

Building Inclusive Communities

How do you take distinct cultural communities and nationalities and make them into one parish?

BY DANIEL S. MULHALL

THE POPULATION of the United States reached 300 million in October 2006, tripling in size in less than 100 years (in 1915 the population was 100 million). This rapid growth has been spurred over the past 30 years by the largest wave of immigrants our country has ever seen. According to the most recent report from the U.S. Census Bureau, there are now eight metropolitan areas whose immigrant populations exceed one million: Chicago, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, San Francisco and Washington, D.C. Most of these new immigrants come from Central or Latin America (mostly from Mexico), although large numbers also originate from Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia, and are from predominately Catholic countries.

As they look for assistance in making the transition to this country and look to practice their faith here, this new wave of immigrants is putting great demands on our parish communities. Pastors and other parish leaders face the difficult task of helping these newcomers feel welcomed and at home, while at the same time helping other parishioners to be welcoming and to accept the changes taking place in the parish.

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This balancing act is not easily accomplished. In many cases, newly multinational or multicultural parishes do not function as one parish but as separate communities who happen to share the same facilities. Little takes place across cultures, and members of the various groups rarely engage in activities together. Frequently in parishes the original founding culture continues to make the decisions, unwilling or unable to make room for the new groups to take root. At other times, two or more new cul-

ART BY STEFANIE AUGUSTINE

tures fight one another for a place in the parish.

Celebrating the Eucharist presents special challenges. The Archdioceses of Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles and New York, and the Diocese of Brooklyn all report that Mass is celebrated in their diocese in more than 60 languages each week. Often the same parish offers separate Masses in different languages to accommodate its different constituencies. Some parishes try to offer a multilingual Mass, with worship aides to assist those who do not speak the other languages. Yet even the best of these aides leave some things untranslated and some parishioners feeling excluded.

At other times liturgy is used as a starting point from which to bring multinational or multiethnic communities together, when it should be the culmination of that unifying work. Before a parish can pray together as one community, it first has to develop the intercultural and cross-cultural relationships that will allow it to become one community.

During the past seven years I have met regularly with a group of people from various cultures and ethnic groups to discuss issues of catechetical importance. Our meetings have been extremely valuable; having voices from so many cultures at the same table is invigorating and instructive. Working with this committee has taught me a great deal about how multiple communities can grow into a unified parish.

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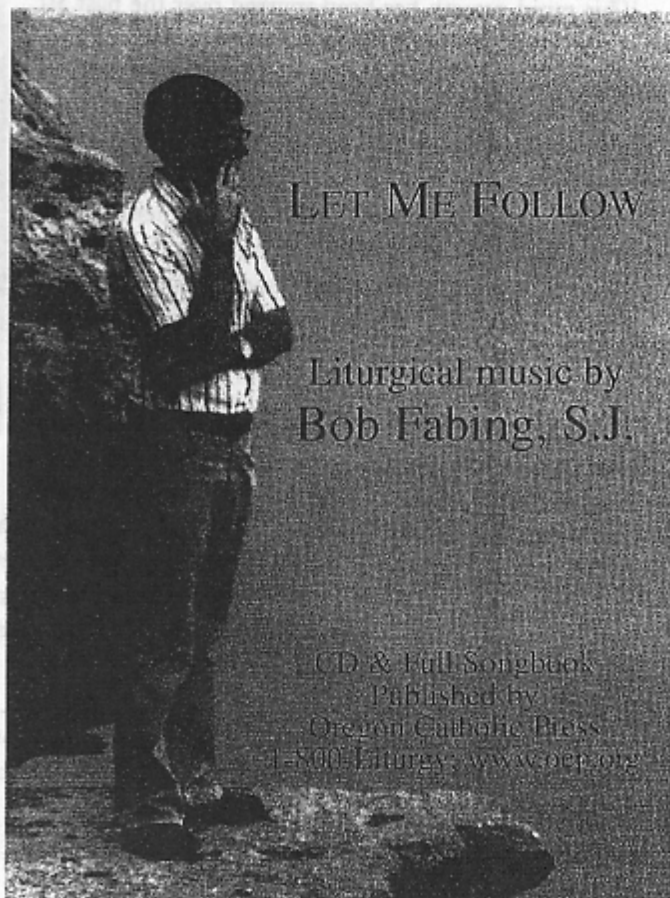
Suggestions for Unifying a Diverse Parish

How do you take two or more very distinct cultural communities—communities often separated by language, ethnicity and nationality—and make them into one parish? I have six suggestions.

