

CATECHETICAL MINISTRY

in a Culturally Diverse Church

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Most of the 65+ million American Catholics today live in culturally diverse parishes. New waves of Catholic immigrants representing many races, languages and cultures live and celebrate their faith under one roof and share the same spiritual home with post-immigrant Catholic communities in parishes across the country.

The perceived image of the United States has shifted from a melting pot to a multihued tapestry¹. The images of a 'pizza supreme,' a salad or even a stew also began to be used to illustrate this shift that recognizes cultural differences as a gift that enriches the whole in transforming and unifying ways. On the other hand, the temptation of expecting Catholics from different cultural backgrounds to simply assimilate into a one-size-fits-all program, group or activity continues to linger in a number of parishes.

Our God-given human diversity challenges all Catholics to achieve ecclesial integration, to discover ways in which we, as Catholic communities, can be one Church yet come from diverse cultures and ethnicities². Keenly aware of this challenge, the bishops of the United States have called upon all Catholics to recognize and celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity as a gift from God. In a statement titled *Many Members, One Body* (1994), the bishops of the Diocese of Galveston-Houston wrote: "Faithful to the teachings of Jesus Christ, the Church affirms the dignity of everyone and presents the diversity of races, cultures and languages as a gift from God, not as a problem." At the convocation of the *Encuentro 2000* national event celebrated in Los Angeles, California, the Bishops spoke of the need to acknowledge and embrace our cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity

and God's unique presence in each other's lives, histories and cultures.

This two-fold commitment to unity in diversity is highlighted in various pastoral statements marking the beginning of the twenty first century. The common thread in all of them is a call for a ministry that requires the commitment to welcome and foster the specific cultural identity of each the many faces in the Church, while building a profoundly Catholic identity that strengthens the unity of the one body of Christ³. *In Renewing the Vision* this call emphasizes "the need to focus on a specialized ministry to [with and from] youth of particular racial and ethnic cultures and, at the same time, promote mutual awareness and unity among all young people."⁴

This presentation offers ministry leaders insights, pastoral principles and practical recommendations to help them achieve unity in diversity

¹ *Renewing the Vision* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002) 22

² *Many Faces in God's House* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1998) 4.

³ *Encuentro & Mission* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002).

⁴ *Renewing the Vision*, 22.

among all Catholics in their parishes. The first part provides a historical understanding on how parish models have emerged to respond to the needs and aspirations of different cultural and ethnic groups. The second part explores concepts in pastoral theology and pastoral approaches that have shaped ministry, such as ecclesial integration, inculturation, multicultural ministry and intercultural ministry. The third part includes pastoral principles and practices for an effective intercultural ministry.

1. A Glance at Our Diverse Catholic Experience

Taking a look at the experience of previous generations of Catholics and how parishes developed to respond to their particular needs and aspirations can help us discern the best ways of achieving true ecclesial integration that shares unity in diversity—today and in the future. Such ecclesial integration is of particular importance among adolescents as they face the generational challenge of building the Church of tomorrow by renewing the Church today.

Immigration is not new to the Catholic experience in the United States. Actually, immigration is the

beginning and the historical context of the Catholic Church in the United States. Ecclesial integration is a fundamental principle to its growth. The right of people to migrate to support themselves and their families is strongly defended by the Church, and it's deeply rooted in the history of the United States as a country of immigrants.⁵

When the massive European Catholic immigrations took place in the late 1800s and early 1900s, the Church allowed the establishment of national parishes in many dioceses to welcome them. Such model of ecclesial integration provided these communities with the ecclesial space they needed to live their faith, to pray and to worship in the context of their own culture, language and traditions. The viability of this model was possible because European immigrants came in great numbers, within specific times and with their own priests. The establishment of national parishes was instrumental in helping new immigrants adapt to life in the United States from a position of strength. Catholic schools in these faith communities were started to provide Catholic children a familiar environment for learning and to keep them from being sucked into a culture often-

times unwelcoming of Catholic immigrants.

