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Changing With Times, a Parish Prospers

By JENNIFER MEDINA
Published: April 16, 2008

The morning service begins with the swift tap-tap-tap of drums, accented with horns. “El Señor es mi pastor,” the band sings out, echoed by loud claps from the pews.

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Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

The Church of the Ascension, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, has “everybody: Americans, Peruvians, Mexicans, Ecuadoreans, everyone,” a parishioner said.

Hours later, another set of parishioners listens in reverent silence to an operatic rendition of “Come, ye faithful, raise the strain” as the faint sweet smoke of incense floats above.

That evening, yet another band belts out, “People get ready, there’s a train comin’ — all you need is faith to hear the diesels hummin’,” to the thumping bass of a three-piece jazz combo.

Three services, three music styles, three very different congregations, one parish: Church of the Ascension on the Upper West Side.

At a time when the [Roman Catholic Church](#) is grappling with sexual abuse scandals, a shortage of priests and the consolidating of churches and schools in many urban areas, including dozens in New York City, Ascension stands as just one example of a parish that remains a vibrant presence in the lives of its ever-changing — and still growing — congregation.

The church has remained relevant for more than 1,500 parishioners not just by varying music styles, but by adapting to the shifting neighborhood and times. At a shrine in one corner of the church, there are pictures of Virgin Marys from across the world. A martini night has replaced coffee hour after Sunday evening Mass. There are citizenship and English classes for immigrants, an active lay leadership and welcoming messages to gays and lesbians.

“We have a great richness in the city here, in our neighborhood, and that has to be reflected in our parish, in our worship,” said the Rev. John P. Duffell, the pastor. “You have to observe and respond to what you have and see.”

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The 11 a.m. Mass, in English, is one of three services, with three different music styles, for three quite different congregations.

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The Sunday evening jazz Mass attracts 200 to 300 people, most under 40. The church also has a monthly martini night.

In many ways, Father Duffell, 64, strays from the orthodoxy and formality preached by [Pope Benedict XVI](#), who arrives in New York City on Friday. But the pope is also expected to praise the vibrancy of the American church; and in New York City, with 2.5 million to 3 million Roman Catholics, few parishes are as alive as Ascension.

Tucked between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue on 107th Street, the parish draws Latino immigrants, scholars with ties to [Columbia University](#) nearby and a growing number of affluent young professionals who have moved

into the neighborhood in recent years.

For the young, there are more avant-garde ways of worship, like the Sunday evening jazz Mass. Started in 1999, the service attracts 200 to 300 people, and a vast majority are under 40. The jazz service has all the traditional rites, and Father Duffell delivers a nearly identical homily as at the more formal morning service. But instead of a choir there is a jazz trio, and parishioners are often young Catholics who are attending Mass for the first time in years.

“It doesn’t feel like you’re in church. For some people that’s a bad thing, but for a lot of us, it’s a great and exciting feeling,” said Rosa Arenas, 33, a legal translator who grew up in the neighborhood and returned to the parish as an adult. “This is my sanctuary, at any time. There’s just a sense of hope and renewal that I have every time I walk in.”

Several months after the jazz service began, a woman told Father Duffell that she enjoyed the service so much she felt she should have a martini in hand. The next week, Father Duffell announced from the pulpit that he was looking for volunteers to organize a martini night. By the time Mass had ended, he said, a committee had already formed.

The monthly event now includes an elaborate potluck dinner and attracts hundreds of people, many nonmembers and even non-Catholics. That sort of ad hoc appeal is essential to the growth of Ascension.

Father Duffell has conspicuously reached out to such young people, in often very simple ways. Every week, he ends Mass by asking for first-time visitors to announce where they are from, then leads the congregation in a round of applause to welcome them.

The informational fliers for the church proclaim, “No matter your age, your race, your gender or your sexual orientation, there is a place for you at Ascension.” In his speeches each week, Father Duffell expresses the same sentiment, each time mentioning sexual orientation. The message is not lost on the parishioners, gay or straight.

“Regardless of the issue of homosexuality, I’ve always been a practicing Catholic — I took what I wanted and left the rest, so to speak,” said John Gasdaska, a 43-year-old real estate agent who has attended Ascension since he moved to the neighborhood with his partner in 2000. “But the simple fact that he includes talking openly about that makes a world of difference. There’s just no question that everyone is included in the message of Christ.”

Altagracia Hiraldo echoed Mr. Gasdaska’s views. Since moving to the neighborhood after emigrating from the Dominican Republic, Ms. Hiraldo has attended Ascension for more than three decades and says it has changed “100 percent.”

“We did not have enough people; there were no Americans, just Dominicans and maybe some Puerto Ricans,” she said. “Now, it’s everybody: Americans, Peruvians, Mexicans, Ecuadoreans, everyone.”

More importantly, she said, the attitudes have changed.

“People are not afraid of each other, because everyone knows this is all of our church,” she said.

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Still, there are undeniable cultural divides, largely because of language. Many of the parishioners who attend the Spanish services are older and do not speak English, and so have little interaction with the younger English-speaking members of the church, aside from occasional bilingual services, like those during Christmas and Easter Week.

On a recent Sunday morning, as the 9:30 a.m. Spanish Mass let out and the 11 a.m. English Mass was about to begin, there were scattered greetings between the two groups, but mostly they passed each other on the steps without much acknowledgment. A woman selling hot chocolate and coffee for \$1, shouted “chocolate y café,” and a small group of young men walked in holding cups from Starbucks.

Joe Hickey, the president of the church’s newly established parish council, is working with others to integrate Spanish and English speakers, perhaps by adding more bilingual services. Mr. Hickey views it as a model for the entire church.

“What we don’t have here is Latinos or anyone else voting with their feet and leaving,” Mr. Hickey said. “To be able to have all these people coexist is a microcosm of what the church is facing all over the world.”

In some sense, the outreach and diversity in the church is a result of Father Duffell’s own religious philosophy. While some view the Catholic Church as a tightrope, he sees it as a “very broad river, with some to the right and some to the left.”

“There are some who cling to the rocks as long as they can, and others who just go with the flow,” he said during an interview in his rectory living room.

He still harbors some reservations about Pope Benedict’s conservative history, but says he has been pleasantly surprised.

Father Duffell has placed a premium on persuading more parishioners to be involved in formal church programs and the day-to-day running of the church. Edwin Madera, who grew up attending Ascension and its school and returned to the neighborhood after graduating from [Boston College](#), was just appointed as the youth minister of the parish. Mr. Gasdaska is considering restarting a gay and lesbian ministry. Ms. Hiraldo is looking for new classes to reach out to more recent immigrants.

“We know the importance of being involved, not just sitting in Mass and saying O.K., bye-bye,” Ms. Hiraldo said. “This is our church.”

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