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THE CHALLENGE OF WORSHIP IN A MULTICULTURAL ASSEMBLY

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One of the hallmarks of the U.S. church at the end of the twentieth century is the increasing cultural diversity of our Sunday assemblies. This diversity is being experienced by all Christian traditions. Roman Catholic dioceses such as Los Angeles, Chicago and New York are providing for the celebration of the eucharist in more than thirty languages every Sunday. Lutherans, Episcopalians, Presbyterians and United Methodists, heretofore largely Euro-American and middle class, are experiencing similar changes in the ethnic composition and economic background of their local congregations. From all indications the tendency toward multicultural assemblies will only continue. Extrapolating from the 1990 census figures, for example, an article in *Time* magazine predicted that "by the year 2056 . . . the 'average' U.S. resident, as defined by the census statistics, will trace his/her descent to Africa, Asia, the Hispanic world, the Pacific Islands, Arabia—almost anywhere but white Europe."[1]

This demographic change poses an unprecedented set of pastoral and liturgical challenges. In the past churches in the United States have dealt with cultural diversity by establishing "national parishes." Common in the Roman Catholic communion until the 1950's, local parishes were set up to minister to the needs of particular cultural groups in their language and respectful of their customs from the old country. Thus, in a few square blocks in urban areas in the eastern U.S. it was not unusual to see several Roman Catholic Churches, each caring for a specific ethnic group: Italian, German, Polish, Irish. This "apartheid" approach was also taken by Lutherans who set up local congregations and synodal structures based on national origin: German, Swedish and Norwegian. Although slowly working to translate the liturgical into English, Orthodox Christians still maintain separate churches based on national identification as Greek, Russian, Serbian and Romanian.

Today the question of culture and faith has taken a different turn. Eschewing the national church solution to cultural diversity, most denominations have taken a decidedly multicultural approach to worship. Though this strategy is not without its critics, existing congregations are being encouraged to welcome largely non-European cultural groups into their local communities church without forcing them to forsake completely their languages and cultural values.[2]

This pastoral strategy leads to a new set of set of questions rarely asked before in the history of Christian worship. How does a local Christian community welcome people of other cultures? What does "full. conscious and active participation" in the liturgy mean when the assembly is culturally and linguistically diverse? Clearly, this means going beyond a tokenism that merely juxtaposes cultural elements representative of the assembly's various cultures to a real welcome that acknowledges and respects"the other" enough to change the way worship is understood, prepared and carried out.[3]

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This article will deal with specifically liturgical issues in a multicultural parish. Since liturgy always reflects life (for good or for ill), the action of the assembly cannot be considered apart from its life context. How do members of different cultural groups within the parish come together outside of the liturgy? Do they have the opportunity to communicate and share on more than just the superficial level? It is presumed that the parish is already struggling with these extra-liturgical issues—for without this struggle worship in a community composed of various ethnic groups always be problematic and inauthentic. I will begin by sketching some preliminary considerations and suggest some practical elements for developing a liturgy that goes beyond tokenism and even multiligualism to one that is truly multicultural—that is a liturgical experience at which everyone in the assembly feels welcomed and "at home."[4]

Frequency of multicultural celebrations

How often should a multicultural congregation come together to worship? For smaller congregations this is really a "non-question" since there is really no choice in the matter. The answer for them would be every week. In larger congregations comprised of a significant number of different cultural groups, however, this is a more complex issue. Since they tend to be larger, Roman Catholic parishes especially need to wrestle with this question. It is undeniable that we all find it easier to pray in our own language, using our own cultural idioms. For many cultural groups, the experience of regular worship is the only place where their language and customs are *publicly* proclaimed and celebrated and their identity affirmed in a larger society

is often perceived as cold and alienating. It is important for these groups to be able to celebrate in a way that they can "relax" and "be themselves" without having to worry about making the necessary sacrifices and accommodations that are a necessary part of multicultural liturgy.

This may sound like just a variation on the historic "national church" solution to cultural diversity already described. It differs from that approach, however, in that there is a realization that all of the cultural groups of the congregation belong to the same parish and therefore need to come together at key moments of the year. Rather than scheduling a multicultural liturgy for every third Sunday of the month, for example, experience has shown that there needs to be a reason to bring a large multicultural parish together. The moments of the liturgical year when separate celebrations would not be appropriate such as the Triduum, Pentecost and midnight mass at Christmas are the obvious times to consider. Local celebrations and events that touch the lives of the people of the congregation are also occasions to plan multicultural celebration: the patronal feast of the parish, tragedies and triumphs that affect the whole community are also appropriate and compelling times to assembly the whole parish.[5]

