

Holy Catholic

Chaos

It is a Saturday evening in late February and Maureen Chicoine, RSCJ, pastoral coordinator at Our Lady of Hope Catholic Church, is making the first of her weekend rounds to her multi-cultural, tri-lingual parish in inner city San Bernardino, California.

The parish is a new one, formed in a recent merger of three former parishes, whose members – some 5,000 families – are an eclectic cultural mix. Though mostly Latinos, members include Vietnamese, Anglos, Native Americans, Samoans and African-Americans.

For the present, the parish operates at three crowded locations and, pending construction of a new church building, offers twelve Masses every weekend, celebrated in either English, Spanish or Vietnamese by one of two full-time “priest-ministers” or one of four part-time “supply priests.” The three locations – the former St. Anne, Our Lady of Fatima and Christ the King – are now named after the streets they face: Our Lady of Hope at Del Rosa, Valencia and Rialto Avenues.

Sister Chicoine’s ministry as head of a parish is unique among RSCJ of the U.S. Province. A transfer to the Society from another religious order, the Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate, founded in New York City

in 1920 to work with immigrants, she has, from the earliest days of her vocation, felt called to work in the local church, where faith meets reality. “It is messy and beautiful and rich,” she said. “I call it ‘working in the holy Catholic chaos.’”

On weekends, Sister Chicoine puts many of her administrative duties on hold and focuses on a ministry of “benevolent presence” – a term and practice she learned from some of the good pastors she has worked with over the years. She visits at least two of the three parish locations each weekend, drops in on religious education classes and sometimes joins parishioners for breakfast in the church hall.

Her first stop this Saturday is Our Lady of Hope at Del Rosa for the 5:30 p.m. Mass, where she will walk beside one of the parish’s “priest-ministers” in the entrance procession. Over the weekend, she will also help distribute communion at some of the Masses, make announcements and greet parishioners after Mass. She will drop in on a meeting for parents of teenagers preparing for confirmation and on a meeting of young adults preparing to lead a pre-confirmation retreat. They are working with Sister Mary Tin Nguyen, LHC,

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A banner bearing the name of a new parish in three languages heads a procession of parishioners to the site where a new church will be built. Maureen Chicoine, RSCJ, pastoral coordinator, took the photo.





a Vietnamese nun, who serves as one of three religious education coordinators.

This, she said, is among the highlights of her ministry: watching teenagers and young adults pass on the faith by preparing younger Catholics for confirmation. “To me, there is no better way to learn about your faith and grow to love it than in the process of sharing it with others,” she said.

National movement

When Sister Chicoine decided to transfer her religious vows to the Society in 1980, she was working in New York City, in a parish on Manhattan’s West Side, where Anglos and Latinos mixed with a large group of French- and Creole-speaking Haitians. She was already fluent in Spanish. In 1983, she moved to California as an RSCJ with the goal of assessing ministerial needs. For ten years, she worked as a director of catechetical ministry in a large Filipino/Mexican parish near San Diego. During a sabbatical year, while doing a Bible study group at a Native American reservation, she came to know of and admire Bishop Gerald R. Barnes, and the rest is history. He made her the pastoral coordinator of a church in Corona, California, where membership grew from 450 to 1,500 during her nine-year term, and then offered her an even bigger challenge: her present post.

Bishop Barnes is in the forefront of a growing national movement to appoint pastoral coordinators – deacons, religious sisters, lay men and lay women – as an alternative to priest-pastors. Statistics show that the practice is increasingly common in the West, South,

and parts of the Midwest, where a growing Catholic population is running well ahead of available active priests.

Presently there are twelve pastoral coordinators in the Diocese of San Bernardino. They include a deacon, five sisters and six members of the laity. Like Sister Chicoine, they do not celebrate Mass or hear confessions or, except on rare occasions, when a priest is unavailable, preach. It is a reality, she said, that sometimes prompts people to ask, “Well, then, if you don’t preside, what do you do?”

“People often don’t realize that running a parish is like running a small non-profit business,” she said. In preparation for the role, she earned a certificate in parish administration at Loyola Marymount University and a certificate in pastoral studies from Loyola University in New Orleans.

Sister Chicoine feels that her call to parish work is highly compatible with her call to be a Religious of the Sacred Heart and the Society’s heritage of empowering leaders for the church and world. Her ministry is at the core of the Society’s call “to carry out this service of education...in pastoral work and guidance in the faith.” (*Constitutions #13*)

As the parish’s primary overseer, Sister Chicoine is responsible for all facets of administration and spiritual life. She keeps a busy schedule training leaders and keeping tabs on sacramental preparation, spiritual development, social outreach (which includes a food pantry), finance, human resources, maintenance of seven buildings on the three sites, along with supervising religious education and youth ministry.

Religious artifacts for sale after Mass at Our Lady of Hope reflect parishioners’ multi-cultural backgrounds and tastes.

Eucharistic ministers consult with Sister Chicoine before going to visit the sick.



