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Ministry for a Multicultural Church

As we move into a new century, the Catholic Church in the United States finds itself before the challenge of ministry to an increasingly complex tapestry of peoples from many different cultures. To be sure, this is not the first time that the Church in this country has had to face waves of immigration and the pastoral needs of diverse groups of people. As we shall see, this was a major emphasis of Church policy for most of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. But the new waves of immigration challenge us in a different way than those of a hundred years ago.

This presentation tries to range over some of the issues which we must address if we hope to remain faithful to our charge as ministers in the Church. As a result, the treatment of any given topic will necessarily be rather general. But it seems to me that it is important to get this kind of overview if we are to be able to grasp the dimensions of the challenge now before us.

What is presented here is in four parts. In the first part, I want to sketch something of the current situation in which we find ourselves, and how it is both similar to and different from our past experiences as a Church of dealing with many cultures at the same time. This forms a necessary background to anything we might choose to do in order meet the challenge before us.

In the second part, I want to present a few of the major cultural dynamics that are at work in a setting where many cultures come together in a single location. The dynamics presented will hardly be exhaustive in their description; they are intended more as illustrative of the kinds of things to which we will have to attend if we hope to be even somewhat successful in ministering in a multicultural Church.

Part three will suggest what goals we might strive for as a multicultural Church. I have found that people frequently assume they know what the goals are and, as a result, never really are able to move resolutely. For many people, it seems that the real goal of a multicultural Church is a reduction of tension and friction among the groups. That is in itself not a bad goal to have, at least initially. But it hardly goes far enough toward what ought eventually to be quality ministry.

In a brief fourth and final part, I would like to propose some of the policy changes we will have to consider as a Church if we are to be a truly multicultural Church. How will we have to change structures, education, and ways of working if we are indeed in a different situation? These can only be proposals at this stage, but it seems to me that it is time to start thinking about them.

The Multicultural Reality of the Church in the United States Today

I want to begin by setting the scene for talking about the many cultures in the one Church as we experience it today. This will be done by offering a brief historical perspective, and then moving on to the current situation in which we find ourselves. This forms a necessary backdrop to whatever might be said about directions we need to take.

The Catholic Church in the United States as a national body has had to address the question of being a multicultural reality at least since the 1830's. It was at that time that the first waves of immigration began coming from Europe. To be sure, there were multicultural realities already in certain parts of the country, such as Louisiana where Cajuns and African Americans and others were together. But racism usually segregated congregations so that there was little or no interaction. Native Americans tended to get pushed westward with immigrant expansion.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the Church needed to address a multicultural reality. Texas and parts of Mexico had been annexed, and the flow of immigrants from Europe continued to rise. This potent mix was often not a harmonious one. Conflict was such between the Irish and the Germans, for example, that the Church in this country came perilously close to having two hierarchies, split along linguistic lines. The American Protestant church historian Sydney Ahlstrom once quipped that the only interesting

thing about Catholic Church history in the nineteenth century was the story of the rise of parochial schools and ethnic conflict.

The response to many cultures together in one Church, at least in urban areas, was usually addressed with the concept of the national parish. In this system, people of one cultural group would be served in a parish that focused on their language and cultural heritage. Sometimes this happened naturally, as people tended to live in neighborhoods together along ethnic lines. In other instances, certain parishes would be targeted to serve a specific group.

Moreover, most of the groups coming from Europe either brought their own clergy with them, or developed conduits which provided a steady stream of seminarians or newly ordained priests flowing from Europe to North America.

Well into the twentieth century, the principal concern of Church leadership was the welcoming and assimilation of these waves of immigration--first from Ireland, then from Germany, followed later by Italy, and finally from the Slavic lands of Eastern Europe. Although the focus was often on language and group cohesion, many cultural needs were addressed along the way.

How is the situation different today? First of all, the immigration into the United States in the last thirty years has not been from Europe, but from Asia and Latin America. A landmark date is 1965, when the Asian Immigration Act was passed in Congress. This allowed larger groups of Asians to immigrate to the United States for the first time. Prior to this, immigration quotas were strictly adhered to, and only lifted slightly from time to time in order to provide a workforce in specific areas--such as Chinese to help build the railroads, and Japanese to work on the sugar can plantations in Hawaii. The policy was overtly racist, and may have only been changed in 1965 because more workers were needed for the expanding economy, and immigration from Europe had dwindled to a trickle.

