

Many Churches, One Church

Back in the fourth century, St. Augustine of Hippo wrote to a friend who had a question about local church customs. Augustine passed along some advice he had learned from St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan. Explaining for Augustine and his mother the differences between ritual practices in Milan and Rome, Ambrose observed that he could not teach them “anything but what he himself practiced, because if he knew any better rule, he would observe it himself.” Ambrose said: “When I visit Rome, I fast on Saturday; when I am here, I do not fast. On the same principle, observe the custom prevailing in whatever church you come to, if you would avoid either giving or receiving offense” (Augustine, *Letter 54*).

No one would ever accuse Ambrose or Augustine of attacking Church unity or of not showing proper respect for the Church of Rome and its liturgical practices, but this story does point out how “diversity in unity” has been part of Church practice for a long, long time.

Today’s Catholic Church is still struggling with the question of how to preserve both the unity of the Church and the diversity of local cultural ways of being Catholic and of practicing Catholic worship. It is not particularly surprising to find the Catholic Church in Africa at the forefront of this struggle today and a model for inculturation of the one Faith. After all, Africa is the birthplace of the human species, and Christianity took an early and firm hold on northern Africa (Augustine’s diocese of Hippo was located in what is now Algeria).

Here are some things that we’ve learned about Catholic worship from the Church in some African nations that



A lector proclaims the Word in the Zaire Rite

have worked, particularly since the first special Synod for Africa in 1994, to apply the experiences learned by the Church in the Democratic Republic of Congo (also known as Zaire) since the 1970s.

We’ve learned that the Liturgy of the Latin (Roman) Church is quite adaptable and can incorporate such local cultural practices as processional dance, clapping, spontaneous acclamations, use of local vestment styles, and even some reordering of the rites themselves. We’ve also learned that one of the most adaptable aspects of Roman Catholic worship is music. It is the use of familiar musical forms and sounds that have helped people in Africa feel at home in Catholic Liturgy. We’ve learned that preaching

must touch the heart as well as the mind, if it is to lead to transformation of daily living. And we’ve learned that the Second Vatican Council’s call to enter the Liturgy as a corporate act which none of us owns, yet in which we all participate, demands authentic response if it is to unite the Church as well as change individual lives.

We’ve also learned that there is more work to do, if there is to be authentic inculturation of the Catholic Church and its worship, but that we must move carefully, so that we do not become victims of one or another passing cultural fad. And we’ve learned that trying to shape appropriate worship for ethnically diverse congregations, such as those in the United States, is a new challenge unanticipated by the Second Vatican Council and unexperienced in many places in Africa. Still, our two-thousand-year history as Church contains so many examples of the successful articulation of the Good News and successful shaping of worship in new nations and cultures that we can be confident that the Holy Spirit will help us to do so once more.