

PASTORAL Music

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Merging, Closing,
Blending Parishes



Growing

Listening for Fusion

By JOHN K. FLAHERTY

The very topic of this issue of *Pastoral Music* is descriptive not only of the whole Church but also of every individual parish, as each community lives, breathes, and evolves in its own distinct way. In the southern and western United States, terms like “merging, closing, and blending” describe a Church groaning, pushing, and leaning on its boundaries on a daily basis.

In the western and southwestern United States, the Church is evolving at a rapid rate. Infant baptisms far outnumber funerals in the majority of parishes in these two regions. And recent studies by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) and Pew Research, as well as the most recent U.S. Census, illustrate the rapidly shifting demographics in these regions.¹ For example, in areas that not too long ago frowned on “mixing the races,” marriages between partners of different ethnic heritages have grown exponentially in the past forty years.

Cultural Crossroads

It has been said that Los Angeles—originally *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Ángeles* (The Town of Our Lady, Queen of the Angels)—now

the second largest city in the United States, is at the cultural crossroads of the third millennium. Five million Catholics call the Archdiocese of Los Angeles home. Rome was such a cultural junction in the first millennium, and Paris occupied this place at the height of European cultural dominance. New York claimed this prominence in this nation’s infancy. Now it is here in Los Angeles, perched on the edge of the western United States, at the Pacific Rim, where one finds the busiest port in all the Americas—North or South.

This is the region into which a flood of humanity continually pours by water and by land, seeking a better way of life, as people continue the exodus from their country of birth to a foreign land that is seen as the gateway to safety and survival. It is in this town that one will find the largest concentrations of first and second generation immigrant Catholics living outside their countries of birth—Vietnamese, Mexican, Guatemalan, Honduran, Cambodian, El Salvadoran, Chinese, Nigerian, Tongan, Korean—among a host of ethnic and national identities—living, pushing, working, embracing, and worshiping every day in the desire to find a better life for their children and their children’s children. Los Angeles



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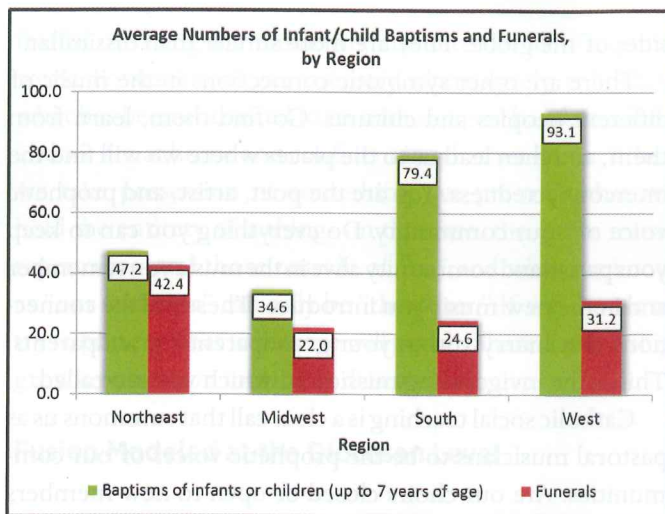


Chart from Mark M. Gray, Mary L. Gautier, and Melissa A. Cidade, *The Changing Face of U.S. Catholic Parishes* (Washington, DC: National Association for Lay Ministry (NALM), Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, 2011), 37.

is also a city of promise for people from other parts of the United States. For example, here one will find the second greatest concentration of African American Catholics.²

In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the Eucharist is celebrated in more than fifty languages every Sunday, and more than 110 distinct cultural groups have been identified in this Archdiocese. It is an invigorating, incredibly challenging, and life-giving environment in which to live. What we celebrate on Sunday, we experience Monday through Saturday in this great big, beautiful, perfectly imperfect mess we call Church. We meet Christ at Eucharist, and we meet the presence of Christ in the marketplace and in the streets at food trucks and in the restaurants where food, culture, and music are fused into new experiences. Perhaps it is the same in the cities in which you live; here we eat Korean barbecue tacos while we hear *Norteña* polkas fill the warm summer nights with music.

