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Photographs by Carlos Chavez Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENT: Sky Mari Marquez, 4, at her recent baptism by Father Steve Niskanen. Every Sunday, the church draws 10,000 people to its 11 Masses. The Olvera Street parish returned to activism with the arrival of Niskanen and Father Arnold Abelardo.

Bringing Back the Fire

Our Lady Queen of Angels Church Returns to Its Role as a Bold Voice for the Poor

By Teresa Watanabe
Times Staff Writer

At 7:30 on a recent chilly night, Father Arnold N. Abelardo tends to 200 homeless people lined up for food outside Our Lady Queen of Angels church in the historic Olvera Street district in downtown Los Angeles.

He asks Dolly about street life and John about job prospects. He whisks a family into the church basement, where he gives them milk, blankets and toys.

Another day, the Roman Catholic priest lures his largely Latino congregants to his side after Mass with mariachi music, stands on a chair and exhorts them to register to vote. "If we want to achieve change, we have to actively participate in politics, and the best way to do that is register to vote!" he booms.

Abelardo is part of a new pastoral team aiming to renew the historic mission of the oldest church in Los Angeles: to serve as a champion of the poor and a voice for the immigrant.

"We are trying to transform it into a church that is more prophetic, liberating and attentive to the poorest of the poor, especially immigrants," said Father Roland Lozano, provincial superior of the Claretian Missionaries of the Western United States, which staffs the church.

Every Sunday, the old church, affectionately known as La Placita or Little Plaza, draws 10,000 people from around the region to its 11 Masses. Its icons of Latino popular religiosity include the black Christ of Guatemala, the

Christ of Miracles of Peru and the infant Jesus known as Santo Nino de Atocha, whose shrine is festooned with baby pictures, locks of hair and written pleas for miracles.

Other days, busloads of tourists alight in front of the church to view the spot at Main Street and New High Avenue where, by the order of King Carlos III of Spain, the pueblo that eventually became Los Angeles was established in 1781.

On weekends, the area draws large crowds for concerts in the plaza, shopping and dining — or, some merchants say, it used to. Olvera Street shop owners complain that the new activism is drawing hordes of homeless to the area, threatening the tourism they rely on.

“Help the homeless, but help them where it doesn’t hurt business,” said Bernarbe Velarde, owner of a nearby fast-food restaurant.

But Lozano and his team hear a clear call to minister to the homeless, undocumented immigrants and people with AIDS.

“Regardless of the political climate or whether [these actions] would be supported by a majority of people in L.A.,” Lozano said, “it’s the right thing to do.”

For much of its history, the parish has been the soul of Roman Catholic Latinos in Los Angeles. In 1910, Pope Pius X granted all Mexicans in Los Angeles the right to marry, be baptized and seek other pastoral care at La Placita, then run by Claretian Spaniards, rather than at their neighborhood churches, where they might face discrimination or language difficulties.

When El Salvador’s civil war sent streams of refugees across the border in the 1980s, the church became the first Roman Catholic parish



PRAYER: Father Arnold Abelardo blesses Luis Jose Mendez, 15, in the plaza at the request of Mendez’s mother. Abelardo has made immigrant rights the focus of his ministry.

in Los Angeles to declare itself a sanctuary. Under the fiery leadership of Pastor Luis Olivares, the church housed as many as 200 people nightly in defiance of U.S. laws against harboring illegal immigrants.

After 1990, the parish leadership changed, giving way to what parishioners and priests say was a greater focus on religious affairs. The church directed the homeless elsewhere and focused on bringing families back to the

parish, a switch hailed at the time by the Olvera Street merchants.

The seeds of La Placita’s more recent change were planted in 2001. That’s when the Claretians voted to champion the cause of immigrants and the poor as one of two priorities, along with developing lay leadership. The choice marked a departure from the previous 12 years of focusing on recruiting candidates for religious life. The new direction was welcomed by the Los Angeles Archdiocese, which has its spiritual headquarters just a few blocks west of La Placita at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels.

