

An Interview with Irma Contreras ***by Father James Babcock***

Irma Contreras is the founder of the annual Roman & Eastern Catholic and Orthodox Christian Ecumenical Service of Prayer for Christian Unity at Pentecost.

Fr. James: Tell us how this event came to be.

Irma: At the time, I was working for Fr. Eamon O'Gorman at St. Catherine of Siena Roman Catholic Church in Laguna Beach. Fr. Eamon decided that it would be nice to visit some of the Eastern Churches in Orange County, so I helped organize a bus tour and we persuaded Dr. Charles Frazee, a professor of history at Cal State Fullerton, to be our tour guide. We visited Holy Archangel Michael Coptic Orthodox Church, 40 Martyrs Armenian Apostolic Church and St. John the Baptist Greek Orthodox Church – all in Anaheim. This really opened my eyes and I thought, “Why is it that we cannot all pray together?” Fr. Eamon was hesitant, but he gave me permission to host a dinner and suggested the “Holy Spirit” as a theme. I sent invitations, but drew only one response initially from Fr. Joseph Boules of St. Verena and St. Mary Coptic Orthodox Church. I was determined to make this event happen, so I sent a second invitation via Federal Express, and this time the response was much better. So we met: Fr. Athanasius from Holy Archangel Michael Coptic Church, Fr. Hrant from 40 Martyrs Armenian Apostolic Church, Fr. Cornel from St. Mary’s Romanian Orthodox Church, and Fr. John Monestero from St. Justin Martyr Roman Catholic Church and a member of the Ecumenical Commission for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange. I brought up the idea of holding a prayer service for Christian unity and a lengthy discussion followed.

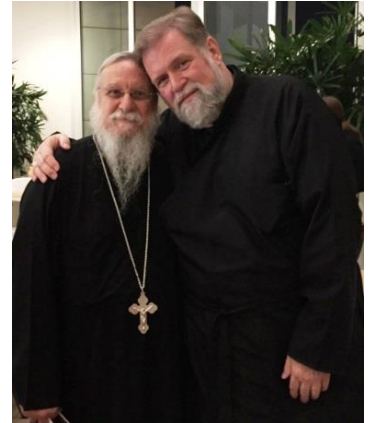


Fr. James: What happened next?

Irma: We more or less decided on each tradition taking a portion of our evening prayer or readings, limited to 5 minutes each. Then we had to decide when we would hold this event. Christmas was deemed too busy;

the Roman Catholic Church already had an ecumenical service of prayer for Christian unity scheduled in January; then Lent would begin and again it was deemed too busy. Finally, we came to Pentecost and that time of year seemed like it might work for everyone.

Fr. Athanasius offered to host the event at Holy Archangel Michael Coptic Orthodox Church. Meanwhile, Fr. Steve Tsichlis heard about our plans and asked if he and his community at St. Paul's Greek Orthodox Church in Irvine could participate. He said he was too busy to come to any of the meetings during Lent, but he sent a representative – Dorothea Love. Meanwhile, I was hired as the business manager at St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Parish in Laguna Woods and I got them involved too. We chartered a bus from St. Catherine and St. Nicholas Roman Catholic Churches to bring parishioners to Holy Archangel Michael Coptic Orthodox Church in Anaheim. So the first Pentecost Ecumenical Service of Prayer for Christian Unity took place with about 200 people attending.



Fr. James: How did it turn out?

Irma: It was a little crazy and exciting. For instance, I had Fr. Athanasius and Fr. Hrant help me hang a huge dove that represented the Holy Spirit with the tongues of fire blowing all over in front of Holy Archangel Michael Church above the entrance. The other clergy started to help out as they arrived for the prayer service and the ice began to melt. The clergy were a bit nervous. There was a lot of repetition in this first service as we discovered that we all did many of the same prayers in our Vesper services. Yet, at the same time, you could feel the presence of the Holy Spirit working and all the people were amazed. They liked the idea of visiting one another's churches. The clergy and the people had an opportunity to get to know each other, and each community was able to share some of their own liturgical tradition with everyone present.

Fr. James: Did you receive any encouragement from the Roman Catholic Church and why do you think this turned into such a great success?

Irma: Initially, I didn't receive any encouragement from my own church. I believe there was some suspicion and fear that the prayer service might not succeed. But I prayed that if God would bless my work that He would help me with raising my autistic son, James. Soon after the first prayer I noticed a marked improvement in him. He began to blossom and bloom and overcome his handicap. So I knew that God was blessing my work. I also believe that this event is successful because every church feels ownership in it. No one dictates what will take place, and we all work together in developing the service and when and where it will be held. Last year it was held at Mission Basilica in San Juan Capistrano. This year it was held for at Annunciation Byzantine Catholic Church. Soon, more and more communities began to get involved, including representatives of the Diocese Orange and the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. This year, Father Alexei Smith, the ecumenical officer of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, also took part in the service and said that he would like to see the same thing happen in Los Angeles.

Fr. James: So, what do you envision for the future?

Irma: I want this event to continue to grow. It's a grassroots effort to assist in allowing us to get to know one another. Nowhere else can people come



together and experience prayer in so many different liturgical traditions: Armenian, Coptic, Greek, Slavic, and Latin/Roman. The reception following also affords an opportunity for the people to get to meet one another. I am currently looking for a grant to help grow this event. Until now the

only funding source we have had is by having each of the participating churches pay for transportation, sound systems and other items. With additional funding we can have more outreach to our youth. I couldn't do all this alone and I must also mention Fr. Steve Tsichlis who has been extremely helpful.

Fr. James: Thank you, Irma, for all the outstanding work you have done, often with little encouragement.

Irma: Thank you, Fr. James, for inviting me to share the story of how all this came to be. I want to thank all the participating churches for their support. And thanks also to the Society of St. John Chrysostom for publicizing this event each year.

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