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JERSEY

3 Kings Transform a Church



Sylvia Kapuscinski for The New York Times

EPIPHANY PLAY Laila Gonzalez teaching roles in a Three Kings Day play at a church in Plainfield.By KEVIN COYNE
Published: January 6, 2008

Plainfield

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CHRISTMAS had passed, but in the auditorium of the old parish school, the Rev. Rafael Velázquez was just starting to cast a Nativity scene. He chose his Mary and his Joseph and then he turned to the three boys

dangling their feet off the edge of the stage, switching out of the Spanish he had been speaking and making an emphatic declaration in English.

“You will be the shepherds,” he said.

St. Mary’s [Roman Catholic Church](#) is the kind of sturdy red-brick Gothic parish complex familiar in many [New Jersey](#) cities — church, convent, rectory and school, built by immigrant Irish Catholics, sustained by their children and grandchildren, and inherited by another group of immigrants who speak a different language, and who have altered the rhythms of the liturgical calendar, especially in the weeks before and after Christmas.

The school at St. Mary’s closed more than two decades ago, after an exodus of white families from Plainfield, but its auditorium will be crowded again on Jan. 6, the feast of the Epiphany, which ends the Christmas season. Hundreds of children will wait eagerly on the hardwood floor that once filled for basketball games, assemblies and graduations, watching the play that Father Velázquez wrote and then turning toward the door to greet the three kings who will arrive with gifts for the infant Jesus, and for them.

This parish in the city’s West End will look like the parishes their parents left behind in Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico or one of the other Spanish-speaking countries where Three

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Kings Day is celebrated more fervently than in the United States.

“O’Keefes, McDonoughs, Meaney’s,” said Jack O’Malley, 72, listing some of the family names once prevalent in the parish where he has worshiped since 1959; where his five children went to school; where he still attends the 8 a.m. Mass each day; and where he and his wife, Sheila, helped start and run the Sunday-afternoon soup kitchen that has served 50,000 meals since 1996.

He played one of the kings last year in what was only a minor celebration when his own children were young. “It wasn’t the big pageant that it is today,” he said. “That really started with the Spanish groups.”

It has grown into one of the most elaborate pageants in the Archdiocese of Newark, where Hispanics account for almost half of the 1.3 million Catholics, and 78 of the 230 parishes offer Masses in Spanish. Of the 3,500 people who attend Mass at St. Mary’s each weekend, 92 percent are Hispanic, a number that has been rising since the late 1970s and that has surged in more recent years with an influx of Mexicans.

“We will try to bring horses,” said Father Velázquez, 38, who was born in Spain and has served at St. Mary’s since 2006. “We will see the kings come on horses from Plainfield Avenue and then on Sixth Street, and it will be good.”

The children will file up onto the stage to receive small gifts from the three kings, as their parents beam and, the priests at St. Mary’s hope, are perhaps also moved to come to church a bit more often.

“When the immigrants come to this country, the first thing they do when they arrive is come to church to give thanks to the Lord because they are here, but after a month they do not come anymore,” said the Rev. Jorge Ortiz, 37, the other Spanish-speaking priest among the three at St. Mary’s, and one of only a handful of Mexican-born priests in the archdiocese. He was a lawyer in Mexico City before he studied at the Immaculate Conception Seminary at [Seton Hall](#) and was ordained in 2004. “When immigrants come here they lose three things: faith, family and culture.”

Three Kings is one way to draw them back in. Another is the celebration that bookends the season, the feast day on Dec. 12 of Our Lady of Guadalupe, a 16th-century apparition of the Virgin Mary that is widely and deeply venerated among Spanish-speaking Catholics, especially Mexicans. In June, St. Mary’s received a gold-framed copy of the image from Mexico and placed it at an altar in the church that was previously home to a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

“We asked his permission,” Father Ortiz said. “He said, This is my mother, so she can stay there.”

Parishioners joined a procession from downtown Plainfield to St. Mary’s when the image arrived, and then again on the feast day, when 4,500 people passed through the church.

“This is the time of the year when we can get some attention,” said Father Ortiz, who, with Father Velázquez, goes knocking on doors like a missionary every Thursday evening, trying to draw people back to the church. “If they see something and they can remember, ‘Aah, I did this back in my country, aah, my grandmother did that, or my mother,’ they feel something.”

In the school auditorium, parents were arriving to pick their children up at the end of the first rehearsal. Everybody had a part, but one central role remained unfilled. “The baby is always the last,” said Jennifer Sanchez, 18, who played Mary two years ago but was helping offstage this year. And then she spotted a boy whose family, she knew, had a potential candidate. “Can we use your brother?”

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