

Reconciliation Heals Wound

People From Two Religions Mend Hurt

BY PAUL LOGAN
Journal Staff Writer

Ruby and Fred Martinez symbolize how Dixon has changed almost a half-century after a controversial religious court case jolted the community.

Ruby, a Catholic, and Fred, a Presbyterian, said they've shared a happy marriage for 33 years.

"It means we compromise and we don't necessarily have to understand everything, but you learn to accept things," Fred said. "We're kind of living what these people are expressing through this reconciliation ceremony."

The small rural community in

northern New Mexico will play host this afternoon to a historic reconciliation involving the state's Catholic and Presbyterian leaders, including Archbishop Michael Sheehan and the Rev. Jim Collie, regional presbyter.

Several hundred members of both churches are expected to attend.

The town was chosen because of the bitterness between the two churches that occurred there in 1951 after the "Dixon Decision."

Collie recalled how a group of Protestants, led by a Presbyterian, formed a school committee and brought suit in state court against the state Board of Education.

The group challenged the right of Catholic nuns, wearing habits, to teach religion as part of the curriculum in public schools in Dixon and other towns.

Nuns had been teaching in New Mexico Catholic schools since long before statehood. As public schools opened earlier in the century in predominantly Hispanic and Catholic outlying areas, nuns, who were available and qualified, were hired as teachers, said the Rev. Ernest Falardeau of the archdiocese's ecumenical office.

Meanwhile, some schools run by the Presbyterian Church and other Protestant denominations closed and those students entered public schools.

"It's kind of 'that's the way it was,'" he said. "Priests and nuns were in place long before it became a state. It was more of a continuation of what was."

After World War II, concern grew about Catholicism being taught in some of the state's public schools

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AARON WILSON/JOURNAL

SPIRIT OF RECONCILIATION: Ruby Martinez displays one of two identical New Mexico tinwork plaques in the family's apple orchard near Dixon. She and her husband, Fred, made the plaques for the two Dixon churches hosting the Pentecost reconciliation ceremony today.

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and the lawsuit was filed in 1947.

The court ruled in favor of the Protestants, the decision based on the separation of church and state.

Falardeau said the decision was "quite wrenching" to Catholics.

It climaxed a century of disagreements between Catholics and Presbyterians as both sought to convert followers. But, Collie said, "the history of friction does not need to control the future."

Dixon also was chosen for the ceremony because many members of both churches are examples to the rest of the state of how to live and work together, he said.

"In a sense," Collie said, "we're following them into the future and recognizing what they have done."

Ruby, 51, is a tinsmith, and Fred, 56, is a mechanical designer at Los Alamos National Laboratory. They made commemorative plaques for the two churches.

The plaques show a tin dove, depicting the Holy Spirit, and a copper flame. Today is the Christian festival of Pentecost, recalling the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples in the form of tongues of fire.

The gathering on Pentecost is symbolic of the Holy Spirit's power to bring Christians together in a unity that could not have been imagined two generations ago, according to the archdiocese.

The Martinezes said the school conflict was before their time. But Fred said that as a child he heard people talk about "the hard feelings between the two religions."

If old wounds still exist in Dixon, a community of about 800 that is known for growing apples, the Martinezes said they didn't know of any.

They attend each other's services.

Reconciliation ceremony

WHEN: Today, 4 p.m.

WHERE: Dixon Civic Plaza, east of N.M. 68.

HOW MUCH: A collection will be taken for the Embudo Clinic, and free refreshments will be served.

"To me it doesn't matter which church you go to because God is there," Ruby said.

The ceremony will include the pastors of both parishes — the Rev. Andrew McComb of the Presbyterian Church and the Rev. Adam Ortega of St. Anthony Church — exchanging pulpits.

Collie said this will be first reconciliation meeting ever in the United States of regional leaders of the two faiths. He said he hopes the gathering will help in "bridging the gap between life events" — such as baptisms and marriages — that both celebrate.

Collie's presbytery, or local governing body, covers about the northern two-thirds of the state and represents about 8,000 Presbyterians from 43 congregations.

The ceremony's focus is on respect for each other's faith and on working together, said Sheehan, whose archdiocese has about 300,000 members in 91 parishes and about 250 mission churches.

"I'm very excited about it," he said. "I think it will be a good catalyst about respect and living with one another and focusing on things we have in common and not just the things that separate us."