African American Catholics also had their own ecclesial space in parishes established for Black Catholics, or in the basement of existing parishes. However, coming from an experience of slavery and imposed segregation, these faith communities were less national parish models than ways of separating them from mainstream life and culture. While national parishes for Italians, Polish, Germans and other European immigrants were located just blocks from each other, parishes for Black-American Catholics were located in Black neighborhoods and depended on clergy of European descent, since Blacks were not allowed in U.S. seminaries at the time.

Despite these limitations, Black Catholics developed their own sense of cultural identity and belonging to the Church.

The Native-American Catholic experience was similar to that of Black Catholics. They had their own parishes within the confines of their reservations and depended on religious priests of European American descent for their sacramental needs, which made it difficult for them to develop native ministers and ministries.

⁵ *Strangers no Longer* (Washington, DC: US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005) 34

The case of the Hispanic American Catholic community was quite different from the groups already mentioned. After the annexation of the Southwestern states, Mexican-Americans were expected to assimilate into their new reality, thus not benefiting from the national parish model. Hispanic Americans did not bring their priests with them, which made it even more difficult for them to have the ecclesial space they needed to live their faith, to pray and to worship in the context of their own culture, language and traditions. The same expectation to assimilate was placed in subsequent generations of new immigrants from Mexico and other Latin American countries. In contrast with the European new immigrant experience, Hispanic-Americans had a long standing presence as well as a steady and robust immigration flow that continues to the present and into the foreseeable future.

2. The New Waves of Catholic Immigrants

At the conclusion of World War II, a big push for cultural assimilation took hold of a diverse nation seeking a new sense of unity. Within the Church, the national parish model began to be phased out as immigration from Europe dwindled. The European new

immigrant population got old and their children moved out of the ethnic neighborhoods, giving way to generations of post immigrant Catholics, mostly from European descent, and who came to constitute the bulk of what can be called mainstream Catholic Americans. This flight to the suburbs was also motivated by the move of Blacks and other non-European immigrant groups into the old ethnic neighborhoods.

When the Civil Rights Movement started the desegregation process under the banner of social integration, African American Catholics were expected to assimilate into mainstream culture. Such expectation created tension among Black Catholics as issues of exclusion and discrimination remained clearly present. In 1979, the U.S. Bishops denounced the problem of racism once more in their pastoral letter *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, "Racism is a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father." Even though some African American Catholics moved out of their neighborhoods and into the suburbs, most remained in their neighborhoods and parishes. Native American Catholics were even more resistant to cultural

assimilation and very few ventured outside their reservations.

The 50s and 60s witnessed a major increase in immigration from Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba and Central America. Immigrants from Mexico came under the labor agreement called the Bracero Program. Many Puerto Ricans left the island seeking better job opportunities in a time of great demand for labor force. The Cuban revolution of 1959 drove thousands of Cubans, including many Catholic priests, into exile. Central Americans, particularly from Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala began fleeing from their homelands immersed in civil war. The dramatic influx of new immigrants from these and other Latin American countries began to challenge the assumption that all Hispanics spoke English and had already assimilated into mainstream culture.

The Vietnam War generated massive immigration from that country. The Korean War generated a significant immigration flow from Korea and from other countries in Asia and the Pacific Islands impacted by these wars. The immigration experience of Vietnamese and Koreans Catholics was similar to the European experience. They came in significant numbers during a well-defined time span and brought their priests with them. This helps

explain why, despite the phasing out of the national parish model, Vietnamese and Korean Catholics have shown a preference to gather in personal parishes that are quite similar to the national parishes of the European experience. In contrast, immigrants from the Philippines had a less massive yet steady immigration flow. Giving their cultural ties to the United States and the lack of their own priests among them, Filipino immigrants were expected to assimilate. It is worth noting that immigrants from Asia and the Pacific Islands represent many different languages and religious traditions within themselves.⁶ This is in contrast with the population coming from Latin American countries as they share a common cultural heritage and religion, and two different and yet similar languages, Spanish and Portuguese.

