

Belizeans Celebrate Garifuna Settlement Day Mass at St. Martin de Porres Church

Belize City, 19th November 2023. The Garinagu arrived at the southern shores of Belize in 1802 after being exiled from the island of St. Vincent in the Caribbean. Since then they have been a resilient force in our country contributing to the development and cultural diversity in areas such as education, language, music, dance, food, sports etc.

Garifuna Settlement Day on which a re-enactment of the 1802 arrival or Yurumein, was declared a national holiday in 1977. On this day Belizeans from all over including the diaspora, join to witness and take part in various cultural activities. The day starts with the re-enactment of the arrival by canoe followed by a Mass. Re-enactment is done every year in the southern towns of Punta Gorda and Dangriga, In Belize City and in Libertad village in Corozal.

Sunday, 19th November 2023, was a beautiful day. After weeks of rain, the temperature was cool and a beautiful sun emerged as a blessing for the arrival. The canoes arrived at the Belcan Bridge in Belize City around 6:30 am. After being given permission to land as they were in 1802, the group processed to St. Martins de Porres church to the sounds of drums and conch shells.

I've witnessed numerous re-enactments but the symbolic entrance into the church and the pulsating rhythm of the drums have never failed to evoke a deep sense of pride in me. For this is the moment when I'm reminded of the struggles of the Garinagu over the years and the need to keep thanking God for where we are today.

Rev. Father Brian Christopher S.J., and his concelebrant, Rev, Father Andres Vall-Serra, S.J. welcomed everyone and led one of the most beautiful Settlement Day masses I've heard in a long time.

Here are extracts from his inspiring homily:

"Culture is a sacred trust that you Belize, have been given. Please, please, I, I beg you as an outsider, never let that go. Because culture is a sacred thing. And the uniqueness and the beauty of individual cultures is a gift given to you by God, never lose it. And I say that it's a gift by God for two reasons. Number one, culture is a part of who we are. Culture makes us who we are. And when I say culture, I'm not just talking about the dress. I'm not just talking about the music. And I'm not just talking about me getting up here, being able to read some words off the page. I'm talking about not just the language, but the whole mindset of a given culture.

The way we invest in culture is by sharing it with the next generation to share it with the youth. And they may not be interested in it all or all at once, but that's okay. Make sure they learn the language, make sure they learn the rhythms. Make sure they learn the food. Make sure they get all of that. Because again, that's how God will allow them to grow. And that's how God will keep Belize growing strong."

He concluded, "So let's make that our prayer today. Today we gather together to celebrate Garinagu. But more than that, bigger than that, we celebrate this beautiful land of Belize, which is not a melting pot, which is not a place where we ignore all of our cultural differences. No, Belize is a land of a whole big, wide diversity. And what a gift that is. And that's why we gather together to celebrate today. So a great big thank you to the Garifuna people sharing your culture with this land and for me, sharing with me. Thank you for that. What an incredible gift that is. Amen."

We thank Fr. Brian Christopher and Fr. Andres for celebrating with us and applaud Fr. Brian for his efforts in taking on the challenge of saying parts of the Mass in the Garifuna language.

We also thank his worship, Mayor Bernard Wagner and Councilor Albert Vaughan for joining in the celebration Mass.

The theme for this year is : ***"Wamúa, wanichigu lubá ámuñegü: óundaruni hama nibureintian lun labagaridu Garifuna lárigi bían san irumu ya Balisi"*** (***"Our Land, Our Culture, Our Future: Involving Our Youth for Garifuna Survival After 200 Years in Belize."***)

Happy Garifuna Settlement Day Belize!