Migration from Latin America also became greater during this same period. To be sure, there had always been migration (not to mention the annexation of half of Mexico), but the number of immigrants swelled considerably, and continues to be a major source of new faces on the American scene.

The United States is now the fifth largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. The second-largest Polish and Greek cities in the world are in Chicago. Long Beach, California is the second largest Cambodian city in the world, and East Los Angeles is the second largest Salvadoran city. Whereas earlier migrations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to come from a few cultural areas--Irish, German-speaking, Italian, and the like--today there is a multiplicity of cultures. Among the Spanish-speaking peoples, for instance, more than twenty countries of origin are represented. This means that, although they all speak more or less the same language, the cultural differences are often considerable.

Secondly, the nature of new immigrant groups in the multicultural mix is of a somewhat different character than was the case in earlier waves of migration in another way. Ease of travel allows immigrants to maintain contact with their homelands--unless, of course, they are political refugees. Whereas earlier immigrant groups usually said goodbye to their countries of origin forever when they came to the United States, that is frequently now no longer the case. That means that immigrants are less likely to assimilate as quickly into the dominant culture in the United States because they maintain contact. It is not uncommon for Mexican immigrants, for example, to send their children back to Mexico during the summer vacation in order to get to know relatives and the customs of that country--and even keep up the language. There is always some level of assimilation, especially beginning with the second generation. But the decidedly slower pace of assimilation, or even outright resistance to assimilation, is certainly bolstered by the fact that access to the country of origin is maintained, at least through the first generation.

A third distinguishing factor of the new immigration is the mobility of its populations. While there may be a distinguishable "Little Saigon" in Orange County or a "Little Havana" in Miami, immigrant populations tend to be more mobile than in the past. They move frequently and quickly, following economic opportunities, or constantly upgrading their housing as their financial resources improve. This makes ministry to a group more difficult if the people--and sometimes even the culture--change rapidly.

How does the Church respond to the needs of these new immigrants? In the nineteenth century, the national parish was a solution. It was predicated on a relatively homogeneous and stable neighborhood, with the parish complex anchoring the area as a religious, but also educational and social center. The national parish

had many merits and was an important vehicle for meeting the needs of immigrant communities. But the idea of national parishes has largely fallen out of favor today. (Interestingly, when major new migration began in Australia after World War II, the Australian bishops sent a delegation to the United States to see how we handled the multicultural challenge. On the basis of that visit, they decided not to go the route of national parishes.) Three reasons account for this. First of all, when a national parish has served its purpose, and the national group has moved out of the neighborhood, it becomes extremely difficult to close the national parish, even when the number of members has dwindled to a point beyond viability. Sentimental reasons will make former members resistant to closing the parish, and will often lead to protracted battles between bishop and members. Second, immigrant neighborhoods are often not so homogeneous any more. An entry-level immigrant neighborhood may hold many cultures instead of just a single one. And third, the mobility issue just mentioned: populations are too fluid or mobile to tie their pastoral needs to a single place.

What has taken the place of the national parish in terms of meeting the cultural needs of immigrant groups? Most frequently, there are parallel communities which share the same parish facilities. Pastors find it difficult to bridge between the groups, not only because of language, but sometimes because the groups are in competition with one another. Parallel communities keep the peace, but raise the question just what does "parish community" mean when there are in fact several communities which have very little to do with one another.

Dimensions of Intercultural Communication

One must preface any treatment of the basis for addressing the multicultural reality in which the Church finds itself by noting that our notion of culture is a fairly recent one in history. Of course, people have noticed differences between peoples for a very long time. But they often noticed the individual differences and did not think of them as a system which made up a way of life. The way we are addressing it here goes back only to the last part of the eighteenth century. At that time "culture" began to be used in its modern sense as the unity of language, custom, and territory. Prior to that, "culture" was used in what is now called the classical sense; that is, as an educated refinement. In that view, some people had culture (usually the upper class) and other people did not. Culture in the modern sense as a way of designating a people's way of life has come rather lately.

