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If a Diverse Congregation Were Cash, This Church Would Be Rich

By [JENNIFER MEDINA](#)

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SPRING VALLEY, N.Y., March 27 - Just before 1 p.m. on Easter Sunday, Raymond Blanco's job directing traffic in the parking lot of the Church of Saint Joseph started to turn hectic.

First, there were the hundreds who had just left the Roman Catholic Mass, in English, in the main sanctuary. Minutes later, an even larger crowd began to spill out of the gymnasium, where more than 1,000 people had packed in for the Spanish service. And almost as many were showing up for the Haitian-Creole Mass that was about to begin.

Mr. Blanco, who considers himself Nuyorican, stood in the middle of it all - waving at drivers with quick precision and beaming with a mix of pride and amusement.

"This place is completely different than it was when I first came," said Mr. Blanco, who joined the parish after moving from the Bronx more than a decade ago. "We call it the rainbow church. It's like the United Nations."

As immigrants have settled in this working-class Rockland County village, the weekly attendance at Saint Joseph's has ballooned to nearly 4,000 people, spread among services in English, Spanish, Haitian-Creole and Polish each week.

With the crowds bigger than ever on Sunday, it was possible to hear Easter greetings in any of those languages - sprinkled with a bit of Tagalog, Bengali and Vietnamese.

As his flock marches by, the Rev. Rudolph Gonzalez delights in listening to the languages change and watching the skin tones shift. There's a refrain he is fond of using: "This is the way God wants it."

"It is what he wants to see," Father Gonzalez, known to members as Father Rudy, said sitting in his car after one of the morning Masses. "For some people, there is so much excitement in seeing all these kinds of people. There are others who would reject that. They don't come here."

For years, Saint Joseph's was contained in a simple small chapel at the end of Main Street. Then, in 1995, the parish dedicated a building more than four times bigger, with a high beamed ceiling, ornate stained glass windows and a large stone fountain holding



Susan Stava for The New York Times
The Rev. Rudolph Gonzalez giving communion to his multicultural parishioners on Easter Sunday.

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holy water. Each week, the building is filled to capacity for nearly a dozen services.

"There is so much faith and so much tradition," said Similia Gasper, 35, who has attended Saint Joseph's since she immigrated from India nearly a decade ago. "This country is a different landscape. There is not always humility in people. But we have that in church, where people keep their own ways and customs."

Even as the parish's population soars, the Archdiocese of New York announced last month that it planned to close the small school here, which has struggled for years to maintain enrollment. This year there are about 130 students, fewer than half the number just five years ago. Meanwhile, the church's after-school program has almost doubled, to nearly 650 students.

"This is a community with a lot of immigrants and a lot of people who are too poor to pay the tuition," Father Gonzalez said, adding that the archdiocese and the church's weekly collection had contributed more than \$300,000 in subsidies in recent years. The tuition varies among families, but hovers around \$300 to \$400 a month. "No matter what it is, for many it is still beyond their means."

Priscilla Gerard, whose 4-year-old son, Matthieu, is enrolled in the pre-kindergarten program, said she planned to move him to another Catholic school nearby. Though she said she was disappointed with the closing, Ms. Gerard said she hoped the change would also mean her son could attend a school with even more diversity.

"There aren't very many white children" at Saint Joseph's, said Ms. Gerard, whose parents are from the Dominican Republic and Guadeloupe and whose husband is Haitian. "I do think he has to be around more kinds of children because the world outside isn't like that."

Still, Ms. Gerard said, there is a kind of richness at Saint Joseph's that can come only from such a varied population. She pointed to a bulletin board where flags from more than a dozen countries surrounded a quotation from the Book of Psalms: "O Lord, let all nations praise you."

The same phrase is repeated on the church's bumper sticker, and its meaning was evident in the church pews during the 9 a.m. English Mass. Skin tones and clothing representing many nationalities could be seen in nearly every row, the physical differences only highlighted as people knelt to pray in unison.

And again, the same kind of variety could be seen during the Spanish service. There, diversity has had a bit of a different meaning for Edgar Ramirez, who organizes the musicians.

After joining Saint Joseph's three years ago, he realized that while the Latin American immigrants had many of the same religious customs, their musical tastes and skills were a bit more difficult to bridge. Colombian cumbias had to blend with Dominican merengues, and Mexican rancheras had to mix with Ecuadorean ballads.

"I have to keep so many people happy," he said, adding that he might change the music selection depending on the crowd. "There are so many different tunes. But it is all the same words. All my music is for God."

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