

## Jesus in the Audience

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Can you imagine Jesus in the audience enjoying a Thai dance? That's how a lay missionary's young daughter pictures him.

In Thailand, where we work as Maryknoll lay missionaries, 9-year old Sarah Doerner has learned some Thai dancing, since almost all children, especially the girls, are taught dancing at an early age.

When asked how she feels about Thai dancing, Sarah said, "I think of angels dancing and Jesus sitting in the audience smiling."

Dancing is an integral part of the Thai culture, with a dance for every occasion and special dances for each region of the country. More than just an art form, dancing underlines Thai human and religious values.

In their love of the ornate, the dancers are dressed in highly stylized costumes, including golden headgear and makeup. Even so, the dance remains within the confines of a strict Thai sense of moderation in behavior, conveyed in efficient gestures and movements.

The pace of the dance also reveals a key Thai value --- don't rush anything! Dances allow the audience time to appreciate each fluid, long practiced, perfectly executed movement. A hint of a smile sometimes crosses the dancers' faces, but just as often, their countenances remain impassive, perfectly detached.

Many of the dances are specifically religious. "Ram Geh Bone" is a dance thanking God for answering prayers. The "Heh Nang Meaw," or rain dance, asks God to provide life-giving waters for the harvest.

Some dances ask divine blessing on the audience. The "Ram Twai Praphon" is a blessing dance done only for royalty. "Ram Ghong Yaaw," danced to the beat of a long drum, is usually performed at ordinations of Buddhist monks.

Sumalee, a young Thai who aspires to be a dance teacher, stresses the importance of being flexible, especially with arms and hands, fingers and toes. "This shows your spirit is sincere and wanting to bless those present," she says.

Somewhat surprising, perhaps dance has not been warmly embraced by Thai Catholic tradition. In a few places liturgical dances in Thai fashion are performed in churches for special feasts, such as Christmas or Corpus Christi, but not universally important religious occasions, such as Christian weddings or First Communions, are celebrated with dance, but only after the Mass. Dancing's close association with the Buddhist tradition is probably the main reason for reluctance to include dance in Catholic liturgy.

We think in the future, however, Thai dance will enjoy a more intrinsic role in the prayer expressions of the Thai Catholic community. But much like the dance itself, it will make a delicate, slow and graceful entrance, entering fluidly into a highly structured institution when the time is right.