One must also preface this discussion of intercultural communication by noting the importance of culture in recent Church teaching. Culture is not just a logistical problem for ministry today; it carries with it a theological meaning as well. In Church teaching, culture in the modern sense is really addressed for the first time in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, at the Second Vatican Council.

As already mentioned, reflection on culture in its modern sense is very recent in Church teaching. *Gaudium et spes* devotes a long section to culture (paragraphs 53-62). While it includes both the classical and modern senses of culture, it is the modern sense upon which we wish to focus here. There are two important teachings that are relevant to our discussion. The first is the right of every person to culture itself. Since culture, although a human product, is so essential to our very humanity, to take away a person's culture is to damage a person grievously. It is a denial of an important aspect of who we are. The second teaching has to do with the right to development in culture. Culture becomes an important vehicle for development of the person at all levels, including the spiritual. It is precisely this positive valuing of culture that provides the theological basis for any reflection on many cultures in the Church.

Concern for culture has been a hallmark of the papacy of Pope John Paul II. In 1982 he founded the Pontifical Council for Culture. In his many pastoral visits around the world, he almost invariably gives two speeches on culture. In one speech, he addresses the artistic and intellectual elite of a society, reminding them of their role as creators of culture. In the second speech, he addresses a group whose culture is being threatened by the dominant culture, affirming the group's right to its own culture as part of their own humanity. The Holy Father has deep convictions about the importance of culture and returns to the theme again and again in his teaching.

To sum up, while the concept of culture we are using today is fairly recent, it is still amply supported in recent Church teaching and in the Bible. As we become more knowledgeable in the area of intercultural communication, we will also need to continue to reflect on the theological meaning of being many cultures together. I will return briefly to this theme in the third part of this presentation. Suffice it to say here that culture is an essential part of our humanity, and so its meaning for us becomes ever richer as we come to

understand it more deeply. This theological teaching on culture is one of the principal reasons why we take it so seriously, why we see it as more than a problem that will eventually have to go away.

That having been said, let me indicate some areas of intercultural communication that are especially important for ministry for a multicultural Church. I would like to focus on four areas briefly: (1) the role of religion and religiosity, (2) interactions between immigrant and dominant culture, (3) issues of age and gender, and (4) the significance of intercultural communication itself.

One thing that frequently happens in immigrant communities is that religious activity actually intensifies over what it had been in the country of origin. This is so because religious practice may serve as an important thread of continuity between the country of origin and the new situation. It helps preserve the identity of people who have made the sometimes difficult transition to a new land. For that reason, religious practices that might appear idiosyncratic to the pastor are deemed essential to faith by the immigrant group, and become a symbol of their larger identity. There is frequently also resistance to changing anything in those practices. Admittedly, sometimes this can lead to even an exaggerated practice. Dealing with such exaggerations must be addressed in terms of the cultural needs such practices represent, and not simply as theologically deviant.

One of the most puzzling things for many pastors is how immigrant groups will, at one moment, want to be integrated into larger parish life, and then at another moment, insist of their particularity and separateness from the rest of the parish. James Barker, an educational theorist, has suggested the immigrant groups go through a four-stage cycle in their interaction with the dominant culture. This cycle involves (1) efforts at *accommodation* to the dominant culture, in which the immigrant group eagerly tries to be part of things; (2) *separation*, in which the group realizes that it is not fully accepted, and so withdraws to strengthen its own identity; (3) *negotiation* with the dominant group to get some of its own cultural identity recognized as part of the larger culture; and (4) *institutionalization* of that aspect of cultural identity into the larger culture. Where one encounters the immigrant group in this cycle can account for whether the group is trying to be part of, or separate from, the larger culture.