She sometimes conducts wakes or funeral services and occasionally presides over the Quinceañera, the traditional Mexican initiation rite for 15-year-old girls. She sometimes performs house blessings, takes communion to sick parishioners and recites prayers of blessing over the people who have died. Her staff of fourteen includes two part-time and one full-time pastoral associates, the three religious education coordinators, a business and plant manager, receptionists, and a custodian.

Delicate balance

Our Lady of Hope is one of some thirty parishes in the Diocese of San Bernardino without a resident priest, a reflection of the region's explosive growth. Not so long ago, the inland southern California valley, surrounded by four mountain ranges, was a sleepy agricultural area. Today, citrus groves and fertile fields are few and far between.

Although it is less than three decades old, the diocese, which includes economically depressed, crime-plagued San Bernardino, and its more affluent neighbor, Riverside, is the second-largest in California, with 1.2 million Catholics. Since the diocese was formed in 1978, that number has grown from 235,000, or more than five-fold.

Further, there appears to be little relief on the horizon. A recent study by Joseph Claude Harris, an independent researcher based in Seattle, projects that the percentage of Californians who are Catholic will rise from just six percent in 2005 to 36 percent by 2025, largely the result of growth in the Latino population.



Sister Chicoine, altar servers and Father Nick Barille, celebrant, join hands to recite the Lord's Prayer during Mass at Our Lady of Hope's Del Rosa site.



A mural depicting the apparitions of Juan Diego, a saint held in high esteem by Latinos, is painted on the wall at the Del Rosa site, adjacent to a mural depicting Vietnamese martyrs.



The merger that produced Our Lady of Hope is one of four recent mergers of space-challenged neighborhood churches into larger parishes better able to accommodate the boom.

Fortunately, Sister Chicoine said, some priests are grateful to be freed of administrative responsibilities and value the extra time it gives them to interact with people and provide pastoral care. "Some priests who do not have the gifts to be pastors are relieved to be able to focus on celebrating the sacraments and preaching. Some say it is what they were ordained to do."

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Sister Chicoine joins women preparing Sunday breakfast in the kitchen at Our Lady of Hope, Valencia. It is one of two sites where breakfast is served weekly to raise funds for the parish.



Dancers perform during a parish celebration of Tet, the Vietnamese New Year.

Youth and young adult leaders practice an activity for an upcoming confirmation retreat.



Photo by Nam Bui, parish deacon.



Photo by Maureen Chicoine, RSCJ

Others, though, particularly some older parishioners and priests, find the new model problematic. “Many people are very threatened by this ministry,” she said. “And some think of a parish coordinator as less than a pastor who is also a priest.”

Sometimes people will say to her, “Okay, that’s what you think. What does Father think?”

It is a delicate balance, she said, to keep the roles working in harmony.

Hope for the city

Unsurprisingly, given its ethnic mix, parish life at Our Lady of Hope is rich and complex. Art and artifacts in the three church buildings that make up the parish reflect the diverse devotional preferences of its ethnic groups. The calendar includes Latino and Vietnamese festivals and religious traditions that are widely varied.

“Latinos don’t want to start Mass until they’ve kissed everybody in the room,” she said, only half-joking. “The Vietnamese are more formal, more observant of personal space, and they like things to start on time.”

Further, she noted, even the Latino groups in her parish are diverse. Some come from New Mexico or Texas, where their families have lived for generations. Both are assimilated into U.S. culture, yet they are quite different from each other. And both of those cultures are very different from that of more recent Mexican immigrants.

“It is a Henry Kissinger kind of job,” she said. “I spend a lot of my time trying to bridge the cultures, mediate, bring people together. I try to get them to see the needs of the whole parish.”

She also encourages parishioners to become involved in helping to solve San Bernardino’s problems. Recently, parishioners helped to pack a city council meeting and push the council to approve more funding for youth programs as one of its crime-reduction measures.

The bishop chose her new parish’s name – Our Lady of Hope – because “we all see it as a center of hope for the city,” she said. He expects the parish to form partnerships with other groups in San Bernardino, and the new building to serve the entire community.

Recognizing that change in the church is slow, and always difficult for some, Sister Chicoine is disinclined to “push the envelope” in terms of her own role or of women’s roles in the church generally.

“When people ask me if I believe in women’s ordination, I tell them, ‘I don’t believe in anything that isn’t doable.’ I have found a niche in the church that works for me.” She has never had a personal ambition to be ordained (but would like to see women ordained as deacons so they could preach).

“People get stuck on presiding,” she said, just as they get stuck on “the institution’s problems.” While she acknowledges problems in the church, she prefers to focus on the local parish rather than the large institution. “All institutions have problems,” she said.

Far more rewarding and likely, in the end, to strengthen the church, she feels, are efforts to empower the laity to claim their places in church life, to train parish leaders. And those efforts, she strongly believes, are an extension of Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat’s vision for the Religious of the Sacred Heart.

“A Religious of the Sacred Heart can never be someplace and not change it,” she said, as she glanced around the parish hall church at the many people deeply engaged in facets of parish life. “You energize people and give them the opportunity to use their talents.” You immerse yourself in the holy Catholic chaos and there, sometimes when you least expect it, you discover God’s love in its midst. ❖