out here, there is an Indianization in the church. We accept the Indian culture."

At Christmas Eve Masses, Indians will add to the event their traditional dances.

"Their whole culture is centered in dance. They bespeak a religious depth in nature," he said.

The priest said he enjoys Indian dancing because it is a way of "showing their gifts in dance form."

After 1 1/2 years as itinerant priest to Tesuque, Santa Clara and

San Ildefonso pueblos, Runnebaum knows most of the 300 Indians in the three pueblos served by his mission. He will help them celebrate the birth of Christ and meet their spiritual and secular needs during the coming year.

The medium-height man with neatly styled light brown hair, clean-shaven face and smiling eyes protected by tinted glasses, spoke enthusiastically about a busy mission.

When Runnebaum was assigned to the three mission churches by the Bureau of Catholic Indian Services, he lived at St. Francis Cathedral in Santa Fe. Then friends offered to furnish an apartment in a former meeting room at San Ildefonso Catholic Church.

The apartment is furnished with a deep cushioned sofa, lounge chairs and shag carpet. Around the walls hang paintings of New Mexican landscapes and churches. In spite of the he was suffering during the interview, Runnebaum continued to fulfill his busy weekly schedule.

As he drives from 10 to 15 miles

between each pueblo, he has time to reflect on his Sunday sermon. By Friday, if the notes he has made on sermon ideas do not gel, he rewrites his message.

The priest is a member of the Franciscan Order of St. John the Baptist Province formed in 1983 to serve in the Southwest where there was a shortage of priests, he said. He was ordained in 1965 and has served at Acuna, Jemez, Tia and Santa Ana pueblos.

"When I was first out of seminary school, I felt my mission was to go to China," he said. "But in 1960, China was closed to the order. And when I was asked where I'd like to work, I said, the Southwest."

He said he is devoted to the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Virgin who appeared as an Indian woman to a Mexican Juan Diego in the 1500s.

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At left, Runnebaum gives communion to church members. Desideria Sanchez Poveka, right, is blessed by Runnebaum at her home in San Ildefonso Pueblo.

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He said a priest at his post has to have a "presence and vitality. And I'm very interested in the needs of the people, whether spiritual or temporal."

Christmas Eve is one of his busiest days. He will give Mass at San Ildefonso at 10 p.m. and a midnight Mass at Tesuque. And on Christmas day he will attend Indian dances at 9 a.m. at Santa Clara and at 10 a.m. at San Ildefonso.

According to custom, Pueblo Indians share gifts through dance. And he is fascinated by the variety different cultures have lent to Christmas in the United States.

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