Along with the cycle of accommodation, one must make an overlay for generational, age, and gender issues as well. First generation arrivals, who come in their adult years, may have difficulties with learning English and adapting to the new culture. For these people, pastoral services will need to be in their language. They frequently are able only partially to accommodate themselves to their new setting. The second generation, those born in the new culture or people who arrived here as children, usually learn English well, and may even react against the "foreignness" of their parents. They may want to reject the culture of the country of origin and embrace the dominant culture of the United States. Or, alternatively, they become "third culture" people, not feeling at home in either the culture of the country of origin nor in the dominant culture of the United States. The third generation frequently becomes intensely interested in the culture of their grandparents, especially if their own parents have rejected it. Where people are generationally, therefore, also affects their perception of their needs and how those needs are to be met.

Age and gender are also factors in pastoral service to immigrants. Teen-agers, for example, have not only the typical issues of identity formation that teen-agers tend to have, but may be struggling also with the extent to which they wish to build their parents' cultural identity into their own sense of self. They may feel several of the reactions noted above coming at them all at once in a very confusing way. Gender may also figure into the total mix, especially in settings of highly patriarchal societies where women have been confined to the home or private sphere and struggle to interpret that in terms of the wider possibilities open to dominant culture American women.

I mention all of these factors--religiosity, interaction with the dominant culture, the influence of generation, age, and gender--to give some idea of the complexities that enter into intercultural communication between different groups within the same parish. It has only been in the last two decades or so that a significant literature has arisen about intercultural communication: what it is, and how to learn it. To be sure, each culture has its own specific ways of dealing with these things, and one can never learn all the rules of all the cultures. But there are things that one can learn about intercultural communication, along the lines which I have just sketched out here. Learning about intercultural communication is doubly important because we need it not only to work effectively in our ministries, but to help the competing groups in our parishes understand what is happened to them. Dominant culture people often mistakenly presume that minority culture people know all about intercultural communication because they have to do it all the time. They may well have learned how to survive in intercultural settings, but they may not be able to articulate what is

happening to them, especially when, as immigrants, they are thrown into the intercultural setting for the first time. As I will propose in the final section, it is time to make intercultural communication training part of priestly formation. It is simply one of the abilities we need to cultivate.

Goals of Many Cultures Together

Along with the challenges of intercultural communication, we need to reflect on what we hope to achieve with many cultures together in the one Church. Just what would that look like? It is important to do this kind of reflection because most people do not have much awareness of their cultures until they are confronted with cultural difference. And when they are faced with another culture, their reaction is often one based on anxiety or uncertainty about the "other" they meet. I would like to suggest that there are three goals we strive for in effective cultural interaction. They are: recognition of the other, respect for cultural difference, and healthy interaction between cultures.

The first goal, then, is recognition of the other. Often we avoid or ignore difference because we do not know what to do with it or because it makes us uncomfortable. Yet those who are "different" cannot escape being different, and know that it is precisely that difference which is the basis for interaction or non-interaction. Recognizing that people of different cultures are here is the beginning of effective cultural interaction. In a parish setting, for example, if people from different cultures are not included in activities of the parish, or services for them are relegated to odd hours of the day when nothing else is going on in the parish, the message is sent that they are invisible--they are not there. If their language or music never figures into liturgical assemblies or their food is not included in parish social events, the message is the same.

What does this mean practically? It means first of all that people must be welcomed. Hospitality is especially important for new arrivals. It is important in this regard to realize that this hospitality is not so much on the cultural terms of the group hosting, but must also make sense to the group being hosted. Cultural patterns of hospitality vary. Many recent immigrants find the hospitality of the dominant culture in this country initially to appear as open, but then as superficial. Hospitality is like other features of American culture: businesslike and goal-driven, likely to be turned off as quickly as it had been turned on. Hospitality does not form a relationship, but is a function of attaining some other result. Recognition, however, is about relationship and the building of relationships. Without this cultural interaction remains distant or even non-existent.

The second goal is respect for cultural difference. Respect for cultural difference builds on recognition. This respect reaches further than acknowledgement and tolerance. Respect means realizing that difference is not going away; it is a permanent feature of reality. Acknowledgement of difference may mean a momentary notice of the presence of difference. Tolerance may mean putting up quietly with difference, with the silent hope that it will eventually go away. Respect, however, means coming to the point that one values the difference in its own right, that it adds to the richness of the world. It often takes a long time to come to this level of respect, since people often see difference as deviation from (their) norm or as a failure to reach their level.

