



FORTIFYING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

SOME TENSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

It is becoming more common for pastoral leaders to develop pastoral plans for multicultural ministry in light of the increasing diversity in our Church today. For example, some parishes may wish to celebrate Pentecost or Christmas midnight Mass by involving the gifts and participation of various ethnic cultural groups. Every now and then, I receive letters or phone calls from liturgy and music directors at parish and diocesan levels who inform me that despite their best efforts to bring together various cultural groups for liturgical celebrations, or despite their efforts to create an overarching pastoral plan for multicultural ministry, they continue to meet with frustration.

One topic that sometimes comes up has to do with a perceived or intentional resistance from ethnic cultural groups that do not wish to participate. I call this a “fortification of cultural boundaries,” in which cultural groups, for whatever reason(s), desire to protect their traditions in the midst of multiculturalism. For example, at preparation and planning meetings led by the parish liturgical committee, only a few representatives from the various cultural groups show up. Where are the others? Or, despite all efforts, certain cultural groups simply refuse to participate in any overarching plan to celebrate a multicultural liturgy. Or (perhaps most commonly) most cultural groups are willing to participate, but only to an extent, holding back from a deeper level of commitment that the parish leaders desire. How should one read such situations? Are the choices to not participate intentional? Are such situations ever avoidable?

These are tough questions and I certainly cannot provide easy answers. While we are theologically one body in Christ, there are various levels of pastoral tensions that spring up when preparing for multicultural worship. With this in mind, I have some reflections that are better expressed through a series of questions aimed toward pastoral leaders.

TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU KNOW THE DEMOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF YOUR PARISH/DIOCESE?

Some parish leadership teams emphasize a prescriptive approach to multicultural ministry. That is, they come up with or even implement a program approach to multiculturalism without first obtaining a full descriptive survey of the various cultural groups in their communities. It helps to have a clearer picture of the parish/diocese’s cultural makeup. Of course, a strategic plan for multicultural liturgy may lead to a demographic survey, but such surveys ought to be conducted during the early phases. You may be surprised to discover the various cultural groups that are represented.

WHAT ARE THE STORIES AND HISTORIES?

This may be unfair of me to suggest, but if various cultural groups are perceived to be uncooperative or are perceived to be holding back from a desired level of participation, these might be indications that the parish/diocesan leadership team doesn’t know the full stories of the various cultural groups. What are their stories? What are their histories within the parish/diocese? How have the various groups changed over the years? Is there an immigration history? Are there current immigration patterns going on now?

THE HISTORY OF CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

There is a plethora of reasons why cultural boundaries are formed and there is a plethora of reasons why cultural boundaries are continuously fortified. From a sociopolitical perspective, these dynamics can be traced back to the rise of multiculturalism during

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the late 1950s with a peak occurring in the 1960s. Before this time period, ethnic and other social cultural groups were usually asked to assimilate into larger dominant cultural groups. The “melting pot” became a symbol of these attempts: the idea that everyone who comes to America eventually blends into the larger American mainstream.

But during the late 50s and 60s, challenges against these notions began to emerge, from social movements and activism to academic writings that challenged melting-pot theories. The African American civil rights movement certainly comes to mind, but other socio-cultural movements followed, including the feminist movement, the gay and lesbian rights movement, and the Asian American movement, among others. In a sense, all these groups were fortifying the boundaries of their socio-cultural identities.

DIFFERENCES AMONG GENERATIONS

Of course, other reasons for cultural fortification exist that are not limited to political activism. For example, first- and second-generation immigrant groups tend to fortify their own traditional cultural boundaries more than third- and fourth-generation members. This is a common challenge among the older members of a particular group as they try earnestly to pass on their tradition to the next generation. No matter what the reasons may be, it is best to approach these stories and histories with an open mind. It may even be more beneficial to listen to their stories first (the descriptive approach I mentioned above) before there is any perceived pastoral plan coming from the leadership (the prescriptive approach).

RITUALS CREATE POWER NEGOTIATIONS

According to the late ritual theorist Catherine Bell, ritual events (for example, eucharistic celebrations) create dynamics of power among and between people. That is, rituals provide opportunities for people to negotiate their own agreements or disagreements in the performance of certain actions in relation to other sources of power found in other people, institutions, rules, or public expectations.

