

Pope Benedict will find a Big Apple that remains city of immigrants

NEW YORK – On Super Bowl Sunday, most of Transfiguration Church in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn had an answer for Father Tony Hernandez when he asked them where they'd be for the kickoff.

The New York Giants were playing the New England Patriots in a matter of hours, and Transfiguration's congregants, many of them from Latin America, were not missing their adopted country's big game.

When Pope Benedict XVI arrives in New York in April, he will find the Big Apple unchanged from papal visits past in at least one regard: It remains a city of immigrants. The same is true for other parts of the metropolitan area.

The New York Archdiocese, whose jurisdiction includes the three boroughs of Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island, as well as seven counties outside the city, numbers 2.5 million Catholics, an estimated 23 percent of whom are foreign-born. Certain vicariates run higher: 50 percent of Catholics in north Manhattan, for example, are immigrants.

In the Brooklyn Diocese, which encompasses Brooklyn and Queens, 54 percent of the area's 1.3 million Catholics are foreign-born. Overall, 37 percent of New Yorkers were born outside the United States.

The numbers aren't all that different from 1910, when 40 percent of the population was foreign-born, in large part because of immigration from Ireland, Italy, Russia and Austria-Hungary.

According to Fordham University church historian Monsignor Thomas Shelley, the first pastor of New York's first Catholic parish, St. Peter's, reported back in 1785 that fluency in six languages – English, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Irish – was necessary for the job.

“When New York's Catholic community was no more than 200 people, it was already

ethnically diversified,” Monsignor Shelley said in an interview.

Today, New York is even more diverse. The Brooklyn Diocese offers Masses in 24 languages and 24 ethnic apostolates serving 18 different groups. In the New York Archdiocese, Catholics can find Masses in 33 languages on any given weekend.

Like many parishes throughout the city, Transfiguration is predominantly Spanish-speaking (Spanish is spoken at home by 26 percent of Massgoing Catholics in the Brooklyn Diocese), and its congregation is made up almost entirely of Latino immigrants and their first-generation children. Its history, too, is similar to that of others, reflecting the changes that occur as new waves of immigrants replace older ones.

Built in 1889 by German and Irish beer barons, who also financed the Tiffany windows, the church is now situated in the middle of Brooklyn’s Satmar Hasidic community; across Broadway the neighborhood is mostly Hispanic. After World War II, Hasidim and Puerto Ricans moved in, as the Germans and Irish moved out. Joining Puerto Ricans in the past 20 years have been Dominicans, Mexicans and Central Americans.

Each immigrant group is highlighted at an annual national Mass – Mexicans, for example, on the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe.

“It’s hugely important to be in a place where you understand and can be understood, where your culture is not just acknowledged but celebrated,” said Father Hernandez.

Transfiguration offers immigration and asylum assistance, especially with petitions for family reunification, and helps with the transition to life in America.

“We often talk about immigration in a philosophical or legal way, but if you get to know them in a personal way, you see it’s much deeper than a political campaign position,” said Father Hernandez. “We deal with the anxiety they live under. The church needs to be protective of people who can’t protect themselves,” he said.

About 18 miles and a 90-minute subway ride to the north lies St. Thomas Syro-Malabar Church, an Eastern-rite parish founded in 1999.

Before then, it was known as St. Valentine, a Polish church that closed a couple of years earlier because of a lack of parishioners. The stained glass still features donor names such as Piasecka and Jadwiga, but today, the light filters through to illuminate the sari of St. Thomas's Indian congregation.

Between 1990 and 2000 the city's Indian population grew 118 percent, according to data analysis by the Asian American Federation Census Information Center. In the past eight years, St. Thomas's pastor, Father Jos Kandathikudy, has seen registration jump tenfold, from 55 families to 555.

On July 4 the church celebrates not just Independence Day but its patron saint's martyrdom. Although the feast of St. Thomas is July 3, the parish observes it a day later since the Fourth of July is a national holiday.

Father Kandathikudy leads a statue-studded procession through the mostly Jamaican Bronx neighborhood, and after Mass in a mix of English and Malayalam, traditional music and dance take over. November brings the national feast of Onam, which commemorates the establishment of the Indian state of Kerala, where the Syro-Malabar church is based.

Soumya Zecharias, 26, said she was impressed with the involvement of the parish's young people, crucial to maintaining a sense of identity as immigrants become more Americanized. "The youth Mass has got them participating more, we have CCD classes in Malayalam," she said. "They're really keeping up Indian tradition."

On the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown, around the corner from what remains of Little Italy, the Chapel of San Lorenzo Ruiz is the New York Archdiocese's only church officially designated for Filipinos.

Originally built in 1925 as the Italian Church of the Most Holy Crucifix, San Lorenzo Ruiz opened in its current incarnation in 2005, drawing Filipinos from throughout New York City, Long Island, upstate New York and New Jersey.

"It's a hardship because they could walk to their neighborhood church, but they want fellowship, and we offer liturgy with Filipino songs and devotions," said Father Erno Diaz, director of the archdiocese's Filipino apostolate.

“Recent immigrants find the chapel like a haven to connect with others, especially if they’re new in the area,” he said. “The church doubles as a hot line – people call and say, ‘Father, could you refer us to this and that?’”

Father Diaz keeps no official registry. About 150,000 Filipinos live in the New York metropolitan area, he said; 90 percent of them are Catholic.

“That is my virtual congregation. Some of them come once a year. Some come almost every Sunday. The idea is that these people have their own parish,” said Father Diaz.

Two weeks after the Giants defeated the Patriots to win the Super Bowl, a member of San Lorenzo Ruiz’s choir was dressed in a jersey bearing the name of MVP Eli Manning – proving his New York bona fides while singing hymns in Tagalog.