It is here, in this amalgam of life, that the challenge of blending and merging and growing occurs in the Church in its diverse richness. To be completely honest, Los Angeles is not a utopia where everyone constantly sings “It’s a Small World” or “Kum By Yah.” Many of the same fears exist for parishioners in the South and West as for the people in other places where parishes are changing or closing. People who came here long ago are witnessing their parishes and neighborhoods change around them. New sights, sounds,



On the Third Sunday of Lent, parishioners at Holy Family Parish in Artesia, California, extend their hands in prayer over the elect who are to be initiated at the Easter Vigil.

smells, music, and food can be found in the places once frequented by friends and children now grown and gone.

An Example in Artesia

The city of Artesia, California, named for its artesian wells, was originally part of the Spanish land grant known as *Rancho Los Coyotes*. The area attracted settlers who favored the rich soil and abundant supply of water. By 1906 the Artesia Improvement Company had developed a town site. The first industry was truck farming, and grapes were one of the chief crops. Dutch and Portuguese immigrants came to Southern California from Europe to be dairy farmers, and many of them settled in this area.

The first pastor of Holy Family Parish in Artesia was Portuguese: an immigrant pastor to serve that immigrant community. As the population changed and grew, the second pastor’s ethnic background was Irish. Other Irish immigrant pastors followed for many years, and the current pastoral team comprises priests who are members of the Marian Ministers of the Holy Cross (MMHC) from the Philippines.

This town, in which First Lady Pat Nixon was born and raised and Michelle Kwan owns an ice skating rink, is one of those ethnically, racially, and culturally blended parishes that may be found all over Southern California. Located within a mile of Artesia’s “Little India,” the parish now

What God does first and best and most / Is to trust people / With their moment in history / To do what must be done / For the sake / Of his whole community.

Walter Burghardt, SJ

has significant concentrations of Samoan, Latino, Dutch, Portuguese, and East Indian Catholics. The Dutch and Portuguese founded and built the original parish structures and began the parish's festivals and gatherings, but those events are now infused with other cultural foods, experiences, and music. Doors, hearts, ministries, and homes have been opened to welcome the new waves of people. This modest working class parish's buildings teem with life every night of the week. The parking lot is full most days and evenings. To put it another way, the dominant cultures and leadership have surrendered something of themselves so that the community may continue to thrive and evolve. In Artesia these days, there are stores painted in Dutch blue and adorned with windmills that are homes to *taquerias* and *mercados*. The town and the parish are beautiful fusions of cultures and peoples.

Musicians, Be the Bridge!

If musicians are to help bring unity in such diversity, we have to perform certain tasks. First, we have to listen. Listen to your radio. Study. Learn. Never stop growing. Listen to as much music as is humanly possible. Listen to the music to which you are drawn. Listen to the music and the languages you cannot understand or fully appreciate. Listen to the music at the far right and far left ends of the FM spectrum—those stations at the margins, below 93 hz and above 105 hz. Those are the people at the margins of your parishes, and their daily music lives at the margins of your Monday through Saturday lives, too. Listen to the music that feeds your soul and listen to the music that challenges you. These songs, too, are the sounds of the people who sit in your assemblies on Sunday.

By attentive listening, I have found that there is a beautiful similarity in the music of the Irish and the Vietnamese. As I have studied each culture, I have learned that more powerful nations overran both—conquering, humiliating, raping, pillaging, subjugating, starving, and torturing each for more than a thousand years. Listen to the music of each because there is a lament and a yearning as well as longing, joy, and hope that you will undoubtedly hear. You'll be amazed at how similar one is to the other. These two countries and their unique cultures existed and endured through all of these challenges within the same time frame on opposite

sides of the globe. They are more similar than dissimilar.

There are other symbiotic connections in the music of different peoples and cultures. Go find them, learn from them, and then lead us to the places where we will find the interconnectedness. You are the poet, artist, and prophetic voice of your community. Do everything you can to keep your parish and community alive in the music you remember and in the new music you introduce. These are the connections that marry you to your grandparents' grandparents. This is the invigorating mission to which you are called.

Catholic social teaching is a clear call that summons us as pastoral musicians to be the prophetic voices of our communities. Are our choirs closed or open to new members and different repertoire? Are they clustered? Are they merging? Are they in the midst of collapsing? Are they blended or blending?

Take time to reflect on these questions. Reflect on them from the privileged place you occupy. Reflect on them as one who lives on the inside of this system even though you may not feel fully empowered within the power structure of the Church. (Who doesn't have such a feeling, after all, and who of us is perfect without a need to change and grow?) Let's allow all those in our midst the opportunity to pray, sing, and live their own "dream acts," just as your grandparents and parents loved you—their dream—into who you are now. You know the "secret handshake," of an insider, and you know where your seat is in the sanctuary. Encourage the ones who have been in your care—those you have formed in music ministry, and those who follow you—to make room, offering their own seats, if necessary, so that others may join us.