The language of gift is frequently used to express this respect for difference. We speak of the gift of other cultures, or the specific gifts it has to offer. Again, it is important to explore what lies behind the use of the language of gift. Does gift mean something nice, but also something somewhat superfluous to daily life, as it frequently does in the dominant culture in the United States? Does it mean a luxury item that adds to the quality of life, but is not essential to it? Or does it mean the basis of a relationship, a relationship that requires reciprocity? Relationship is the meaning of gift-giving and gift-receiving in many cultures. In some cultures, for example, gifts are even dreaded because it requires the receiving to give a gift of equal or even greater value in return.

Respect for difference, then, has a sense of engagement about it. It requires interaction and relationship that does not brush difference aside, but engages it directly.

The third goal is healthy interaction among cultures. The word "healthy" is important here, since much of the interaction between cultures is often very unhealthy. It may be marked by unwarranted suspicion, racism, conflict, and even overt violence. Healthy interaction is based upon confidence about the value of one's own culture, and a sense of security that is not threatened by an encounter with difference. Its hallmark is a willingness to be changed by the other, to incorporate aspects of that otherness into one's own cultural world. It involves taking respect one step further--into a change in how I view and act in the world. The

presence of that difference in my world is not some antibody that dwells as a foreign substance in me, but comes to be a genuine part of me. It becomes part of my own identity.

If there is a kind of bottom line to many cultures in the one Church, it is about belonging. Welcoming others so that they sense that they are more than guests who are expected to leave at the designated time; respecting their difference as a positive value; and coming to interact so that they are fully engaged: that is perhaps a more complex way of talking about belonging. Belonging is a fundamental human need since we are by nature social beings. Being made to feel that we do not belong by racism, fear of the stranger, prejudice, suspicion, or simple ignorance strikes at the core of who we are. It sends a message that we are less than others, diminished in their sight. And certainly that is not the message of the Gospel!

One final thing needs to be said here. What happens to the unity of the one Church if so much attention is placed upon understanding, respecting, and engaging difference? Is not the most important thing that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, children of the same God? Doesn't all this emphasis on difference become divisive, undermining the communion we hope to achieve?

This is frequently invoked in conversations about difference. Our unity in Christ is indeed the most important thing; no one would want to deny that. The problem, however, is how to come to that unity. Early and frequent invocation of unity more often than not is a way to avoid the issue of cultural difference. People will speak of unity but their actions (and sometimes even their speech) will speak of separation and exclusion. Insisting that cultural difference is not an issue or not a problem is usually an indicator that it really is. There is without a doubt a place for the language of unity. We must realize however that it is only a true description of our faith communities when all people in our midst can speak this language with joy and conviction--that we really do belong, to each other and to Christ.

Implications for Ministry in the Future

What are the implications of being many cultures together in the one Church for our parishes and for our dioceses? What will have to be done differently in order to achieve this? Let us begin with parishes and then move to dioceses.

Two things can guide seeking the implications of many cultures together and implementing changes to support that reality. One is reflection upon aspects of culture that make up identity, especially in encounter with other cultures. The other are the respective goals we hope to achieve in intercultural interaction.

Regarding cultural identity, one should focus on language, customs, and material aspects of the culture. Language is central to cultural identity, since it is the basis for self-expression and interaction. Denial of language is denial of cultural identity. The inclusion of songs and readings in the different languages of represented in our parish communities is a powerful sign of recognition. Some may object that such inclusion may minimize intelligibility for others, even for the majority present. But not to do so makes recognition and interaction impossible.

Language is a crucial factor for immigrants and refugees. In many instances it becomes less of a factor in the second generation and thereafter. But even then it may linger in the form of favorite hymns and expressions. In any event, it is important for parish leaders to attempt to learn at least key phrases in the languages of their cultural groups even if they cannot learn the entire language well. Learning another language is not an impossible task, even though dominant culture Americans are notorious in the rest of the world for only knowing English.