With the arrival of Abelardo and Pastor Steve Niskanen in 2002, the Olvera Street parish returned to activism with a roar. The church re-declared itself as a sanctuary and denounced government raids around Southern California to root out undocumented immigrants. The church has expanded its assistance programs for the poor, inviting St. Bede the Venerable church in La Canada Flintridge to bring in hot dinners twice a week. It launched a new St. Juan San Diego Immigrant Center at the church to help people find jobs, shelter, medical care and legal aid.

The congregation has also stepped up its political activity, helping to gather 10,000 signatures in support of a bill to extend driver’s licenses to undocumented immigrants. Church members marched through the streets to



CUSTOM: Parishioners light candles for loved ones. “Shame on us,” Father Abelardo said, if we don’t help the poor.

promote the bill, and when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed it, they sponsored a news conference with other religious and civic leaders to denounce his action.

Abelardo and Niskanen are united in mission but not in style. Niskanen is tall and gangly; Abelardo shorter and compact. Niskanen speaks deliberately and at times cautiously; Abelardo is passionate and demonstrative.

Niskanen, 44, is a Utah native of European descent, raised in an upper-middle-class family. Ordained in 1990, he served in Texas, San Gabriel and Long Beach as a parish priest and trained candidates for religious life.

Abelardo, 36, grew up on a rice farm in central Luzon, the main island of the Philippines, and spent five years living with slum-dwellers in Manila as a lay missionary for the Claretians, a community of 3,000 members in 63 countries. He was assigned to San Francisco in 1994 to evangelize in the Filipino community. By all accounts, Abelardo, ordained last year, has made immigrant rights the burning focus of his ministry.

Parishioners Silvia Hernandez, 23, and Guillermo Armenta, 25, say the new team has revitalized the church, teaching faith in action and community solidarity over individual salvation.

"Before, it was just about going to Mass on Sundays and that was it — you're gone," Hernandez said. "Father [Abelardo's] vision is to fight for things. He says we should not remain isolated. Their vision is always to be in community."

The priests began events to bridge cultural gaps among Mexicans, Peruvians, Guatemalans and others in the parish and started a pastoral council of ethnically diverse lay leaders.

The changes initially prompted some congregants to complain that the new priests were "radicals with liberation theology trying to destroy the traditions of the people," Abelardo said, but such grumbling has died down. Still, Armenta said, many parishioners have shunned his entreaties to get involved in immigrant rights causes, saying politics and religion should not mix.

And some neighboring merchants fear the church's new activism will bring back the



Photo courtesy of Father Arnold Abelardo, C.M.F.

ACTION: Claretian Missionary Fathers Dennis G. Gallo, C.M.F. (seated) and Arnold M. Abelardo, C.M.F., support the passage of a bill to allow undocumented workers to obtain driver's licenses in California.

controversial days of Olivares, who declared La Placita a sanctuary in 1985. Although many activists hail the late Olivares as a visionary hero, his critics say the refugees he sheltered transformed the area into a "war zone" of fights, drug use, panhandling and other mayhem.

Vivien Bonzo, president of the Olvera Street Merchants' Assn., said business revenues dropped by an estimated 40% during Olivares' time. She said business later revived but has been down again by about 20% over the last few years. However, she could not separate the effect of the homeless from the overall recession and drop in tourism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

In one 30-day period a few months ago, two area employees were beaten, a handgun was discovered in the plaza and a homeless man was found dead of a drug overdose, according to Rushmore Cervantes, interim general manager of the El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historic Monument.

Police Officer Ken Lew, who patrols the area, said crime had not risen statistically but the nuisance factor has increased with the

neighborhood's homeless population during the last 18 months. He said he asked the priests to stop feeding the homeless, suggesting they send them instead to Skid Row organizations for food, shelter and medical care.

"I'm very concerned," Lew said. "The homeless create trash. They don't clean up. They're like an eyesore."

So far, a compromise does not appear to be in sight. Cervantes said he would like to see at least half of the homeless diverted to other areas in return for increased help for those who stay. But the La Placita priests say that turning anyone away would violate their commitment to the poor.

"Shame on us," Abelardo said, "if we don't help them out. While others are saying no to immigrants, let's have compassion."

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