

Pastoring a Multicultural Church

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan

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I Introduction

Archbishop Patrick Flores of San Antonio who ordained me a Bishop in 1983 tells of a busy Saturday of going to several meetings, from place to place. By the end of the day he arrived at a Church full of children and he asked them, “Do you know who I am?” They answered no. He introduced himself to them and then he asked them if they knew why he was there. And again they said no. He pleaded with them, ‘Doesn’t anyone know why I’m here?’ Finally a little boy answered, “I know who you are and I know why you are here.” The Archbishop said, “Tell me, quick, why am I here?” The little boy said, “To take up a second collection.”! Well we should ask ourselves, why are we here? The answer is to reflect on the multicultural reality of the Catholic Church in our Country and to see how best we might minister to the different cultures which make up the Catholic faith.

II The Church is Catholic, Embracing All Cultures

It is not surprising that the Catholic Bishops of the Country, in 2008, chose cultural diversity as one of our five major priorities for the Church. The things that unite us – faith, charity, love of Christ, Eucharist, and the Pope, Successor of Peter – are more powerful than the different cultures and languages in our Church. But it is not a tug of war, us against them. How do we build up one another?

In the Bishops’ document, *The Stranger Among Us – Unity and Diversity*, issued in 2000 we said, “The Church of the 21st Century will be, as it always has been, a Church of many cultures, languages, and traditions, yet simultaneously one, as God is one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – unity in diversity”.

One of the marks of the true Church is that the Church is Catholic. This means that the Church is indeed universal and includes all cultures. Our Lord Jesus Christ came to save not just the Jewish people or the Greeks, but he came to save everyone – all cultures, all languages, all colored skins, all socioeconomic backgrounds are welcome in the Church. The presence of many cultures reminds us of the universality of the Church and that mark of the Church which is Catholic.

III The Archdiocese of Santa Fe

As Archbishop of Santa Fe, New Mexico, I come from a State that is about 50% Hispanic and the Catholic population is about 50% Hispanic as well.

It is not surprising since we are on the border with Mexico. Also something that many people don't realize is that the Spanish Franciscans brought the Catholic faith to our area in 1598 – over 400 years ago. The impact of the Spanish settlement continues to this day. We were, after all, part of the Spanish Empire for over 220 years. The largest river is the Rio Grande. The mountains have Spanish names such as Sangre de Cristo and San Juan Mountains. The capital City is Santa Fe – Holy Faith and many of the traditions of the New Mexico culture are rooted in those years in which we were part of Spain. Even the Native American communities which we call Pueblos have much of their culture drawn from the Spanish.

The area that is now the State of New Mexico became a part of the United States after the U.S. Mexico War in 1846. Until that time the Churches in New Mexico were part of the Diocese of Durango, Mexico. The Vatican wisely created a new Diocese when the area became separated from Mexico and a part of the United States. Instead of choosing an Hispanic or American Bishop for the area a Frenchman was chosen – Bishop John Baptist Lamy. It was wise awareness of the cultural differences even in 1850 when the decision of the Vatican was made. Archbishop Lamy was a Missionary Priest of France who had been in the Midwest and could be seen as neither Hispanic or American.

In addition to the Hispanic and Anglo population, the Archdiocese also has about 50,000 Native Americans with their own languages, culture and history since they were the original inhabitants of New Mexico. We have a significant number of Vietnamese. There is Our Lady of LaVang – the Vietnamese National Parish where the Vietnamese language is spoken primarily for the liturgy as well as another parish where the Vietnamese liturgy is held. We have a number of African Americans with their own unique culture to be concerned about. We have other cultures represented as well.

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces is specialized in multicultural ministry. I draw upon some of his wisdom in this presentation. He notes that while assimilation takes place, it doesn't happen all at once. The process is not simple. In the case of many Mexicans coming to the U.S. there may have been more of a tendency to hold on to their cultural heritage. From the pastoral point of view, it is to be hoped that they hold on to their Catholic cultural heritage in particular. There are other religions trying to convert them, take them away from the Catholic faith. Some of these will be Evangelical who will be very aggressive in recruiting them. The U.S. is, after all, not only multicultural but also very multi-religious.

The U.S. culture itself has its problems. We are consumeristic and materialistic and we tend to measure success by how much we earn and how many things we possess. Our U.S. culture is cynical about truth and all forms of authority. The dark side to our present culture is the negative attitude towards people of color, towards the poor, towards the new immigrant. In ministering to a multicultural Church we certainly don't want to see our immigrants, no matter what culture they come from, adopt the negative aspects of American culture.

IV Where Parishes Find Themselves

We must be ready to welcome new comers, no matter what culture they come from. There is no room for racism or prejudice among our parishioners and parish leaders. Bishop Ramirez suggests that there are three levels where parishes may presently find themselves.

