

# DIVERSITY

## Barriers Blown Away

Arturo Chávez

*“And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven staying in Jerusalem. At this sound, they gathered in a large crowd, but they were confused because each one heard them speaking in his own language” (Acts 2:4-6).*

**T**he Acts of the Apostles bears witness to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit on Jesus' followers. Suddenly, the terrified men and women—hiding behind closed doors—are filled with a newfound courage to boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus to anyone and everyone who will listen. Just like fire driven by the wind, the Spirit begins to blow in unexpected ways, burning away the linguistic, cultural, and religious barriers that once separated God's people as “Chosen” and “Stranger.” People from every race and nation are surprised to realize that they can understand the apostles' preaching. The message of God's unconditional love and salvation is proclaimed without the usual religious and cultural restrictions designed to safely guard the distance between insiders and outsiders. The simple beauty of Jesus' message moves their hearts to conversion and thousands are baptized that very day. It is no wonder that Pentecost is referred to as the church's birthday!

The culturally diverse context of the church's birth reveals not only her

“catholic” nature and universal mission; it also reminds us that the gift of the gospel message always comes wrapped in a particular cultural and linguistic package. There is no other way, because faith builds on nature. Our tendency as evangelizers, however, is to mistake our own culture for the gospel itself, especially when the setting is our own backyard. Such is the case for the church in the United States. Even though it has been a hundred years since the Vatican officially declared (*Sapienti consilio*, 1908) that the United States was no longer a “mission territory,” it is clear that the rapidly changing demographics in many of our parishes are redefining what “mission” means in 2008. The cultural and linguistic diversity that we were accustomed to seeing in large metropolitan areas is now part of even unlikely, remote, and rural parish communities throughout the United States. So what happens when, as with the Pentecost, the whole world shows up on the doorstep and wants to come in?

Our history as a church in the United States reveals multiple responses in how we have dealt with cultural and linguistic diversity. The early waves of Catholic immigrants often had priests and religious who accompanied them and quickly set up parishes and schools that provided a sense of security and belonging, in a country that was frequently hostile toward Catholics in general and new immigrant Catholics in particular. This created a national church model for deal-

ing with diversity through parallel communities—all Catholic, but also distinctly German, Italian, Irish, Polish, etc.

## Melting Pot

As the descendants of Euro-Catholic immigrants entered the mainstream of U.S. society, the acceptance of the church as “American” grew. The melting pot model for dealing with diversity through assimilation became the general stance of the church in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This created a new form of xenophobia among “mainstream” assimilated Catholic immigrants toward newly arrived immigrants and toward the Catholic descendants of Africans, Indigenous Peoples, and Hispanics who had been enslaved, colonized or displaced by the United States. This model had a devastating impact not only on cultures that refused to be assimilated, but also on those people who did assimilate and therefore lost the richness of their ancestral cultural identities.

The great social movements of the 1960s and '70s and the religious renewal of Vatican II led to significant changes in how the church in the United States dealt with cultural and linguistic diversity. A new model emerged in the subsequent decades that can be categorized as the multicultural model. Unlike the isolationism or assimilation associated with the other two models, this model seemed to welcome cultural diversity as a gift to be celebrated, not a problem to be solved. Enthusiastic idealism led to various efforts and reforms to make the liturgy and the catechism of the church more reflective of and accessible to diverse cultural groups.

Hispanics especially benefited from this welcoming model as church leaders became more aware and affirming of their strong Catholic roots and vibrant culture. Ironically, this model ignored the diverse, multicultural nature of this growing group of Catholics from over sixty-three different countries, of all races and classes, and who spoke in English, Spanish, and various

other languages and dialects. Hispanics, after all, exist only in the United States! Still, the church's welcoming posture enabled Hispanics to make their growing presence felt and helped to establish diocesan and university-based pastoral centers and other initiatives to minister to Hispanics, especially the newly arrived and Spanish-speaking. The church's insti-



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tutional support through the bishops' conference Secretariat for Hispanic Ministry, established in 1974, and effective organizing strategies led to three historic gatherings of thousands engaged in Hispanic ministry called *Encuentros*. This groundswell culminated with the USCCB's unanimous approval of the *National Plan for Hispanic Ministry* in 1987.

In the decade that followed, however, this plan was never implemented nationally, and Hispanic ministry inevitably splintered into various special interest groups competing for the shrinking institutional resources of a church now facing a growing number of sexual abuse lawsuits. Additionally, the twenty-first century brought with it the tragic events of 9/11, the Iraq War, and the troubling economic downturn that has inflamed new waves of anti-immigrant sentiment toward the growing number of new immigrants. Even many Hispanic Catholics see these newcomers as poten-

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place in society and the church. These multiple stressors have revealed the fatal flaws of a superficial, multicultural model.

First, the multicultural model has focused mostly on the externals of culture in order to classify and minister to the various minority groups in the United States, but has not recognized that everyone has a culture, even the majority group identified as white or Euro-American Catholics. Culture and cultural identity are mostly an internal reality that encompasses one's values, beliefs, and mindset. Second, the model does not help cultural groups to work together. Actually it often fosters competition and conflict as they compete for the seemingly limited resources dedicated by the church to specialized ministries. Third, it rarely addresses the negative dimensions of culture and how these influence the perceptions of power, stereotypes, mindsets, and prejudices we carry hidden in our heart. Finally, and most significantly, the multicultural model has ignored the systems that institutionalize power to the advantage of some cultural groups and to the detriment of others. These multiple and serious limitations of the multicultural model keep our church divided instead of united and do not foster a new Pentecost but rather perpetuate a state of "Babel."

### Conversation, Communication, Solidarity

What model do we need now as we see the cultural and linguistic diversity of our church continue to increase? At a recent symposium convened by the National Catholic Council on Hispanic Ministry, lay and ordained leaders from around the country gathered to assess the impact that the restructuring of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) will have on Hispanic ministry. Archbishop José Gomez of San Antonio prophetically challenged the group to return to the gospel and the basic tenets of our Catholic faith during this time of great challenges and opportunities for Hispan-

ic ministry. His message echoed the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II—*Ecclesia en America*—calling all Catholics in the hemisphere to a new evangelization, rooted in a profound conversion, communion, and solidarity.

Rather than being the end of Hispanic and multicultural ministry, perhaps the restructuring of the USCCB will create multiple new models and strategies—rooted in the gospel—that will help Catholics of all cultures to a greater unity in our diversity. In *Welcoming the Stranger: Unity in Diversity*, our bishops call us to a conversion of our hearts and the structures of our institutions so that we might truly become "a sacrament of unity." In the face of so much pain and misunderstanding stemming from racism and cultural miscommunication, it is clear that goodwill and being "welcoming" are not enough. Parish leaders need the skills to help guide their communities through the difficult and long-term process of transformative integration.

Bringing distinct cultural groups together to form one community of faith requires leaders who are equipped with cross-cultural skills, especially in facilitating intercultural communication and resolving conflict. Their mission is primarily to be peacemakers and bridge builders who can lead congregations through the difficult process of forgiveness, reconciliation, and systemic change. Because of this, parish leaders need to be steeped in a spirituality that is disciplined and centered in the gospel. The transformative integration of the Pentecost experience requires an ongoing commitment to conversion and healing; without this, our attempts to build a Christ-centered multicultural community will fail. The mission that is before us will require time, patience, and a deep trust that the Holy Spirit will remain with us forever and will fulfill Jesus' eucharistic prayer, "that they may be one."

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