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MATTHEW FOX'S TRICK-OR-TREAT SPIRITUALITY

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SAN FRANCISCO — It's Halloween weekend in this freewheeling coastal city, and the crowds are frisky on the streetcars climbing the street alongside Grace Episcopal Cathedral. "Happy Halloween!" they shout to the bystanders waiting and fidgeting expectantly at the side entrance to the cathedral's basement.

To some of the people in this line, Halloween is not simply a time to dress in exotic costumes and collect candy. It's a sacred time to honor the ancient pagan spiritualities they embrace. Matthew Fox is here, in the name of the Cosmic Christ, to help them do it.

Fox has chosen Halloween weekend — he prefers to point out it's the eve of Reformation Sunday — to import the first "Planetary Mass" from Sheffield, England, to San Francisco.

For most of his clerical career, Fox has been a Dominican priest who specialized in angering the Vatican. The Vatican silenced him for a year as a disciplinary measure. When Fox began talking again, he returned to his favorite theme, which he calls Creation Spirituality — a blend of Catholic mysticism, pantheism ("all is in God"), feminism, and environmentalism.

During his struggles with the Vatican, Fox said an Episcopal bishop wrote to him, promising to protect him from such treatment if he cared to become an Episcopal priest instead. Fox investigated the idea and found a welcoming shepherd just across the bay in the Rt. Rev. William Swing, Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of California.

Swing quietly welcomed Fox into the Episcopal church. Several weeks later, when Fox publicly announced his intention to become an Episcopal priest, he also introduced the concept of the Planetary Mass to North Americans.

The Planetary Mass is also called the Rave Mass (after all-night raves, the dance phenomenon of the '90s) and the Nine O'Clock Service (for its starting time on Sunday evenings back in Sheffield).

Since Fox did not become an Episcopal priest until December, he could not celebrate the first Rave Mass at Grace Cathedral. Instead, Fox invited 35 young people to San Francisco, mostly in their 20s, who helped create the original Rave Mass in Sheffield.

Outside, organizers draped two lights near the entrance in black crepe. (The Rev. Chris Brain, 36, the sole ordained Anglican priest in Sheffield's Planetary Mass community, describes the worship space as achieving "the ambiance of an ancient crypt.")

Inside, at the center of the room was placed an oversized circular altar and a smaller crescent table. Surrounding the tables were a series of concentric circles, tracks marked off in tape, around which the Rave Mass team would walk and dance. Atop the eclipse altar sat a chalice, protected by a clear Plexiglas pyramid.

Above the eclipse altar was an impressive screen — a large sphere of white cloth onto which the organizers projected images of revolving planets, decaying forests, human pulses, and faces.

Several young people emerged from the shadows carrying small flames.

"These people are not pyromaniacs," said Matthew Wright, 31, who served as a liturgical emcee. "As you can see, they're using the flames to pray and invite the Spirit into this place."

Wright encouraged people to approach the flamebearers and use the flames to pray. The flamebearers held the flames inches from people's faces, slowly lowered the flames to foot level, then slowly raised the flames back to eye level. Some people gently waved their arms at waist level, almost like charismatic Christians. Others stretched their arms high above their heads, then bowed fully before the small flames.

The music intensified. A few people, mostly Rave Mass organizers, danced behind their volume controls and light-show gadgets. A woman in a white alb slowly walked the circle around the eclipse table, making mournful, whalelike cries on her flute.

Laurie Camm, 26, coemcee and a talented singer, welcomed people to the Rave Mass.

"What we're going to do is pray and ask the Holy Spirit to come," Wright said, following Camm's welcome. "Spirit of life, thank you for the power to live, the power to pray, and the power to create. Now let's celebrate being alive."

The music cranked up to a pulsating dance beat. The 35 young Brits — including one young woman in a short skirt and a negligee top — led the room in energetic dancing to this bouncy anthem:

Now we feel your lifeforce rising
Raise the passion 10 by 10
Now we breathe you, Christ, inside us
Feel the freedom pushing on!

A young woman read an unspecified passage of Scripture, listing some of the evils that will exclude people from the kingdom of God, including adultery, uncleanness, lust, and sorcery.

Then a video set the Scripture reading in a corporate context. For adultery, the video portrayed the contrast between Third World debt and Third World aid. For lust, it showed images of pollution. For sorcery, it showed the creature almost everybody loves to hate: a TV preacher begging for donations.

The organizers also adapted a reading from chapter 1 of the Gospel of John through the Cosmic Christ filter. The reading repeatedly referred to "the Word" as "it" rather than "he."

"This is the Word of Christ," Rev. Brain said.

"Thank you, Eternal Voice," the congregation responded.

Fox delivered a brief homily: "Tonight is the eve of Reformation Sunday. The Reformation did a lot of good things. It also had a shadow side, like any human endeavor."

According to Fox, the Reformation made religion accessible to the masses, but it overemphasized words. "We overidentified this idea of the Word of God with words," he said. "Every creature is a word of God and a book about God. It's in every one of us. It's in every creature and every being and every rain forest."

After Fox's homily, Brain celebrated communion — of a sort. Women dancers in four corners of the room turned in circles repeatedly throughout the prayers and communion. Assistants presented fire, water, and soil. Brain immersed his hands in the soil, saying he was washing them. He thanked Mother God for the gift of air.

Brain repeated Jesus' words about partaking of communion in his memory. Otherwise, Brain spoke no words of consecration, which may not matter to those Protestants who believe the Lord's Supper is a memorial service, but matters immensely to Anglicans, who affirm what is called consubstantiation. Most Anglicans do not believe the bread and wine literally become the flesh and blood of Christ, but they do believe in a "real presence" of Christ in the elements of the sacrament.

There's supposed to be a "real presence" in the Rave Mass, too, but it's the presence of the Cosmic Christ as lifeforce, not the personal historical figure who died on a cross and rose again.

"As Christ is behind the creative explosion started at the Big Bang, and is the lifeforce of nature's continuing rebirth on its journey to fulfillment, we break the bread of the universe and drink the blood of

the cosmos, a microcosm of the vast macrocosm," Brain wrote in an essay for *Treasures in the Field*, a book about worldwide Anglicanism's understated Decade of Evangelism. Accordingly, Brain alternated between calling the elements "the body and blood of Christ" and "the life of the universe."

Bishop Swing attended the service and expressed his approval. At a news conference, Swing described the service as "the church singing a new song."

"We kicked the Canaanites out of the Middle East, and they were a fertility cult, people of the Earth. The worst thing you can call someone today is a pantheist," he said.

Not if Matthew Fox can help it.

— *Doug LeBlanc*