1. Racial and Cultural Differences Seen as Defects or Problems

Certainly, in the deep South there were strong racist attitudes on the part of many Whites towards Blacks. I grew up in Texarkana, Texas which had basically a Southern culture and in the 50s when I was in high school it was clear that there was strong prejudice against Blacks. Even in public buildings the Whites could have water from the water cooler and the Blacks were supposed to drink regular tap water. There was a White ladies restroom and the Colored women restroom. Blacks were required to sit in the back of the bus. Thank God that we have given up visible signs of those clearly unacceptable signs of racial intolerance. It is true that many Catholics turned Protestant after they saw Catholic Priests and Nuns walking with those advocating Civil Rights for African Americans. Thank God that we have moved beyond racial intolerance, but there might still be unspoken and unwritten practices in parishes in dealing with people from other cultures.

2. Tolerance of Racial and Cultural Differences

At this level official policies may be announced regarding the acceptance of multicultural diversity in a parish. A consciousness of White Power and privilege may also be present but there are efforts of recruiting people of Color for Parish Staff and Committees. Yet there may still be some level of hesitation about other cultures.

3. Racial and Cultural Differences Seen as Assets

This is the level of welcoming and acceptance that we should be aiming at in our parishes. This means a concerted effort at eradicating social sin of any racial bias and truly accepting people from other places. My Hispanic Ministry Director emphasizes again and again that the Church should embody the concept of *Mi Casa es Su Casa*, my house is your house.

Recently, in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, we have accepted a number of priests from African and other Countries. There is no more dramatic way to be reminded of the universality of the Church than to have a Priest from Nigeria serving the spiritual needs of our people. I have been very pleased that these Priests have been accepted with love and gratitude.

V Practical Ways of Ministering in a Multicultural Situation

The Vatican Council in the Document on the Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, par. 37-40 speaks of the importance of the Liturgy taking into consideration different cultures and traditions of the people. And so the language of the people, the music they use, the artistic traditions of different groups are important. All must be done in accord with Church norms, the Episcopal Conference of the Country and with the approval of the Holy See. We seek to

minister in our multicultural Archdiocese in accord with those basic principles. Other Church documents urge these principles too, always keeping the basic unity required in the Church.

1. Masses and Homilies

In the Archdiocese of Santa Fe there are 92 parishes and about half of them have a Spanish or Bilingual Mass to accommodate the Hispanics. You might ask how the issue of languages is handled. It depends on the particular parish, but most of our Hispanic speak both English and Spanish. There are a number of parishes though that have a large number of recent immigrants that require a Spanish Mass with the homily also in Spanish. It is a challenge to have enough priests who are sufficiently bilingual to not only celebrate the Mass in Spanish but to preach in Spanish. We are blessed to have a good number of bilingual deacons that assist the priest in providing for a Mass completely in Spanish by giving the homily in Spanish. The music is also in Spanish. Many parishes have a bilingual Mass which is partially in English and partially in Spanish with music also being bilingual. The Pastor tries to have a prudent arrangement of English and Spanish Masses in those parishes with a significant number of Hispanics. All our Seminarians are required to learn Spanish. They study Spanish not only in the Seminary but also study in Mexico or Spain. Priests are given the opportunity to study Spanish as well. It is very important for our clergy to speak Spanish in our ministry.

An example of multicultural liturgy would be our Annual Mass and Rosary Rally honoring the Virgin Mary drawing about 6,000 people. It is held at the Isotopes Baseball Stadium. The Mass and Rosary are bilingual as well as the music. The Vietnamese young people, dressed in their traditional garb, give a dance on the ball field in front of the statue of the Blessed Virgin. This way we are recognizing not only the Hispanic and Anglo cultures, but the Vietnamese culture as well.

2. Traditions

Efforts are made to incorporate aspects of Hispanic culture into the Mass in ways that are acceptable to the liturgical norms. For example, in Mexico a wedding often times includes the lasso or a large rosary placed over the two newlyweds as they kneel in Church showing their unity. When we celebrate Mass for the Native Americans we often times use the smoke that is traditional to the Native American culture instead of regular incense. We have 16 Pueblos or villages of the Pueblo Indians in New Mexico and efforts are made to respect other aspects of their Catholic traditions such as the music that is prepared by Native American musicians. Or by having an Eagle Dance or Buffalo Dance to bless the sacred space prior to the liturgical procession of a Mass.

3. Evangelization

Our recent Popes have emphasized the importance of the New Evangelization and creative ways of seeking the inactive Catholics and unchurched peoples. We have an active Evangelization Committee and Office of Evangelization.

We have become aware of the need to do more in terms of evangelization of Native Americans as participation at Mass has fallen off and many young people are not being

trained adequately in the faith. Recently I appoint a new Coordinator of Native American Ministry – he is a Deacon and a Native American himself. He has recently led meetings of Catholics in the different Pueblos to see what could be done to help the people become stronger in their Catholic faith, especially the youth. As a result of these meetings we are hiring two Native American catechists to help build up the catechetical efforts in the Pueblos. Two other part-time Native American youth leaders are being hired to promote the faith among the young people of the Pueblos. As I said, I estimate that we have about 50,000 Catholic Native Americans and these efforts at new evangelization will indeed bear fruit.