Customs (special holidays, special things done at common holidays such as Christmas and Easter) will often last longer than language use. Engaging in certain practices together creates solidarity in a group and indicates belonging. Incorporating customs, especially of course religious customs into parish life and urging all cultural groups in a parish to participate is an important kind of community builder. As was noted above, different cultural groups frequently operate as parallel communities in parishes. When that is the case, building bridges by participating in one another's customs is a way of building understanding and interaction.

Finally there are the material aspects of a culture. Modes of dress and especially food are the principal parts of this. Many experienced parish leaders know the importance of food for bringing people together. Unity found in sharing food prepares people for the unity which the Eucharist is meant to signify. Since food is

such a signature feature of culture, and one of the most easily shared, it can play an important role in cultural interaction.

Keeping in mind these three aspects of culture, one can overlay upon them the goals of cultural interaction outlined above. What things and practices provide recognition for a cultural group in a parish setting? Having images and pictures in the Church which reflect the religious life of the cultures represented in the parish is a potent sign of recognition. How we schedule events and services, who is chosen to perform ministries, and what things we undertake as important for the whole parish all speak of recognition.

Respect for difference will be shown when changes in a parish become habitual or permanent rather than one-time event. So if certain festivals such as Tet or Our Lady of Guadalupe become regular features in the parish calendar, the message is to that parish's people is that difference is here to stay. Charting all of these onto parish life helps create the networks for sustained intercultural interaction.

For healthy intercultural interaction, education is an important tool, both at the child and the adult level. Racism and prejudice can be addressed; intercultural communication can be learned. Learning about other groups, and the obstacles to interaction help lessen the problems. Intercultural communication is not the same from group to group, but there are general principles which one can learn.

At the level of the diocese, the single most important thing is to develop policies that will guide engagement of the many cultures within the one Church. As has already been stressed, one can have a set of goals that build upon one another progressively to shape and direct action. They will also help guide the use of human and financial resources available to meet needs of different cultural groups.

How diocesan-wide services or offices will be developed depends upon the cultural configuration of the diocese and the human and financial resources it can bring to bear upon its situation. Within those parameters there must be ways for engaging (and to some extent evaluating) intercultural interaction. With it also should be opportunities for the education of parish leadership in language and customs of cultural groups, as well as training in intercultural communication.

There are two things also that should also happen at a regional or even national level. The first is providing catechetical and worship materials in different languages. In some instances, such as with Spanish, this is fairly well developed already. In other instances, as with Asian languages, there might not even be complete translations of the Bible. Translation is usually something that a single diocese cannot reasonably undertake. Cooperation on a broader level will be necessary.

The other is training leadership for intercultural communication. This is simply a feature of ministry in so many parts of the country today. Some places do and have long require learning another language. But few provide any training in intercultural communication. To be effective leaders in parish communities, pastors and lay ministers need to develop some competence in this area. Just as thirty years ago we began teaching pastoral counselling and introducing things like clinical pastoral education into our seminaries so as to make our ministries more effective, so now, I believe, we must introduce courses in intercultural communication. There are things about culture and intercultural communication which can be learned, and we need to learn them if we hope to be effective ministering in a multicultural Church.

Conclusion

Much, much more could be said about this topic, and what has been said only scratches the surface of a complex reality. Let me say one thing in closing. It is important that the issue of the many cultures in the one Church never be addressed as a problem to be solved that, once solved, will go away forever. The many cultures in the one Church is a potential blessing, an enrichment of our communities and our humanities. It is an invitation to expand our horizons and nurture new relationships. Keeping that in mind will keep us from seeking technical solutions that get us no farther than reducing conflict (as valuable as that may be), and help move us along a pathway that will bring us closer to respecting the right to culture and the development of culture, about which Pope John Paul II has spoken so eloquently. It is in that vein that we can turn to some of the striking biblical images of cultures coming together: the event of Pentecost, the coming together of every tribe and tongue, people and nation in the Book of Revelation. Ministry in a multicultural Church must be such that it does knit the members of the body, diverse as they may be, closer together and closer to the Head of the Body, Jesus Christ. It is these bold visions which we must hold before us as we struggle to become more faithful to our call to ministry in a Church so varied and so rich.

Source: Text from the Author