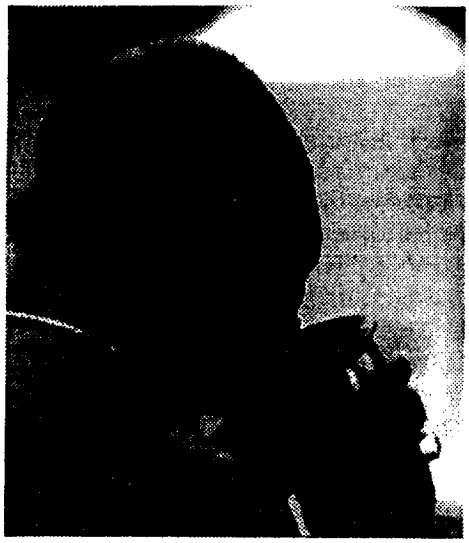
The goal of multicultural worship

In preparing a multicultural celebration, whether a weekly celebration in a small congregation or an occasional worship event in a large parish, the overarching goal of helping each member of the assembly participate fully, actively and consciously in the liturgy. That is to say, the primary goal of worship that happens to be multicultural is no different from monocultural worship: to celebrate what God has done and continues to do for us in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. Surprising perhaps to some, then, the primary purpose of multicultural liturgy is **not** to celebrate cultural diversity. The planning priority should revolve around exploring ways in which all present, despite differences in language, culture, economic status and educational level, might feel the hospitality of the assembly and the invitation to actively participate in the liturgy. This needs to be kept in mind lest the worship event is fragmented into a serious of unrelated cultural components that, while representative of the assembly, fail to invite everyone into the prayer. The remainder of this article will explore with the various facets of finding liturgical common ground in a multicultural assembly.[6]

Verbal communication in a multicultural assembly

The proclamation and interpretation of the Biblical Word is central to Christian liturgical tradition. Also central to worship in liturgical churches are prayer texts such as eucharistic prayers and collects. Every time words are publicly uttered—a text read or an admonition given—there will be people who will be automatically "excluded"

from the liturgy if they do not understand the language being used. Sensitivity to this reality in a multicultural assembly calls for a judicious use of words. In preparing the verbal parts of the liturgy the planning team should be concerned with 1) making the proclamation of God's Word and the prayer texts accessible to as many of those gathered as possible; 2) avoiding an unduly long period of time speaking in a language not known by the majority of the assembly, 3) incorporating culturally appropriate means of engaging members of the assembly in hearing and reflecting on the sacred text being proclaimed.



It is helpful to first determine the principal or "base" language of the assembly. This is not necessarily the native language of the majority of the congregation but the language understood by the majority. For example, in a parish that is Hispanic, Polish and Korean, the language most accessible to the majority of the assembly would probably be English. If this is the case the base language for the bulk of verbal proclamation would be in English. On the other hand, short invitations to prayer, responses to petitionary prayers, ordinary parts of the service such as the *Sanctus* and other verbal communication easily understood because of its context can be in the language of the various cultural groups of the parish.

In the case of the proclamation of biblical texts, especially in a an assembly that is bilingual, it is helpful to introduce each reading with a short synopsis in the language not being used for the reading. Complete verbal translations of biblical readings or prayer texts should be avoided since this induces tedium in the majority of the assembly, many of whom are undoubtedly bilingual. Providing printed translations is one strategy for dealing with problems of understanding occasioned by a multilingual assembly. Even here, however, consideration should be given to the fact that having all that is said translated and published in a booklet could frustrate active listening and make the participation aid rather long and complicated to prepare.

Preaching

One of the most challenging aspects to a multicultural celebration is the preaching moment. As with the rest of the liturgy there is difference between bilingual/multilingual preaching and preaching that is truly multicultural. Successful multicultural preachers are able

to move back and forth between the major languages of the assembly with "parallel homilies" that are culturally specific to each group rather than simply translating the homily. In this way speaking for a long time in one language is avoided and even those who are able to understand the languages are kept interested because what is being said is not repetitious. While the "base" language of the assembly would be the principal one for the homily, preaching in the other languages of the assembly is an important part of acknowledging and respecting the cultures present. Naturally, the possibilities of preaching in this manner depend on the linguistic abilities of the preacher. In some parishes, the sermon or homily is prepared by a multicultural team that is also responsible for actually preaching in the various languages of the assembly. Clearly, more leeway and creativity needs to be given when fulfilling this important ministry in a multicultural assembly.[6]

Attending to the non verbal

While spoken language is an important way the liturgy communicates, it is far from the only "language" the liturgy uses to invite the assembly into the Presence. Movement in the form of processions, standing, sitting kneeling are important way in which a multicultural assembly is invited into the liturgical action. Silence is also a way which we communicate in the context of worship. The obvious advantage to these forms of liturgical participation is that they do not depend on translation and can be easily performed by all in the assembly. It is crucial that care be given to these non-verbal aspects of worship since they offer the possibility of real participation of the whole assembly at the same time.[7]