1. *Know your people.* Who are the people in your parish? Where are they from? What generation are they? (There is a vast difference between the needs of first- and second-generation immigrants.) What are their cultural backgrounds? Conduct a demographic study of the whole parish, not just of those people who may look different from the dominant group or of those who speak English with a foreign accent.

2. *Set up a multicultural advisory committee.* Once you know who your people are, form a committee from the various groups in the parish to advise the pastor and planning bodies on all aspects of parish life. The selection of committee members should reflect not only the diversity of the parish but the cultural sensibilities of each community. People will be better served in many Asian communities, for example, if you ask the community to nominate three candidates for you to choose from than if you simply pick someone yourself.

An important note: consult this advisory committee before making decisions that affect the groups they represent. If you are looking for someone to bless your decisions after the fact, you have already missed the mark. Bring your



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thoughts to them first, and let them shape the decisions that are made.

3. *Work for the complementarity of cultures.* Parish procedures need to be structured so that all people are treated equally and fairly, with dignity and respect. The dominant culture in a community is used to getting the first and best piece of the pie. In a multicultural setting, however, that is no longer a given: every community will have to have the first slice at times. Why should the English-speaking community, for example, automatically get the main church for Christmas midnight Mass? At my former parish, St. John the Baptist in Baldwin Park, Calif., the English and Spanish midnight Masses were rotated each year between the church and the parish hall; the Spanish would have the hall one year and the church the next. As my friend Dennis Johnson Jr., says, "It's like juggling: there are times when each ball needs separate attention if it is going to stay in the air."

Routine parish procedures must also encourage inclusion. All boards and committees can reflect the make-up of the parish, but without tokenism. A person from a non-dominant culture often feels intimidated if he or she is the lone voice among a majority of voices from the dominant cultural group; consequently, more than one member of each nondominant group needs to be on every committee if the group is effectively to have a voice.

Parish prayer and social activities must be influenced by the various cultures of the parish as well. A multicul-

tural community will celebrate many more feasts and in many more different ways than would a single-culture community. Make sure that all parishioners are invited to participate in every celebration and that all these celebrations are accessible. Provide translators if you have to; hand out booklets in several languages to explain the feast and how it is celebrated and so on. We need to move from the concept of welcoming the stranger to welcoming home a missing family member.

4. *Develop structures to deal with cultural tensions.* With the help of your cultural advisory committee, evaluate what is currently being done to see how sensitive the parish is to the needs of each community. What changes need to be made? What ought to be dropped or added? Establish a process through which issues that cause tension across cultural boundaries can be aired and addressed publicly. This demonstrates a Christian community in which inevitable disagreements do not lead to anger, and consensus does not lead merely to one side's giving and the other side's taking most of the time.

5. *Encourage conversation and interaction.* Encourage people to talk with each other and to work with each other in activities outside of liturgy. Find ways for people to overcome cultural chasms by sharing a meal together in one another's homes or by working together to shelter the homeless. In many ways, eating meals together best prepares people to share the eucharistic meal together on Sunday. When I lived in California, I liked to take visitors and guests over to the parish for the monthly breakfast put on by the Spanish women's society. Eating burritos, tacos and *menudo* (tripe vegetable soup, a Sunday morning delicacy in Mexican communities) opened eyes and hearts immediately to the wonderful diversity of our parish.

6. *Listen.* Learning to listen without judging or comparing or offering solutions may be the most important skill one can learn for working across cultures. Those in leadership positions need to realize that people from other cultural and ethnic groups do not need us to make decisions for them or to tell them how to do something. They need us to build bridges across cultural chasms, to open doors to closed organizations and closed minds, and to help them understand how "the system" works so they can participate fully in it.

THE JESUIT THEOLOGIAN KARL RAHNER wrote that in the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church truly became a world church; for the first time the church was being shaped not just by European cultures but by all cultures of the world. Rahner's statement reflects well the current situation of the church in the United States. The question is, can we take advantage of that cultural diversity to create dynamic communities of faith enriched by the grace of God as brought to life in a variety of cultures and voices? **A**



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