News



Church members place a replica of Guatemala's Black Christ of Esquipulas statue on a precessional float the day before celebrating its feast day at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Worthington, Minnesota, Saturday, Jan. 11, 2025. (AP/Abbie Parr)

Giovanna Dell'orto

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Worthington, Minnesota — January 17, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

With their sparkling embroideries and colorful sashes flapping in the frigid wind, hundreds of Guatemalan faithful flocked to the Catholic church of this heartland farming town to celebrate their biggest festival yet in honor of the Black Christ of Esquipulas.

Just days before the start of a U.S. administration that's promised a swift immigration crackdown, they turned with hope and pride to the statue of the crucified Jesus, an elaborately carved replica of the most venerated image in their tropical homeland. Church members had it especially commissioned and brought from Guatemala at enormous expense, along with two massive marimbas. No feast is complete without these musical instruments.

"The Black Christ of Esquipulas has come taking planes and crossing borders like us," said Lucas López. Fourteen years ago, he left San Marcos, one of Guatemala's poorest regions, where communities nonetheless also organized festivals this week.

López and his wife, María Ramírez, are now raising their four children in Worthington, a town transformed by international migration. With his salary from the pork processing plant job for which he awakes daily at 4:20 a.m., the couple recently bought their first home a few blocks from church.

At Sunday's Mass that launched the daylong celebration, López and Ramírez — wearing sequined and embroidered huipil and skirt, colorful ribbons tied in her hair — led a dozen faithful in a traditional barefoot dance bringing the offerings to the altar.

"We're so happy to show that we are here, with our American dream, and also to share our culture with others," López said.

One crucifix for many countries — and their migrants

The original crucifix dates back to the late 16th century, and its feast day on January 15 draws thousands of pilgrims to the basilica in Esquipulas, a city on Guatemala's border with Honduras. On Sunday, Cardinal Fabio Baggio, long the head of the Vatican's migrants department, will also celebrate a special Esquipulas Mass at St. Peter's.

From New Mexico to Panama, and throughout Guatemala, nearly 300 churches are devoted to its veneration, making the image a source of communal identity even beyond its religious meaning, said Douglass Sullivan-González, a University of Mississippi history professor.

He added that it's been intertwined in modern Central American politics, from Indigenous rights — because centuries of candle smoke have given it a darker skin tone — to civil wars.

"The image itself comes alive in its context," Sullivan-González said.

For many in Worthington, that context is migration. Gratitude they made it to the United States, whether twelve months or two dozen years ago, mingles with nostalgia for customs and loved ones left behind.

The community includes undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and U.S. citizens, so apprehension over who will get to stay and for how long mixed with the pride of having pulled off a genuinely Guatemalan celebration some 2,500 miles (4,080 kilometers) away.

"The immigration police is coming already!" joked Benigno Miranda when an empty passenger van pulled up by the house where he and other church members had gathered to prepare the two marimbas to be transported to St. Mary's Church. That's what the van was really for.

"One can't be afraid all the time," added Miranda, reflecting widespread sentiment among those celebrating the festivities that God will decide their destinies more than shifting politics and policies.

Advertisement

Working a miracle to bring a sacred image to Minnesota

After all, the Black Christ of Esquipulas is known for miracles — as long as one truly has faith, choir member Lilia Soto said.

She remembers going to visit the sanctuary in Esquipulas with her grandmother before she came to Minnesota at 17 — and also recalls how, shortly afterward, an

Immigration and Customs Enforcement raid at Worthington's meatpacking plant had many migrants terrified to leave their homes.

But now the Black Christ is here at St. Mary’s — normally hanging on a wall by the entrance, though for the festivities it was mounted on a processional float decorated with the same kaleidoscopic fabrics as the women’s dresses.

“When they were getting it down, I basically went running to give it a hug,” Soto said.

That made it even better than in Esquipulas, where the image is untouchable behind glass, she said.

“It’s like having a little piece of Guatemala in this church,” added Dilma Pérez, her fellow choir member.

Pérez and her brother Sergio came to Worthington from San Marcos — where their parents regularly took them to church, but couldn’t afford to travel to Esquipulas — more than two dozen years ago, when she was a teen and he about 9.

Now Pérez and her husband have three U.S.-born children, and also relatives in Guatemala who still depend on their remittances because wages in their region hover around $6 a day. They both work in a pork processing plant 45 minutes away by car.

Nevertheless, one taco and tamale sale at a time, the family led the community’s effort over the last three years to fundraise the nearly $40,000 needed to have an artist in Esquipulas sculpt the statue, to buy the wooden marimbas, and to get them to Worthington.

“We sacrificed a lot,” Sergio Pérez said Sunday afternoon, after serving the celebration’s free taco lunch in the parish school cafeteria and before playing guitar in the hours-long prayer service. “It’s been somewhat physically exhausting, but spiritually I feel strengthened.”

Keeping traditions alive for future generations

For many diaspora communities, maintaining traditional celebrations while integrating in the life of the local church is crucial for the faith of future generations, said Jennifer Hughes, a history professor at the University of California, Riverside.

In the villages in San Marcos that also celebrated festivals this week for the Black Christ of Esquipulas, some participants lamented losing many youth to migration.

“Unfortunately, our people have to migrate to get ahead,” said Freddy De León, a dancer in one of the processions.

But ties remain, also through remittances. The sister of another organizer, Luis Ramírez, watched a live Facebook video of their hamlet's festivities from her New Jersey home.

“That's how the tradition continues,” he said.

In Worthington, where students of color constitute more than 80% of those enrolled in K-12 and speak more than 40 languages, children are growing accustomed to intercultural mixing.

Downtown, a flyer advertising the celebration in Spanish hung in a Guatemalan corner store, three blocks from where lifelong residents ice fished in the middle of frozen Lake Okabena.

That’s one thing Ramírez isn’t eager to try, though the cold no longer fazes her. Her prayers to the Lord of Esquipulas center on a binational future for her family — that they can one day travel to Guatemala without losing the grip on their American dream.

During Mass, the procession of the crucifix to the altar was preceded by dancers carrying flags — that of Guatemala and the Stars and Stripes next to each other in the center — and accompanied by the marimba tune of “Our Lord of Esquipulas.”

“It was very emotional. It’s what we’ve learned since our birth,” said one of the players, Antulio Juarez. He’s spent 12 years in Worthington, but learned marimba music by ear from his grandfather in Guatemala’s volcanic highlands.

Sergio Pérez hopes the opportunity to hear this music will help keep the festival growing for years. Beyond that, he asks for no other miracles.

“I don’t ask him for anything, because I feel that he’s already blessed me so much,” he said of the Esquipulas image.

His sister Dilma was equally self-effacing — and trusting.

“Faith is what keeps us going no matter what life confronts us with,” she said. “We don’t do it to please anybody but God.”

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.