

In Mexico City, Bells and Baptism, Then Tamales at Home

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MEXICO CITY High up in the bell tower, men pull hard on dangling ropes, filling the square with eardrum-battering clangs. Down below, a man in a sweat-stained cowboy hat strums a guitar, and a woman's high-pitched voice pierces the air.

"Delicious. Hot," she calls out as sweet corncakes turn brown on her grill. "How many will you take? How many?"

A few steps away, deep in that vortex of sound, Barbara Beesne, a 1-year-old with impossibly long, curling eyelashes, lies motionless in her godmother's lap. It's five minutes before noon and, for Barbara, that means nap time. No megaton bells or wandering guitarists or street-side chefs can distract her.

Barbara, dressed in white, is surrounded by babies. Shielded from the sun by a well-worn tent, they are sucking urgently on bottles, squirming, snoozing, crying, cooing, laughing. And more arrive almost every minute.

Today they will all be baptized in one of the Western Hemisphere's largest cathedrals, a stone church with sagging floors that sits atop ruins of Aztec temples. This is a beloved tradition of Mexico City's millions of Catholics -- a baptism at the Metropolitan Cathedral, followed by tamales back home.

The rich come, and so do the poor. Services in this grand, baroque space, filled as it is with gilded statues and priceless antiquities, happen to be a bargain. A baptism at the cathedral costs just under \$20, half the price of baptisms at some local parish churches.

By 12:20, about 20 infants and their parents cluster beneath the tent. A little girl, oblivious to the heat, races up in a fake fur coat. Her mother tries to catch up, the wind fluttering her slinky red party dress as she teeters along in sky-high heels.

Barbara's father, Manuel Beesne, who works as a house painter, looks confused in the middle of all the comings and goings. He also was baptized here when he was 1, but that was 26 years ago.

"Which side is the beginning of the line?" asks his wife, Jenny Beesne.

"You know," he responds, "I have no idea."

So much for arriving early. He wriggles through the gathering crowd to find someone who knows what's going on. Ten minutes later, a priest in an ankle-length tunic with a wide collar steps out from a side door with a bullhorn.

"Please, listen to me," he says as the crowd converges. "Fathers and godparents -- only fathers and godparents -- come with me."

Fathers hand babies to mothers and grandmothers. Mothers rustle through purses, pulling out neatly folded documents and manila folders.

With the dads off handling paperwork, the hawkers descend on those left behind. A woman with wooden caterpillar toys makes a quick sale. When the fathers return, hired photographers place stickers on the babies' white baptism dresses and suits to identify their subjects.

Inside the cathedral, Mass is in full swing -- one of eight today, with two rounds of baptisms. A soothing chorus seeps out the doorway.

Having lined up a photographer, Silvia Escalante, 26, smiles and fishes two pesos out of her pocket for a plastic bag filled with lime juice and ground chili. Escalante is a pro. She's been a godmother here before and she's steering her less-than-organized brother-in-law, Manuel Beesne, through the process.

Behind Escalante, Martin Hernandez passes the time telling stories about sneaking across the border to work in Oceanside, Calif. Hernandez, 57, cradles his granddaughter, Carla Vanessa, who is just 8 months old, then holds her high and regal as her mom adjusts her white baptism hat.

Like Escalante, Hernandez has been here before, having baptized his oldest son at the cathedral. Now he is here to serve as godfather to the daughter of his youngest son, who has gone off looking for tamales.

By 1:15, the wind lifts the enormous flag in the colonial-era square behind them, known as the Zocalo. Mass ends and worshipers filter out, some hauling Jesus statues they picked up at the gift store in the cathedral's foyer.

The bullhorn-wielding priest returns, ushering the babies and their entourages into the building, where chandeliers hang from heavy metal chains, the altar is resplendent with bouquets of white flowers and the floor is marble. The crowd fills two columns of pews, each 20 rows deep.

The priest says a few words about commitment to religious faith, then plunges into the pews with holy water, touching tiny foreheads and saying, "May the strength of Jesus Christ the savior be yours." At the head of the second row, he blesses little Carla Vanessa. But the priest steps back when her family says, "Amen," and frowns.

"You're at the front of the line, and that's all the enthusiasm you show?" he says. "Let's hear it again."

Carla Vanessa starts to cry.

The grumpy priest gets to Barbara and tears roll down her face. He touches holy water to her forehead at 1:55. The instant he moves on, Barbara -- newly baptized -- stops crying and smiles.