It is essential to identify and train lay leaders in the different cultures represented. We can't be satisfied with the involvement of new comers in liturgical ministry. They need adequate formation. There are other urgent needs too. Catechists need to be trained, especially those who have the advantage of being bilingual. Children and youth may understand and communicate well in English but their parents may not. Catechists must assist parents as the first teachers of the faith for their children. The Archdiocesan website is a valuable way to reach young people and to evangelize.

4. Music

Since Vatican II we have been blessed with a variety of forms of vernacular music. In English we began with such things as Kumbaya and Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore. We took in what was the fad at the time. The music of hootenanny and folk music in those first years of liturgical reform! Thank God we have moved beyond those kind of trivial forms of music.

What we need in ministry in a multicultural Church is music that is appropriate for the different cultural groups. Usually, the challenge is met by having separate Masses for each group. We schedule a Spanish Mass or an English Mass in bilingual parishes with appropriate music. In our Vietnamese parish the music is always in Vietnamese. But many times we seek to have a bilingual or multicultural music that encompasses all our cultures. Thanks to contemporary composers, several from my own Archdiocese, we have at our disposal some very fine bi- and multi-lingual music. Although each language group might have its own Mass, there are times when we should seek to have it bi-lingual or tri-lingual. On special feast days, the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi in Santa Fe incorporates English, Spanish and the Native American languages with appropriate worship aids.

It is important also to keep in mind that we can use Latin and Gregorian Chant for the Holy, Holy, Holy and the Lamb of God and other parts which is a common means of worship for multicultural groups. It is, after all, part of our tradition as Catholics and the Holy See has encouraged a greater use of Gregorian Chant and other traditional music.

VI Listen

It seems very important to me that the people from different cultures listen to each other and hear stories that need to be told. Listening is the greatest gift that we can give to each other in communication. There needs to be thoughtfulness on the part of the liturgical committees of the parishes and of the dioceses to find out what people would like to have in terms of liturgical celebration. Of course, that means having different cultural groups represented on the liturgy committees. This means not only different cultural groups in terms of language, but also of age, and special interests. Young people should be able to have a voice in the arrangement of the liturgy. Older people have something to say as well as single and married couples.

It is important to respect the popular religiosity of the different cultures that are represented in the Archdiocese. For example, the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe is a very important part of the spirituality of those of Mexican origin. Years ago, the Anglo church didn't pay much attention to the devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Now, of course, it is a very large part of the devotion to the Blessed Mother which we have in the Southwest and elsewhere. The pastors must be ready to celebrate, on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, at the traditional times which Hispanics would like to have Mass at the Vigil honoring Our Lady. The Vietnamese have a great devotion to Our Lady of LaVang which should be respected in the proper context. Other cultural groups have aspects of popular religiosity and their traditions should be respected as well.

VII Welcoming the Immigrants

Much should be done regarding respect given to the immigrants, whether they are documented or not. We have in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe families who are descended from the original Spanish settlers of 1598. Many other families have entered our State from Mexico through the years. Then there are more recent arrivals that sometimes are not respected by the older people who originally came from Mexico. We must respect them, without approving of the violation of immigration law. We are committed to serving immigrant peoples from Mexico and other Countries because they are children of God and part of the faith. We should be welcoming to the immigrants.

One great concern that I have, not only for immigrants but for other people who have been away from the Church, is that they be welcomed. When someone comes to the parish office to arrange a Baptism or Wedding or Funeral and they are not registered in the parish they are often turned down. It is not the custom in Mexico to register in parishes. The parish office should be very careful to welcome even nominal Catholics and to bend over backwards to instruct them and help them so their family can receive the Sacraments. There are many stories of people being turned away because of the harshness that they experience when approaching a parish office. There are ways to respect the norms of the Church and at the same time welcome the stranger.

VIII Conclusion

In closing, all of us, regardless of our cultural backgrounds, must realize that our beautiful Catholic Church has profound attraction in terms of spiritual food for those who have found the secular lifestyle unsatisfying and unfulfilling. I believe that the richness of our Catholic heritage is the most complete, compassionate, witness of Jesus Christ possible. Our faith not only guides and helps us in this life but leads us to the joy of life eternal. We must have a love, passion, for our Catholic Faith and a burning desire to share it with all people regardless of their cultural background.

Finally, I believe that we must foster great zeal for the salvation of souls. It may sound old fashioned, but God has called us to serve as instruments to help people get to Heaven. We must see that our Holy Catholic Church invites us to a personal relationship with Jesus that will nurture us here on earth and lead us to the eternal happiness of Heaven. We ask the Lord to help up that we might trust in him as we seek to serve the multicultural groups that we have within our Faith. It is important to remember that despite the challenges of a multicultural church we face, Jesus promised to be with his Church always – until the end of the world. May God give us great energy and creativity in bring the new evangelization to all the cultures we are privileged to embrace.