BILINGUAL MUSIC
The Difference between Singing It and Living It

S t. Michael Catholic Church in Pontiac, Michigan, is the parish where I have the privilege of ministering. Located 30 miles north of Detroit, Pontiac is a diverse city where many cultures and immigrant groups converge. Five years ago, in early 2003, a Spanish Mass was established at the parish, thanks to the vision and diligence of our pastor. He decided it was time to address the pastoral needs of the growing Hispanic community in the area. I came on board in November of that year, so I was not there to witness the community’s initial growth. Though the first few Masses were moderately attended, I’ve been told, the church was filled to capacity in a matter of weeks. By the time I came along, St. Michael was already a hub for Hispanic ministry in Pontiac and a thriving multicultural parish—just six months later.

As one can imagine, there was some confusion as the two different language groups within the community tried not only to coexist but also to better understand each other’s history, identity, and gifts. The fact that both Spanish and English speakers began to voice their opinions and expectations strongly and firmly was a good indication. As in any family, everyone took ownership of their home—some hoping to foster a more welcoming environment, others seeking to retain their identity in the midst of change. It was a diverse group of people, all with good intentions, trying to make St. Michael the best parish it could be. Our parish family was working things out!

Those of us involved in liturgy planning and music ministry know that, in theory, good bilingual music is an effective means for bringing God’s people together in song and helping them see beyond cultural differences in order to celebrate our oneness in Christ. But of course it’s easier said than done. As music ministers, we also know that planning bilingual liturgies is twice the work and that we will inevitably receive some criticism.

We can almost count on someone approaching us after the liturgy to express frustration that they “missed out” on some of what was said at Mass. Some people run for their lives as soon as they hear the word “bilingual.” Yet we plan bilingual liturgies with great hope, devotion, faith, and enthusiasm. That’s because we believe in their benefits, and because we take very seriously our mission to unify the parish through music. We believe that our music program ought to reflect the entire parish community at worship, and that people will only feel welcome at the Lord’s table if their gifts, needs, and longings are truly considered and represented.

About a year into my ministry at St. Michael, I was excited to try something new that I hoped would draw people together. A common approach to bilingual liturgies is to have the English-speaking choir lead English songs and the Spanish-speaking choir lead Spanish songs. Unfortunately, these liturgies often seem fragmented. In my opinion, they also send the wrong message to the assembly. We cannot possibly talk about oneness and then “take turns” singing and participating.

That’s why I decided to try something different. I wanted to have both choirs learn the refrains and sing them together, regardless of language. The English-speaking choir would then lead the English verses and the Spanish-speaking choir would lead the Spanish verses. All of us would sing the refrains and, in doing so, we would bring the assembly together in song.

First I presented my idea to the English-speaking choir. They reacted strongly against it and questioned the need for such a change: We can’t possibly sound good in Spanish. What about rolling those Rs? If we can’t lead properly, we’re doing the parish a disservice. Why fix it if it isn’t broken? I explained to them that, as music ministers, we should set an example of service and sacrifice in the interest of achieving true liturgical hospitality. They were not in agreement with me, to say the least.

I presented my idea to the Spanish-speaking choir with the same enthusiasm, determined to stay positive and focused. They reacted the same way! Why do we need to do this? We can’t possibly sound good in English. What about all those vowels? This is so difficult. I felt discouraged but decided to stick with my plan, trusting that God would open their hearts and minds and that everything would work out in the end. However, I made the mistake of telling myself just how and when God would step in and help, instead of trusting his wisdom and timing. I started to get impatient.

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The escalating tension in both choirs lasted for weeks until we had a combined rehearsal just days before Holy Week. Thank God for combined rehearsals! Once they were together and witnessed firsthand the sacrifice and effort each language group was making to sing in the other’s native tongue, their fears and doubts suddenly escaped the room. We all were filled with peace. The Holy Spirit was in our midst and God’s presence was overwhelmingly obvious, so powerful that no one said a word. There was nothing to say. It was a great moment of epiphany and one of the most memorable and uplifting moments in all my years of ministry in the Church.

From that point forward, there was no need to explain anything else. We had a profoundly spiritual Holy Week at the parish, the assembly following the choir’s lead and participating more fully despite the language barrier. This pivotal and enlightening moment truly changed the choir’s attitude toward multicultural music and liturgy.

As far as bilingual music and full, conscious, and active participation of the faithful is concerned, everything starts with the choir. We are not only music makers, but also catechists, evangelizers, and ministers of liturgical hospitality. Folks in the pews are looking to us for leadership and example. We must believe that which we sing. We can only be convincing and inspiring if our hearts, minds, and voices are in harmony. The recent document by our U.S. Bishops, Sing to the Lord, tells us that the quality of our participation “comes less from our vocal ability than from the desire of our hearts to sing together of our love for God” (13).

So, whether you have bilingual celebrations for Holy Week, Christmas, first Communion, confirmation, or a regularly scheduled Mass, here are a few ways you can help English- and Spanish-speaking choirs and assemblies to be more open and receptive to bilingual music:

• Use songs with short refrains that are easy to learn. I have found songs that have Latin refrains to be especially effective: e.g., “Ubi Caritas,” by Bob Hurd (BB/MI 335), “Deo Gratias,” by Pedro Rubalcava (BB/MI 629).
• Use songs with refrains that must be sung bilingually and talk about how the melody and text are related and intertwined: e.g., “Somos el Cuerpo de Cristo/We Are the Body of Christ,” by Jaime Cortez (BB/MI 586), “We Venerate Your Cross/Tu Cruz Adoramos,” by Santiago Fernández (BB/MI 162), “Amén. El Cuerpo de Cristo;” by John Schiavone (BB/MI 333). This kind of liturgical song represents exactly the balance and harmony we are trying to achieve.

• Use songs that are already “hits” in one language and have been translated or adapted into the other. This way our choirs can learn more about the history, culture, and heritage of both language groups: e.g., “Caminaré/Yes, I Will Walk,” by Juan Espinosa (UC 524), “Here I Am, Lord/Aquí Estoy, Señor,” by Dan Schutte (BB/MI 382), “Visión Pastoral (Cien Ovejas)/The Good Shepherd,” by Juan Romero (UC 605), “Open My Eyes/Abre Mis Ojos,” by Jesse Manibusan (UC 257), and, of course, “Pescador de Hombres/Lord, You Have Come,” by Cesáreo Gabaráin (BB/MI 505).

• Take some time during choir rehearsals for liturgical catechesis. Study documents and statements that deal specifically with multicultural issues. Examples include Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide (OCP 44761TL), Encuentro & Mission (OCP 12112TL), and three publications by the USCCB: Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity; Many Faces in God’s House; and Sing to the Lord. In my experience, choir members have a genuine interest in liturgical matters and always welcome new information.

• Bring both choirs together socially from time to time to foster a more familial relationship and to provide an opportunity to discover each other’s uniqueness. As we all know, some of the best conversations in our lives take place when we are gathered at table.

May our choirs truly come to embody the oneness in Christ that St. Paul speaks of in his First Letter to the Corinthians: “Now you are Christ’s body, and individually parts of it” (1 Cor 12: 27). And may we continue to discover and appreciate the treasure of bilingual liturgical music we possess in this country. Other nations are not as privileged to have the diversity and cultural richness we are blessed to have here in the United States.

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