

# New Worship director nurturing vibrant liturgical life in parishes

By Erin Friedlander

Tony Varas' earliest memories of Church are of when he was about 7 years old and singing in front of a microphone. He may not have known it at the time, but that was the beginning of a life-long ministry which has led him to his new position, director of the diocesan Office of Worship.

As a student in a Catholic elementary school and high school in Tampa, Fla., Varas said he was always involved in music and liturgy. He did not have his sights set on working in the Church, but wanted to be an opera singer. In 1977, Varas enrolled at the University of South Florida to pursue a degree in music with a major in vocal performance.

In college, he took a part-time position at a parish as a musician. Within a year, the job expanded to full-time and at the age of 19 Varas became the parish's music director. He was responsible for the music at seven Masses each weekend and directing the parish's choir.

"Slowly, over about a year or two, it became clear to me that this is where I wanted to focus my energy. It was a very natural transition into Church ministry. Basically, I was wooed into the world of Church ministry. And ever since then, that's just what I've done. I've never known anything different," Varas said.

After a few years as a music director, Varas took the next step in his ministry and accepted a position of director of liturgy and music. However, he said, "As the job broadened, I felt like, 'I needed something more to do my work well.'" It was then that he enrolled in a graduate program and earned a combined master's degree of liturgical studies and music from St. Joseph College in Indiana, one of the few places in the country offering that type of degree at that time.

After his graduate studies in Indiana, Varas then accepted a position as director of the Worship Office in Lafayette,

Ind., and later moved to Seattle where he served as associate director in the Liturgy Office of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

Reflecting on his work in the Archdiocese of Seattle, Varas said "The Liturgy Office is very much like ours [Metuchen] in many ways in that both offices support the work of the bishop, in terms of consulting, in terms of preparing for his Episcopal ceremonies, and also providing formation and education for liturgical leadership."

Consultation, Varas said, is simply being available for the bishop and the College of Consultors to provide support or research on liturgical matters as requested.

"In the area of support for liturgical leadership," Varas added, "that involves providing the resources to assist parishes in their liturgical preparations, and being available to consult with pastors and lay leadership on how to continue to invigorate their liturgical celebrations and how to nurture full and active participation of the assembly."

While some aspects of his new position will be similar to those he had in the Archdiocese of Seattle, Varas said when he came to the Diocese of Metuchen, he knew that his most important role is to support the bishop's vision of the Office of Worship.

"It is my understanding that our bishop wants to see a vibrant liturgical life in parishes — one that is in communion with the vision of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which was the first document of the Second Vatican Council," he said. "And I'm hoping to assist him to nurture that life in the parishes — a life that is rooted in vibrant liturgical celebrations where people participate fully, consciously, and actively in the liturgy so that people may know Christ and grow more closely to living a life conformed to Christ. I hope that our office will build upon the previous work of the office and



Tony Varas

continue to nurture the liturgical life of the diocese by providing the resources and education needed at each parish."

Talking about what else he wants to accomplish, Varas said, "One of my hopes is to get out to parishes over the next year or so to learn and experience the parish liturgies of this diocese, to become part of the liturgical life of my parish and of the diocese, so that whatever we design for the future will build upon, or 'stand on the shoulders' of, what's been done before."

Addressing changes that have been made in the Office of Worship, Varas noted that Msgr. Robert W. Medley is no longer director, but he continues to assist the office with episcopal ceremonies and has agreed to serve on the Liturgical Commission. "I'm very excited about that because it helps with continuity," he added.

With the appointment of Varas, the bishop has moved the office to the Department of Formation and Leadership. Varas noted that this was a logical move because the Office of Worship and Episcopal Ceremonies is better able to collaborate with the other offices in that department especially in the area of formation of liturgical leadership and Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults.

"Our office, as part of that overall department, easily collaborates with others who do similar work. For example, the Office of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has significant ritual and liturgical dimensions," Varas said. "Similarly, with the Office of Parish Leadership, which works with lay ecclesial ministers, there's a natural ability for collaboration when in the same department. So moving my office to formation and education makes a lot of sense."

Varas, who is a member of St. Matthias Parish, Somerset, said he expects to spend many of his weekends in different parishes so he can get to know the pastors and the people in the diocese.

## Cardinal congratulates Obama, urges he give priority to most vulnerable

By Mark Pattison  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, congratulated President Barack Obama on his re-election in a Nov. 7 letter.

"The people of our country have again entrusted you with a great responsibility," Cardinal Dolan said. "The Catholic bishops of the United States offer our prayers that God will give you strength and wisdom to meet the difficult challenges that face America."

Cardinal Dolan added the bishops pray that Obama will "help restore a sense of civility to the public order."

He said, "In particular, we pray that you will exercise your office to pursue the common good, especially in care of the most vulnerable among us, including the unborn, the poor, and the immigrant. We will continue to stand in defense of life, marriage and our first, most cherished liberty, religious freedom."

In the press release containing the text of the letter, the words "our first, most cherished liberty" were in italics.

The bishops and the Obama administration have clashed for the past year on a federal Department of Health and Human Services mandate that would require most religious employers to provide contraceptive access to their employees, allowing for few exceptions.

With 270 electoral votes needed to secure a presidential win, Obama, a Democrat, had 303 to 206 for his Republican challenger, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney. Florida's 29 electoral votes had not been decided the morning after the Nov. 6 election.

Archbishop Jose H. Gomez of Los Angeles also congratulated Obama in a Nov. 7 statement.

"Every political office is an expression of public trust and carries the responsibility to work for justice and the common good — not only in our own country but also in the international community. So I pray that God will grant our president the wisdom he needs to carry out his duties, along with the virtues of honesty, courage, prudence and humility that are necessary for true public service," Archbishop Gomez said.

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