3. *The Shift from Cultural Assimilation to Ecclesial Integration*

By the time the Second Vatican Council concluded in 1965, the new landscape for parish life in the United States was in place. With the national parish model behind, and the new waves of Catholic immigrants coming from Latin America,

Asia and the Pacific Islands, the territorial parish shared by culturally diverse members emerged as the new reality of the Catholic Church in the United States.

This new reality generated a shift in pastoral ministry from a policy of cultural assimilation prevalent after the Vietnam War, to one of ecclesial integration. Through a policy of assimilation, the bishops said in 1987,

“new immigrants are forced to give up their language, culture, values and traditions . . . This attitude alienates new Catholic immigrants from the Church . . . By [ecclesial] integration we mean that our Hispanic people [and Catholics from all cultures] are to be welcomed in our church institutions at all levels. They are to be served in their language when possible, and their cultural values and religious traditions are to be respected. Beyond that, we most work toward mutual enrichment through interaction among all cultures.”⁷

This concept of ecclesial integration generated the emergence of Hispanic ministry and the renewal of Black Catholic ministry in the early seventies,

and more recently ministry among Asian-Pacific Islanders, and others in parishes across the country. Ten years later, *Renewing the Vision* would echo this call for ecclesial integration when it says: “effective youth ministry should help all young people to feel comfortable and welcome so that they can develop their identity by affirming and utilizing the values and traditions of their unique culture, and the gifts and talents they offer to the entire faith community.”⁸

4. *A Missed Opportunity to Minister Among Adolescents from Diverse Cultures.*

Ministry among adolescents found definition in 1976 when the pastoral statement *A Vision for Youth Ministry* was issued. Since then, youth ministry has experienced a tremendous growth, becoming a sophisticated and professionalized ministry among mainstream Catholic adolescents. During that same time, ministries within the Black, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian and Pacific Island Catholic communities had successfully welcomed and developed ministers and ministries among adults, following an ecclesial integration model within culturally diverse parishes.

⁶ *Asian and Pacific Presence: Harmony in Faith*, (Washington, DC, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2004. URL::<http://usccb.org/mrs/harmony.shtml>) 5

⁷ *National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic Ministry*, (Washington, DC, U S Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1987) 4.

⁸ *Renewing the Vision*, 23.

Unfortunately, adolescents from these ethnic communities have only benefited marginally from the impressive growth of youth ministry or culturally specific ministries for adults. The unspoken assumption that children of new immigrants knew English, or were in the process of doing so, made the development of culturally specific catechetical programs for them quite difficult. In the area of youth ministry, this assumption was even more prevalent as adolescents from these communities were simply expected to assimilate into the existing mainstream parish youth group, programs and activities. This assumption has proven to be incorrect, as a large segment of the young Catholic population outside of mainstream Catholics has gone without appropriate pastoral attention.

In their document, *Encuentro & Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry* (E&M), the Bishops of the United States make a direct reference that helps explain why Catholic adolescents from ethnic and cultural communities have been falling through the cracks between successful youth ministry and culturally specific ministries.

In the case of Hispanic ministry, the principle of ecclesial integration versus cultural assimilation was only consistently applied to ministry

with adults, leaving adolescents in a kind of cultural and ministerial limbo. Regarding youth ministry the Bishops say that

The traditional [mainstream] model of parish youth ministry has not, for the most part, reached Hispanic adolescents because of economic, linguistic, cultural, age-range, and educational differences.

(Encuentro & Mission, 70)

In the same document the bishops note that the majority of parish youth ministry programs serve adolescents of well-established families, mostly of European descent. They are part of mainstream culture, English-speaking and middle class or upper middle class. Many of them live in the suburbs, are more likely to attend Catholic schools and are college bound. On the other hand, Hispanic adolescents can be monolingual in Spanish or English, or bilingual. They can be U.S. born of many generations or new immigrants; working-class or middle class, white, black or brown. Most of them go to public schools; a significant number have a low educational attainment, and less than twenty percent are college bound.

