



**Gifts from Many Cultures Enriching God's People:
"From east to west and north to south, let us praise God."
By Sister Martha Ann Kirk, Th.D.**

At Pentecost the Spirit of God was poured out on people of many nations, on old and young, male and female. St. Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female, we are all one in Christ Jesus." Worship should be a celebration of diversity and unity. Worship should stretch people's hearts and minds to seek justice and share compassion. This past year at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas, we had a Worship Renewal Grant that provided a series of workshops and performances called "From east to west and north to south, let us praise God; Gifts from many cultures enriching God's people." This has been an educational series for our multi-cultural university community and local churches of all traditions. The series included gifts from Hispanic, Middle Eastern and Orthodox, African and African American, Asian and Asian American, and the Euro-American traditions. The program was made possible through a Worship Renewal Grant from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, Grand Rapids, Michigan, with funds provided by Lilly Endowment Inc. As we focused on worship renewal in general, we came to recognize the value of dance and drama to help open people's eyes and hearts.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . .

We have been His glory. . .

**In Wisdom dancing with the Vietnamese until the gentle melodies
become stronger than the cries of the boat people drowning,**

**The Word made flesh in stories of people seeking refuge
after the devastation of Katrina, the displacement of Palestinians,
the massacres in Sierra Leone,**

**In the drama of the man born blind who comes to see the Christ
while the people around the man become blind to Christ's glory,**

**In the "Amazing Grace" of Korean American children
playing the song on the instruments of their grandparents,**

**And the Word became flesh in the womb of Mary,
imaged as the Nahuatl Guadalupe, and among the native people of
the New World the Word echoed in songs of hope and dignity,**

**In the sounds of the ancient chant so close to the Aramaic Jesus spoke
and strumming of harps and ouds,**

**In the persistent praise of the African American tradition,
reverberating with courageous hope in the midst of the challenges,**

**Yes, we have seen the glory of the Word made flesh,
the image of the unseen God, prying open our eyes
to see the Divine reflected in all the peoples of the earth.**





The Hispanic Gifts workshop began in the historic San Fernando Cathedral, the oldest cathedral sanctuary in the United States, and the oldest building in Texas, originating in the 1730's.

Persons were welcomed not only to this workshop on Hispanic Gifts, but to the whole series which invited us to appreciate each other and to be hospitable to each other.

Students danced with flowers to share based on the idea of "Las Canacuas," a dance of hospitality done by the Tarascans, native peoples of southern Mexico.

Within the opening prayer service, the first reading was a reflection on examples of hospitality in the bible, including the stories of Laban and Rebekah's welcome to Issac (Genesis 14). Abraham and Sarah welcomed three strangers (Genesis 18), and the parable of the Good Samaritan which was dramatize (Luke 10:25-37). Persons who opened their homes and their hearts to guests also opened themselves to receive God's ever faithful love.



(See *Dancing with Creation, Mexican and Native American Dance in Christian Worship and Education* by Martha Ann Kirk. Saratoga, CA: Resource Publications, 1983, pp. 79-80).



As an offering in movement, Gabriel Zertuche danced “Pues Si Vivimos.” “If we are living we are in the Lord, and if we die we are in the Lord, for if we live or if we die we belong to God, we belong to God.” Retired Archbishop Patrick Flores, who has given so much of his life to serving God’s people, looks on. He has encouraged the arts of the people in worship and San Fernando has become a center for creative worship.

“Envia tu Espiritu, sea renovada la faz de la tierra . . . Spirit of the living God, burn in our hearts, and make us a people of hope and compassion. . . . Breath of life and holiness, heal every wound, and lead us beyond every sin that divides us. Envia tu Espiritu, sea renovada la faz de la tierra . . .”





The *reredo*, behind the altar of the cathedral, celebrates Word and Sacrament. The crucified Christ who gave himself is surrounded by the evangelists Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The sculpture and painting were recently done by artists from Mexico, in the style of the earlier *reredo* which was destroyed by fire in the 1800's. The workshop helped us remember the words of the evangelists, the words embodied through dance, music, and arts. All point to Christ the Word made flesh.