The primary symbols that are used in many liturgical tradition: bread, wine, oil, water, fire also should be of special concern for a multicultural assembly. Again, these symbols need no translation and if care is given to celebrating with them in a lavish way, much will be done to overcome the divisions in the assembly that are automatically engendered by the use of words alone.[8]

Music

Music has the power to unite an assembly in prayer and praise in a way that other liturgical languages do not. Those charged with music ministry should also be aware that music can also divide the assembly. It is a romantic hangover to presuppose that music is a universal language and that it communicates the same

thing to everyone regardless of culture. The interpretation given to tempo, key and musical from may vary a great deal from one culture to another in the assembly. For example, many people from Central America frequently perceive music which is slow as "sad"—even if the music is in a major key.[9]

For this reason it is important to avoid a simple translation of one musical form conditioned by its own history and culture into another language. For example, a German metrical hymn, while suitable for translation in English because of German/English cultural and linguistic affinity, usually works poorly in Spanish. More successful is an *ostinato* style of music popularized by Taizé or music written in a call/response structure using a cantor who sings a short line alternating the languages and then inviting the assembly to repeat. Thankfully, a new bi-lingual and multilingual liturgical repertoire is now being composed to fill this need.[10]

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Art and environment

Another non-verbal liturgical language important to a multicultural celebration is environment and art. The organization of the interior space, attention to seasonal elements, the iconic representation within the worship space, vesture for ministers, devotional areas, should all be assessed to assure that they are inviting and hospitable to a multicultural assembly. For example, congregations worshiping in older buildings need to evaluate if the images of the sacred present in the church only reflect of the Euro-American experience. Do other groups see themselves reflected in the sacred art and furnishing of the church building?

Cultural groups which have a lively devotional life largely drawn from popular religious practice can be an especially challenge in this regard. People from Latin America and the Philippines, for example, find the aniconic aesthetic in many of the new Euro-American churches to be cold and lifeless. The intense identification of some of these groups with their devotional images needs to be respected in some way in the communal worship space. The use of banners and other portable art displayed for particular celebration may be the best solution.[11]

Conclusion

This article has touched on some key consideration in preparing liturgy in a multicultural community is both a challenge and opportunity. Each Christian tradition and each congregation will need to wrestle with this task in their own way. While the multicultural assembly poses challenges that are unprecedented in the history of

Christian worship, the very process of proclaiming God's Good News in Jesus Christ to diverse cultures is as old as the faith itself. Congregations that are honestly struggling with inclusion and evangelical hospitality toward people from a range of cultural backgrounds know well the words of Peter in Acts 10:34, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

Notes

1. Naushad Mehta, Sylvester Monroe, Dan Winbush, "Beyond the Melting Pot," *Time* 135:15 (April 9, 1990) 38.
2. See for example the statement of the US Catholic Bishops, "Cultural Pluralism in the Unites States" (Washington DC: USCC, April 14,1980).
3. For two helpful resources on multicultural ministry that give a perspective from a non Euro-American vantage point see: Orlando Espin, "A Multicultural Church? Theological Reflections from Below," in W. Cenkner, ed., *The Multicultural Church: A New Landscape in U.S. Theologies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996) 54-71; Eric Law, *The Bush was Blazing but not Consumed: Developing a Multicultural Community Through Dialogue and Liturgy*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1996).
4. Many of my reflection here will be found in a more elaborated form in my *Guidelines for Multi-cultural Celebrations* (Washington DC: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 1998).
5. On the different needs of various cultural groups in a congregation see Robert Schreiter, "Multicultural Ministry: Theory, Practice, Theology," *New Theology Review* 5:3 (1992) 6-19. 6. On oral communication across cultures see John Condon and Fathi Yousef, "Language and Culture" in *An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (New York: Macmillan, 1975) 168-196.
7. On the importance of gesture and ritual see Elochukwu Uzukwu,"Human gestural Bahavior as Ritual and Symbolic," in his *Worship as Body Language* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press) 1-40.
8. On attending to the full symbolic nature of liturgical communication see Mark Francis, *Liturgy in a Multicultural Community* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press) 49-65.
9. See Linda O'Brien-Rohe's insightful article "Music in a Multicultural Parish," *Liturgical Life* (May, June, 1993), (Publication of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles Worship Office).
10. See Bob Hurd, "Music for Multicultural, Multilingual Liturgy: Theology, Issues and Strategies," *Liturgical Ministry* 6 (1997) 120-133; and Mary Frances Reza, "Cross-Cultural Music Making," *Liturgical Ministry* 3 (1994) 164-169.
11. On liturgical art and culture see Anita Stauffer, "Inculturation and Church Architecture," *Studia Liturgica* 20 (1990) 70-80; on devotions and liturgical environment see John Buscemi, *Places for Devotion.* Meeting House Essay No. 4 (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993).

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