Such contrasting economic, linguistic, cultural, racial and educational

differences explain to a good extent why most Hispanic adolescents living in culturally diverse parishes don't participate in mainstream youth ministry. It also explains the emergence of alternative youth groups and apostolic movements for Hispanics and by Hispanics to fill the pastoral void created by a policy of assimilation. A similar situation faced adolescents from Black, Native American, Asian and Pacific Islander families living in culturally diverse parishes. They often find themselves without the ecclesial space to be precisely that, themselves.

5. Inculturation of the Gospel

In 1987, John Paul II met with over 10,000 Native Americans in Phoenix, Arizona. During the gathering the Holy Father encouraged Native American Catholics with this message: "keep alive your cultures, your languages, the values and costumes which have served you well in the past and which provide a solid foundation for the future." The Catholic faith, he added, can thrive in any culture. The words of the Holy Father were given in response to the desire of Native Americans to "seek to follow Jesus in languages and cultures which God has given us."

These words evoke the image of each culture as holy ground, for God dwells in each culture and in each person in a unique and amazing way. They also are a clear example of what the Church understands by inculturation of the Gospel. In the *General Directory for Catechesis* (GDC), the Church speaks of inculturation of the Gospel message in the following words: “The Word of God became man, a concrete man, in space and time and rooted in a specific culture. Christ by His incarnation committed Himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the men [and women] among whom he lived. This is the original ‘inculturation’ of the word of God and is the model of all evangelization by the Church, called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures”⁹ (GDC, #109).

In the context of a culturally diverse parish, inculturation comprises all the riches of the different cultural and ethnic communities that have been given to Christ as an inheritance. It is a profound process that touches every culture deeply, going to the very center and roots of each culture, taking from each what is compatible with Gospel values

while seeking to purify and transform beliefs, attitudes and actions that are contrary to the Reign of God (GDC, #109).

The challenge to inculturate the Gospel reminds us that the most fundamental mission of the Church is to evangelize, to bring the Good News of Christ to every human situation.¹⁰ John Paul II calls for a New Evangelization that will renew the commitment of the Church, and of each believer, to denounce all things that go against the dignity of the human person, and to build a culture of life inspired by gospel values. The New Evangelization aims to serve as a bridge between faith and culture, proving that a faith that does not generate and transforms culture is a sterile faith.¹¹

The inculturation of the Gospel involves following Jesus’ example to become gracious hosts for one another, as we acknowledge and embrace our cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity and God’s unique presence in each of our lives histories and cultures.¹² It also describes a truly Catholic understanding of ministry among diverse communities that focuses less on how mainstream culture looks at and relates

to ‘minority communities,’ and more on how to have meaningful conversations and build meaningful relationships among all the culturally and racially diverse members of the parish community. This subtle and yet powerful difference can be captured in the concepts of ‘multi-cultural’ ministry and ‘intercultural’ ministry respectively. The following example may help illustrate the differences between the two approaches:

6. Envisioning a New Pentecost

Interactions between Catholics of diverse cultures, including mainstream culture, are transforming opportunities that bear fruits of Christian unity in the spirit of a new Pentecost. Like two thousand years ago, the Feast of Pentecost offers a redeeming vision of human diversity. It is a vision of unity among peoples that goes far beyond their differences, and in which all share the same human dignity. The Holy Spirit empowered the apostles to preach to people of many nations and different languages, creating among them a new community united by the same Spirit. The communion of the Church, rooted in

⁹ *General Directory for Catechesis*, (Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997)

¹⁰ *Go and Make Disciples*, (Washington, DC, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1992), 2.

¹¹ *Hispanic Presence in the New Evangelization in the United States* (Washington, DC, US Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1996), 16.

¹² *Many Faces in God’s House*, 9.