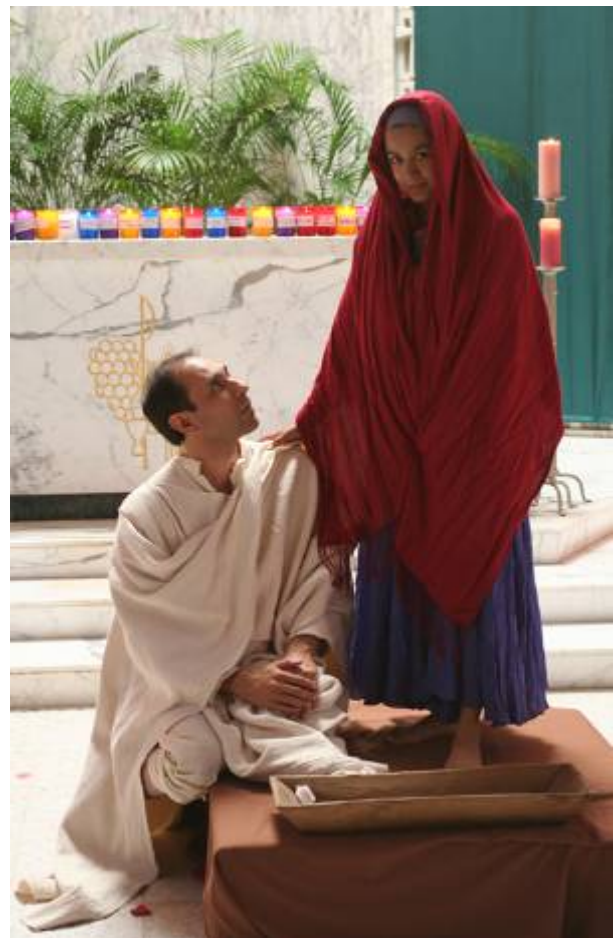




Over 12,000 evacuees from hurricane Katrina were in San Antonio at the time of this workshop, and many people active in local churches were doing all they could to help these homeless people. Some expressed regret that they could not attend the workshop because of the pressing needs of caring for the homeless. Among Mexican Christians there is an advent prayer service “Las Posadas” which re-enacts Mary great with child and Joseph seeking lodging. People have candlelight processions through the neighborhoods with the holy couple. They knock on doors, only to discover that there is no room. Songs and prayers for those who need shelter are used. The closing prayer of the day recalled “Las Posadas” with students as Mary and Joseph. Theologians, Dr. Bernard Cooke and Dr. Pauline Turner who had fled Katrina shared their story and called for conversion in our social structures. Other stories of displaced peoples were shared by Palestinian graduate student Rolla Alaydi and Dr. Francis Boakari, a professor Africa.

The native peoples had been slow to receive Christianity in Mexico in the 1500's, and when Mary, the mother of Jesus, spoke in their language, Nahuatl, and looked like one of them, more turned towards her son Jesus Christ. This drama by José Rubén De León told the story of Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531.

Mary gave Juan Diego roses in December as a sign to convince the unbelieving to build a Christian church and come closer to her Son Jesus. Many cultures have stories of people coming to accept Christianity when it comes to them through language, symbols, or concepts that are close to them or meaningful for them. Throughout the year, the workshops and performances at Incarnate Word will continue to explore the many ways that God's Word is expressed in various cultures.



Gifts from Middle Eastern and Orthodox Christianity



Ancient traditions from the lands of the Bible and Early Christianity were explained. About three million of the two billion Christians in world are Orthodox, but many of us do not know much about these first roots of Christianity. The Greek word from which liturgy comes means the “work of the people.” The term was used for a service that benefited the community. John’s gospel does not record Jesus sharing bread and wine at the last supper, but it describes Jesus washing the feet of his disciples, offering humble service.

A second century document the Act of John speaks of Jesus and his disciples dancing at the Last Supper. Prayer is embodied in drama and dance.

In the presentation “Stories and Prayers from Biblical Women and Women Saints of the East,” Sister Martha Ann Kirk as Mariam the prophetess, took a tambourine and invited people to join her in praising God who had freed them from bondage. (Based on Exodus 15)





In a drama based on I Samuel 25, Abigail feared for the life of a child because her foolish husband Nabal would not share the food requested by David. David angrily planned to kill their people in retaliation. Wise Abigail shared food and prevented violence. (Portrayed by Sister Martha Ann Kirk with accompaniment by Covita Moroney, a specialist in ancient music, on oud.)



The San Antonio Arts Ensemble, SAVAE, in the collection “Ancient Echoes” uses the original Aramaic which Jesus spoke and has developed creative interpretations of the Beatitudes and the “Lord’s Prayer” which were based on ancient musical modes. “Blessed Are Those Who Mourn” was danced as a prayer for peace in the Middle East and all the world. Among the selections of the sacred concert were re-constructions of a song of the Jews in Babylon called “Ashir Shirim” and “Bircath Cohenim” the priestly blessing from Numbers 6.

African–American African and Gifts Enriching Christian Worship



Rev. Trevor Alexander, U.I. W. Assistant Director of Campus Ministry, and his congregation, True Vine Church, opened the day with a vibrant experience of praying African American Style. The sufferings of slavery have been identified with the sufferings of Jesus. This has not ended in violence, but African American spirituality can teach all of us about resurrection in love, reconciliation, and courage. African American worship can bring energy and strength.

A part of the video *The Dancing Church of Africa* by Father Thmas Kane was shown. Also, pictures of Zambian women dancing in prayer were shown.