If that sounds too heady, here is an example. At Old St. Mary Cathedral in Chinatown, San

Francisco, where I reside, our early morning daily Masses are held in the east transept to the right of the sanctuary, where we have set up a smaller daily Mass altar and have rearranged the pews to accommodate close to forty people comfortably. Since this is a smaller gathering, there is no need for us to celebrate Mass in the larger nave (central section) of the church. Yet, despite the obvious location of where these morning Masses occur, there are some who continue to choose to sit in the back pews of the nave, far, far away from our morning gathering. Of course, we could rope off all the pews of the nave to insist that all join the larger group in the east transept, but this would take too much energy and, even then, I bet people would still sit where they want to sit. I cannot physically force them: this would be “coercive power.” But within this context, within this ritual situation, there are power negotiations going on with everyone involved, whether one is conscious of the dynamics or not.

The same holds true when it comes to preparing our liturgies or developing any pastoral plan for multicultural worship: individual people, collective cultural groups, and leaders will negotiate their own level of power and, in the end, exercise their own judgment and discretion in particular situations. Of course, we need to be careful not to judge the actions and decisions made by people, groups, or parish leaders. For now, simply be conscious that there are power negotiations going on.

HOW DO CULTURAL GROUPS PERCEIVE STRATEGIC PLANS FOR MULTICULTURAL MINISTRY?

While pastoral plans for multicultural ministry are noble efforts, I am often left with questions about how such plans are perceived by groups that are in the minority. For example, cultural groups whose heritage and traditions have always been nurtured and nourished within a parish, or immigrant groups whose cultural expressions, symbols, and languages were a given in their homeland, may view any attempt to bring all groups together as a dissemination of their cultural identity. How does any strategic plan not come across as a threat to cultural traditions?

WHAT IS AT STAKE?

It helps if the parish and diocesan leaders can somehow convey their overarching pastoral vision to the various cultural groups. But one must be sensitive in conveying this vision. Each cultural group needs to see the larger picture and, hopefully, learn how to trust all levels of leadership. They also need to know what the unforeseen consequences may be if all or some cultural groups do not cooperate together. What is the history of this pastoral vision? Why have the parish/diocesan leaders chosen this particular time and place for its implementation? What is going on in our parish beyond the boundaries of my immediate cultural group or the groups that I affiliate with?

BALANCING INDIVIDUAL GROUP NEEDS WITH A LARGER GROUP VISION

This leads to a dynamic that is probably the most difficult one to navigate and, in my opinion, is the crux of the tensions: balancing the needs of each cultural group with the larger collective vision of the parish. Somehow in our efforts to bring various cul-

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tural groups together, we need to convey to all groups that their cultural gifts, traditions, and heritages will not be ignored or disappear into the annals of parish history. For example, while there may be an attempt to have a multicultural Pentecost celebration, each group needs to remember the other times when they have more control, times when their cultural traditions are considered and given more prominent expression.

At the other end, each cultural group needs to come to an awareness and acceptance that there will always be some level of compromise whenever multicultural dynamics are present within larger

parish/diocesan frameworks. How is this balance between individual and larger group needs conveyed? Is there an acknowledgement that all groups, including the parish/diocesan leadership team, will need to compromise and, if so, to what extent?

WHAT ARE THE EXPECTATIONS?

I end my reflections by suggesting that we keep our expectations in check at all times. I am always reminded that if cathedral buildings are not built in a day, neither are parish communities with great cultural diversity. Set your goals, short-term and long-term, but be patient and kind to yourself as to how these goals progress over time. It may be that after the first couple of years, the parish/diocesan leadership team has obtained a fuller picture of the stories and histories of the cultural groups in their community. In the process of listening to these stories, other issues and concerns may arise that were not previously considered. (This is another reason why descriptive approaches are more effective than prescriptive approaches.) There may be a general desire to celebrate a community's diversity by *all* groups, but the way that was implemented in the past didn't resonate with the cultural expressions and values of all those involved. Whatever the expectations and goals may be, we can be thankful that our theological unity is already assured by virtue of our baptism in Christ, and that we ultimately rely on a "greater power" that transcends all our best efforts. Do not lose heart and, in the meantime, celebrate the diversity of gifts that is already present.

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