

FIESTA!

DANCE AND CULTURE IN SAN ANTONIO

BY THOMAS A. KANE

Today, not only the world dances, but the Churches of the world also dance. Liturgical dance is happening around the globe, especially in cultures where dance is such a vibrant life principle. My various journeys have taken me to the continent of Africa, to deep blue waters of the South Pacific and to the Mexican-American community in San Antonio. As I traveled to these different yet uniquely wonderful places, I had incredibly moving experiences regarding life, family and the living faith. Not only was the Church dancing, but the Christian faith was also embodied and connected to everyday life. No longer a traveler, my journey became a pilgrimage as I learned to pray and move in unexpected ways.

Through my travels and study, I have discovered a thrilling integration of liturgy and culture. Inculturation was no longer a theological *buzz* word, but a living reality. In shaping the documentaries for educational use, I wanted the audience to see and feel the power, the majesty and the prayerfulness of dance in the worship and to experience the cultural influences shaping the worship of San Antonio, Texas. Through careful planning and the generous support of my school, Weston Jesuit, my sabbatical projects have allowed me to search out and document the intersection of liturgy and culture. I have been fortunate to uncover the Dancing Church in various locations around the world. I will now describe in print, what is so gloriously portrayed in video. Words can only approximate the experience.

SAN FERNANDO CATHEDRAL

San Antonio, Texas

The video, *¡FIESTA! Celebrations at San Fernando* chronicles the vibrant liturgical life of San Fernando Cathedral in San Antonio, Texas. Throughout its history, the Cathedral has always been a place where people celebrated the unique beauty of their culture and heritage. When the local people were often not accepted by the wider society, they knew they could always be themselves and be at home at San Fernando. The beautiful and colorful rites within the cathedral often spill outside onto the streets and plazas of the historic center of the city. The Cathedral celebrates fully the entire liturgical year, beginning with Advent and including the feast of Guadalupe, The Gran Posada, Christmas, the three Kings, Candelaria, Lent, the compelling and dramatic services of Holy Week, Mexican Independence Day, The Day of the Dead and Thanksgiving, to name a few.

The body is an essential element in all worship and this is most evident in hispanic worship. The Catholic liturgy has always appealed to all the senses - candles, color, the smell of incense, the touch of oil, the taste of sweet wine and bread. Processions, stational celebrations and pilgrimages have also played a liturgical and para-liturgical role in our worship development.

At the Cathedral of San Fernando in San Antonio, Texas, the congregation literally puts its body on the liturgical line throughout the year with rituals and processions within and around

the Cathedral plazas. Mexican religious tradition meets the Southwest culture in a unique blending. The liturgies are colorful, passionate, dramatic, and involve the congregation in a totally polysensual way.

PROCESSION DANCE / DANCE DRAMA

On Good Friday, there is a dramatic presentation of the Passion of Jesus Christ. The drama includes hundreds of parishoners from San Fernando and embraces the entire city of San Antonio. It is also ecumenical and includes the religious and civic leaders of the city. After Jesus is condemned to death, the entire Market Square becomes Jerusalem as Jesus makes his way to Calvary. As Jesus passes by, the people on the street are not passive onlookers, but are deeply moved and touched by the experience. It is heart-felt drama. Jesus makes various stops along the way, enacting the stations of the cross, falling under the weight of the cross, meeting his sorrowful mother, encountering Veronica and being helped by Simeon, played by the archbishop of San Antonio and assisted by the priests of the Cathedral. The procession makes its way along Dolorosa Street to Cathedral Square. There Jesus is crucified between two thieves in plain view of the entire city.

It is interesting to note that this drama has been a San Antonio tradition for over a hundred years and that the street of the procession is called *Dolorosa* (street of sorrows) named in honor of this Good Friday tradition.

SPECIAL CELEBRATIONS

The Cathedral of San Fernando community also celebrates the Flamenco Mass. The Mass is celebrated at different times during the liturgical season. It is a unique blending of the Spanish dance form, Flamenco, with the Catholic liturgy. The dancers, dressed in the traditional red and black of Flamenco, are present in the celebration space and are integrated as the liturgical ministers throughout the entire liturgy. Three moments during the liturgy stand out:

The Gospel procession includes a reverencing of the Book of the Gospels in a uniquely Flamenco way. As the presider stands in an empty space in front of the altar, the women encircle him as he lifts the book up for all to see. The women in their dramatic black and red dresses dance in a circle around the presider and book, waving their decorated fans to bless or sanctify the book of the Gospel.

After the gifts are presented at the altar, the lead Flamenco dancer continues to incense the gifts at the altar, then the presider and the community. The incensing is done with a dramatic Flamenco flair.

At the Our Father, the dancers join in a circle around the altar and the presider joins in the dance and movement of the men dancers. It is a special fusion of one liturgical moment!