Ownership or Possession?

Musicians and ministers have the choice either to own or to possess that which we hold and control. If we own our ministry, then we can share ownership, and we will continue to grow ourselves. Ownership is akin to holding what we control with an open hand, inviting others into what we do. The risk is that by holding something—in this case, music ministry—with an open hand, we open ourselves to the possibility that we ourselves might be called to change. Sometimes this is an uncomfortable prospect because it requires humility, even, perhaps, admitting that we are

fearful of facing the unknown, and most of all it requires work. Possession of our ministry, alternatively, is holding what has been entrusted to us with a closed hand. It is safe, and we are at home and confident in what we know. When we take possession of something, we presume that we hold the entirety of a thing—in this case, the entire music repertoire—and those outside of “us” and what we know as “our tradition” can only be “the other.” If we choose to try to possess what we do, we will perish. Shared ownership grows; possession inevitably dies with us.

Fusion Modeled at the Diocesan Level

Many parishes and dioceses have worked to incorporate music and practices from various ethnic communities into major celebrations such as the installation of a new bishop or, at the parish level, the Paschal Triduum. But in many instances, those liturgies become a series of parallel ethnic moments—The African American dancers leading the entrance procession are followed in short order by the first reading in one language, the psalm in several languages, the second reading in yet another language, the Gospel proclaimed in English, and so on. Such occasions are certainly multicultural, but in a sequential and unrelated way. Those who have experienced such events know that we need more than this, if we are to bring together people in a unified event. We need a fusion of cultures, each recognizable yet building something together that is experienced as one act of worship.

If you have a chance, listen to Maurice Duruflé’s *Ubi Caritas*. This twentieth century arrangement of an eighth century Gregorian chant, arranged and harmonized in a distinctly French style, is an exquisite representation of inculturation. Samuel Barber’s *Agnus Dei*, based on his *Adagio for Strings* is another.

At the Mass of Reception celebrated for Archbishop José H. Gomez, the fifth Archbishop of Los Angeles, I chose to fuse the Vietnamese hymn *Le Dang* with Duruflé’s *Ubi Caritas*. Recently in Los Angeles, we celebrated a liturgy in which a Native American call to worship blended into the well-known Spanish hymn *Vamos Cantando al Señor*, which then segued into “O God Beyond All Praising,” a hymn text by Michael Perry set to the hymn tune THAXTED, a melody found in “Jupiter” from Gustav Holst’s orchestral suite



The Planets. This fusion was the “Song of Gathering” for the liturgical procession. Whenever asked to prepare and direct music for Archdiocesan celebrations, I work to find the music that speaks universally to as many people as the poetic, artistic, and ritual movement of the Liturgy will realistically allow. It’s not a matter of how many different elements one stuffs into a celebration; the goal of such fusion is more akin to looking at a beautiful gem and entering the experience from different facets (faces). Looking at the entire experience, one experiences (and sings) the whole.

Poet and Artist

You are the poet; you are the artist. Do what you can with humility from where you are. There are forces which you cannot possibly control, as is the case in every age. You are the minister of music and the keeper of the song of the community. You are the poet, and you are the artist, and no one describes the indescribable better than the poet and artist. You image the unimaginable in the music you play and summon God’s people to sing. Through what you do, God’s people live, love, and hope another day. Through what you do, you give God’s people a reason to rise each new day and be Christ.

Notes

1. In *U.S. Census Briefs* (March 2011), Paul Mackun and Steven Wilson, with Thomas Fischetti and Justyna Goworowska, reported: “The 2010 Census reported 308.7 million people in the United States, a 9.7 percent increase from the Census 2000 population of 281.4 million. . . . The increase of 9.7 percent over the past decade was lower than the 13.2 percent increase for the 1990s and comparable to the growth during the 1980s of 9.8 percent. . . . From 2000 to 2010, regional growth was much faster for the South and West (14.3 and 13.8 percent, respectively) than for the Midwest (3.9 percent) and Northeast (3.2 percent)” (U.S. Census Bureau, Department of Commerce, Washington, DC).

2. Louisiana has the largest number of African American Catholics, and most of those in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles trace their origins to Louisiana.