Paula Coffey, a U.I.W. graduate student who is a part of Women’s Global Connection “Reach Out Africa” project shared information from visiting the Incarnate Word Sisters’ mission in Zambia. <http://www.womensglobalconnection.org/reachoutafrica.html> In an area where over 70% of the adults are victims of AIDS, not only medicine, but the hope and strength that comes from worship are needed.





Dr. Reginald Davis inspired us with insights from *Frederick Douglas, a Precursor to Liberation Theology*.

The U.I.W. Arts for Christian Worship Class Students dramatized the Zambian folk story about the blind men and the elephant. Each claims that he knows the true nature of an elephant while in reality he only knows a small part. This was followed by a dramatization of Jesus curing the blind man in Jericho. We prayed that we may not think that we know all of Christianity when we only know a small part. We need Christians from throughout the world to help us understand the great love of God.



We were sent forth dancing and singing, “Thuma Mina, send me Jesus. . . “



Asian and Asian American Gifts Workshop

We experienced the beauty of Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Indian, and Pilipino presentations. Brother Rufino Zaragoza, OFM, presented on music, dance, visual art and architecture, and ritual theory from his work on a major U.S.-Vietnamese hymnal, his on-going research in Viet Nam, and questions and issues that U.S. congregations need to face in relationship to Asian Christianity. His article “The ‘Asian Face’ in God’s

House” in *Eucharistic Ministries* magazine explains that a recent U.S. census indicates that there are about 300,000 Chinese in this country, one and a half million Filipinos, 325,000 Vietnamese, over 285,000 Indians, and over 74,000 Koreans, not even numbering Japanese, Samoan, Tongan, and other Pacific Islanders. This information from the 2000 census indicated a a 48% increase in Asian population in the U.S. in ten years. Are we recognizing the faces in God’s House? University of the Incarnate Word students shared a pantomime of the story of the man born blind from John’s Gospel. Those around the man refused to see the power of Christ and were like the blind. We prayed that we might recognize Christ and recognize the face of Christ shining through people of each culture.

Eun Young Kim presented a slide show with both historical information on worship in Korea and contemporary insights. She explained that during a period of about a hundred years beginning in the 18th century around 10,000 believers died as martyrs. Yet people continued to become Christians. Hang Cha Jones from the First Korean Presbyterian Church who is the leader of the Jones Korean Dance Group and her students embodied the beloved hymn “Amazing Grace” in their traditional forms.





Through out the day, we learned and prayed hymns from Japanese, Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Filipino cultures which are available in U.S. collections now.

Dr Rajam Ramamurthy of the Arathi School of Indian Dance has worked with Father Francis Barboza in developing the movements of Bharata Natyam classical Indian dance to tell stories of the Bible. The story of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she was to be the mother of Jesus is a central theme for the Incarnate Word Sisters. The chapel has a stained glass window depicting that. Rajam showed her students interpreting this story of the Annunciation. Mary was surprised and frightened, but accepted to do God's will. God continues to invite us to accept the seed of the Word and to bring forth love and service in the world today.

Dr Rajam Ramamurthy and Sujatha her daughter dance.



Catherine Cuasay of the Philippines has an M.A. in Expressive Arts Therapies and uses dance, music, and drama both in counseling and in worship and retreat ministries. In Filipino homes straw mats are important. In the hymn, “The Earth is the Lord’s,” God rolls out the beauty and the blessings of creation as a mother would roll out the mat for her family. Catherine not only spoke of worship, but interpreted this hymn in the closing prayer service.



An evening sacred concert included music from *Chung Loi Tan Tung: Thanh Ca Song Ngu/ United in Faith and Song* edited by Brother Rufino Zaragoza, OFM with local Vietnamese communities. We learned by “Praying the Seasons of the Christian Year among Asian Christians” in music, dance, and symbol.

As we remembered the church year and that “cloud of witnesses,” the communion of saints, we lit incense remembering our ancestors and holy people through the ages. The “friends of God and prophets” can give us examples of courage, love, and service.



Maly Tran of Vietnamese Martyrs Catholic Church directed the dancers and Vincent Tran directed the choir.

We learned much of the compassion of God who sent Christ to be among the human family, to be with them in the midst of misunderstanding, suffering, and exile. God does not teach revenge or hatred, but gentle compassionate love that can draw and build justice, unity, and peace in the world.

In the last workshop “Celebrating Our Gifts,” gifted people of all ages danced. The concert began with “Come Holy Spirit” embodied in prayer. “Good for the Soul: An Evening of Music” featured songs and instrumentals from “Behold,” “Steal Away,” “Surrender,” and “Be Still”
<http://goodforthesoulmusic.com>



. . . and this young Christian was eager to come to church the next Sunday believing that all worship should be a wonderful celebration!



Photography by Kathryn Daniels and text by Sister Martha Ann Kirk, Grant Program Director, except Dr Rajam Ramamurthy is from her web site and the photos below by Sister Martha Ann.

