

A Multicultural Church at Worship: Promise and Challenge

The Second Vatican Council taught that local parishes “in some manner . . . represent the visible Church established throughout the world.” Therefore, the Council said, “efforts must . . . be made toward a lively sense of community within the parish, above all in the shared celebration of the Sunday Mass” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [SC], 42). In places where parishes are homogeneous in ethnic background and social outlook, that goal is relatively easy to achieve. But how do you accomplish it in a parish that is politically divided, with all the challenges posed by various age groups, and in which the members come from different ethnic backgrounds and, perhaps, are only comfortable speaking different languages?

Consider that since 1970 more than thirty million immigrants have settled in the U.S.A., representing more than one-third of all people ever to come to the United States from another country. Currently, foreign-born immigrants constitute more than ten percent of the total U.S. population. Many of these people are Catholic. In fact, the Catholic Church in the United States provides special apostolates for at least twenty-two groups of immigrants, from Brazilians to Ukrainians. Whether or not immigrant groups have a special apostolate reaching out to them, however, many of them simply come to the local parish looking for a church home. If we are not ready to welcome them and to provide them a way to feel at home, many will leave the Catholic Church and find a home in some other Christian community, or they will simply stop participating in church life altogether.

Our history as Roman Catholics in the United States offers several answers to such challenges. One has been to establish parishes for specific ethnic groups—the Irish parish, the Italian parish, the Lithuanian parish, and so on. Another has been to set up a schedule of Sunday Masses that keeps ethnic groups and people of different ages and political attitudes apart—the Spanish Mass, the youth Mass, the Mass for seniors, the traditional choir Mass, and the like.

Many of these solutions are no longer acceptable, and some are no longer possible. It has become clear that if a parish is to be the local sign of the Church that the Second Vatican Council hoped it would be, we have to find ways to overcome our differences. We must learn how to celebrate our diversity within the Church of Jesus Christ in order to be the kind of beacon that our world needs. Before we can

offer solutions to anyone else’s problems, in other words, we have to heed the call of Jesus to remove the log sticking in our own eye before we try to “see clearly to take the speck out of [our] neighbor’s eye” (Matthew 7:3–5). That log, in the case of our multiethnic Catholic Church, is the scandal of separation, the fear of new immigrants, the desire to hold onto what we consider “ours” rather than hand it over to “them.”

People are finding new ways to remove the log of separation within our multicultural communities. Many of our current practices amount to allowing various ethnic or otherwise separate groups to use the same space but at different times—the equivalent of the old ethnic parishes simply sharing one facility—and this leaves the local parish disjointed, fractured, and fragmented. Recognizing this fact, some leaders are moving outside the walls of the liturgical space (and, in some instances, outside separate religious education programs) to embrace all those aspects of life that lead to liturgy as the “summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed” and the “fount from which all the Church’s power flows” (SC, 10). The building blocks of shared liturgy are created from the sharing of meals and stories and cooperation in common projects that promote justice and charity.

Pastoral musicians have more opportunities to build bridges than most other people in the liturgical assembly. They often find themselves ministering to people from various kinds of groups within the parish; they hold a rich resource of song and instrumental music that can express the many paths to the faith we share. They often meet those without power or without a voice to express their needs and their gifts. Pastoral musicians can be instruments of God’s grace to transform our parishes from fractured groups that do not talk to one another—let alone share one another’s approach to worship—into the living body of Christ that represents the graced and visible Church of Christ in this place, present for the transformation of the world.

Multicultural liturgies can be wonderful expressions of unity in diversity, but if little connection among the various ethnic groups is going on outside that liturgy, what is the purpose? The challenge is for us all to be educated about inclusion and diversity, and we must all be open to conversion: deep conversion about personal beliefs and prejudices, about other people, about cultures, and about the best way to be the Church at worship.