God's love, is called to offer all Catholics the sense of identity, purpose and community they seek. Claimed by Christ and baptized into the Holy Spirit, all Catholics from all generations, immigration status or social situations are full members of the Church, worthy of the love, the respect and the support of the entire Christian community. Faced by a society that is increasingly diverse and to some extent divided, it is urgent to proclaim with joy and firm faith that through our communion with Christ, we enter into living communion with all believers.¹³

Learning from past pastoral experiences and reclaiming the universal roots of our Catholic faith provides ministry today with new opportunities to achieve unity in diversity. Building upon the openness and appreciation for diversity that is present in this generation of Catholics, we have the opportunity to bring together the many faces of Catholic people in a new yet old way. "The Holy Spirit, with his power and with the intimate connection of the members of the faith community, gives unity to the Body and in this way stimulates and produces love between the believers."¹⁴

7. A renewed vision of catechetical ministry and ministers

Striking a balance between the needs and aspirations of Catholics from different cultural and ethnic communities is not an easy task. Equally challenging is accepting each other's differences and confronting each case of prejudice, cultural stereotype and expression of racism present in our society even today. It is in this context that catechetical leaders ask: How can the Church provide a healthy environment and a sense of community for all Catholics in culturally diverse parishes today and in the future? The answer to this question is not only found in what we do—activity—but who we are—identity—and how we interact—relationships.¹⁵

The most important of these dimensions is who we are as persons and as ministers with all adolescents. It involves a spirituality of discipleship and a human maturity that allows us to grow in welcoming others, embrace them and journey with them; leaving behind the we-they language and moving into the all-of-us-together language. This way of being fosters our growth in respect and in love for each person:

not so much the love of a teacher [or minister] as of a father, or rather of a mother. It is the Lord's wish that every preacher of the gospel, every builder up of the Church should have this love.¹⁶

We must make the Church the home and the school of communion.¹⁷

What we do and teach should be rooted in the double commitment we have as ministers to the message of Christ and to the adolescents with whom we minister. This requires solid knowledge of Christ and His message, as well as interpersonal knowledge of all adolescents in our parish, and the cultural, religious, social and economic context in which they live. Such knowledge is born from our efforts to be good listeners, sensitive and authentically interested in people's lives, needs, aspirations and ideas. It also requires an ability to relate beyond our cultural boundaries, to engage in dialogue and promote collaboration with a constructive spirit.

How we do things is as important as what we do. Knowing how to communicate and relate to others, particularly to people from other cultures and their parents, is the key to building relationships and ministries. Ministers need to be effective

¹³ *Ecclesia in America*, (Vatican, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), 33.

¹⁴ *Many Faces in God's House*, 9.

¹⁵ *Renewing the Vision*, 34.

¹⁶ *General Directory for Catechesis*, 239.

¹⁷ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (John Paul II) <http://www.usccb.org/laity/youth/nmieng.shtml> 43.

communicators of the message of Christ among people speaking different languages. This includes knowing how different communities make decisions, how they learn, how they organize and come together with other groups. Such awareness and commitment help us welcome and empower all people to develop and exercise their leadership, contribute their unique perspectives, develop groups, activities and program content that is culturally appropriate and relevant to the needs and aspirations of Catholics within each culture, while affirming their sense of belonging to the universal Church and the local parish community in the spirit of unity in diversity.¹⁸

8. Pastoral Principles for Ministry in Culturally Diverse Parishes

The following pastoral principles stem from ministry experiences and Church teachings gathered in a wealth of pastoral statements published by the Bishops of the United States. They have proven to serve parishes well in the development of ministries and ministers within cultural/ethnic groups, and in relationship with the broader parish community.

a) Articulate a vision of catechetical ministry based on ecclesial integration

- ▶ Be willing to listen to the stories, perspectives and preferences of people from the different cultures and ethnicities present in your parish.
- ▶ Recognize and affirm cultural, linguistic and racial differences as a gift from God not as a problem to be solved.
- ▶ Promote the right of each Catholic cultural/ethnic group to have their own space to live and practice their faith in the context of the one parish community.
- ▶ Avoid the temptation to expect others to assimilate into a one-size-fits-all group, program or activity.
- ▶ Commit to achieve unity in diversity, not uniformity.

b) Foster the inculturation of the Gospel in all cultures

- ▶ Be aware of your own cultural heritage and relate to people from other cultures with respect and appreciation of differences and commonalities.
- ▶ Use the concept of inculturation of the Gospel as a point of reference in all ministry efforts.

- ▶ Be willing to be a bridge builder between people from cultures rather than a gate-keeper of your own culture.
- ▶ Avoid the tendency to see your culture as better or more valuable than the cultures of others, also avoid the use of we/they language.
- ▶ Commit to the spirit of mission of the New Evangelization and its ongoing transformation of all cultures by the Gospel values.

c) Plan with people, not for people

- ▶ First listen and welcome the unique perspectives of the different cultural/ethnic communities you are trying to reach.
- ▶ Include them, from the beginning, in the development of plans, programs and activities
- ▶ Use the language of ministry To, With and For people from the unique cultures and ethnicities present in your parish.
- ▶ Avoid planning for others and judging them when they don't show up to your activity.
- ▶ Build community in every thing you do within each cultural/ethnic group and between all of them as one body of Christ.

¹⁸ *Renewing the Vision*, 23.

d) *Broaden your understanding of catechetical ministry groups, programs and structures, and cast a bigger net*

- ▶ Recognize the uniquely lived experiences, needs and aspirations of people from each cultural ethnic community your parish.
- ▶ Understand the existence of more than one program or grouping in your parish as a blessing, and as the first step towards ecclesial integration among all of them.
- ▶ Promote the formation of culturally specific groups and apostolic movements for Catholics of all ages as effective means of evangelization and community building.
- ▶ Avoid the perception that allowing the formation of culturally specific groups creates division or separation.
- ▶ Commit to creating welcoming spaces for all Catholics living in your parish.

e) *Empower people from the different cultures/ethnicities into leadership positions*

- ▶ Understand the way in which different groups view leadership, organize themselves and make decisions.
- ▶ Identify catechetical leaders and mentor them into

ministry within their own cultural community and in the parish as a whole.

- ▶ Advocate for inclusion of people and their families in leadership positions within catechetical ministries in the parish.
- ▶ Avoid a mentality of scarcity when growth in ministry generates demands for more resources.
- ▶ Commit to the awesome mission of weaving a new diverse parish community by helping shape the leadership of Catholic catechetical leaders today.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Catholics in the United States are growing up in an unprecedented culturally diverse society. This reality challenges all Catholics to achieve ecclesial integration and to discover ways in which we, as Catholic persons and communities, can be one Church yet come from diverse cultures and ethnicities.

The two-fold commitment to unity in diversity is highlighted in various pastoral statements marking the beginning of the twenty-first century. This call emphasizes the need to focus on a specialized ministry to, with and for people of particular racial and ethnic cultures and, at the

same time, promote mutual awareness and unity among all Catholics.

Looking at the experience of previous generations of immigrants and the emergence of culturally specific ministries, can help us discern today the best way of ministering among Catholics from diverse cultures and ethnicities. Concepts and principles in pastoral theology and practice such as ecclesial integration, inculturation and intercultural ministry can also provide guidance in the area of catechetical ministry.

The call to inculturation of the Gospel values in all cultures has direct implications in the way we relate to one another and in the way we are ministers and do ministry. Understanding that people from each cultural/ethnic community have their own path, as individuals and as a group, empowers us to respect them, love them and accompany them in their journey of faith. Understanding that the paths of all Catholics come together in Christ and His vision of humanity empowers us to be bridge builders between them and a visible sign of unity in the faith community.

Common pastoral principles and a common language in ministry development are pivotal in building an effective catechetical ministry that is both culturally relevant and profoundly Catholic. Knowing

where we are going in ministry and having a common road map on how to get there is also essential. Moving from identity to belonging, to building relationships and to achieving ownership describes the journey of building up the community of faith. It is a journey that brings us all together on equal footing and dignity. For the goal is not to get there first and alone, but together and on time.

