

GETTING
DOWN
TO
CASES

Sharon Henderson Callahan

**Hospitality:
The Key to Recognizing
the Prophetic Dimension
of Diverse Populations**

Gloria Duncan has been a lay catechist at St. Gabriel's Parish for seven years. During that time, she has been quietly and persistently working to invite Mexican farm workers in the apple orchards to visit St. Gabriel's. Finally, Gloria was able to gather seven people who wanted to study Scripture. She found Bibles in Spanish and reserved a room for them on a Tuesday night in February. Unfortunately, the room Gloria had been given was unheated during the week. Some of the farm workers, she learned the first night they came, were illegal aliens. Gloria was astounded by their devotion to the study of Scripture. They huddled in a circle with their coats on around a single candle and spoke quietly in Spanish sharing together their reflections on the Gospel of Mark. When Gloria asked the secretary who maintains the parish schedule for another time for the group to meet, she was informed that rooms cannot be allocated to individuals who do not contribute or are not registered with the parish. There could be no exceptions to the policy, the pastor informed Gloria later, because there was hardly enough room in the parish for the activities of the regular members. When the local Baptist church offered its facilities to the Bible study group, Gloria had more than one dilemma.

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Patricia Wilson taught Spanish at the local high school. She was also a trained musician who had volunteered to help with music and liturgy at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish. Because she was interested in having the choirs sing with guitar as well as organ, the music committee recommended that she work with the Mexican-American people in the parish in order to develop a choir that could sing at the Spanish Masses. As a white, educated woman, concerned with helping the poor, Patricia readily embraced the challenge of developing a music program for Mexican-American parishioners. Her aim was to establish a Mexican-American choir that would sing "good liturgical music" to enhance worship in this rural parish. Because of her ability to speak Spanish, Patricia expected that people would trust her more quickly than they did. Even though she herself felt marginalized in the parish because of her age and musical sensitivities, Patricia failed to recognize at the beginning how her position of power (her education, color, and talent) also marginalized the Mexican-American community. Once she relaxed her cultural pre-dispositions about

timeliness and regular attendance, Patricia was able to trust their love of music and their commitment to celebrating faith. While the quality of the music did not reach her expectations, Patricia learned how active participation in worship fashioned a believing community. Not incidentally was she transformed by their lively expression of faith.

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The sacrament preparation programs in Holy Innocents Parish were the responsibility of Cecelia Gallagher. Trained for her work by the pastor of the parish, she was a faithful lay volunteer who had worked her way through various levels of volunteering. Cecelia eagerly embraced archdiocesan policies and applied them to the parish with a certain legalistic rigor. So, for example, she had worked with the Catholic school teachers and the religious education director to ensure that the parish comply with all the new Archdiocesan Catechetical Guidelines for preparing children to receive sacraments. She gathered a group of catechists and told them of the significance of First Communion within the Sunday liturgy. Cecelia introduced the new archdiocesan practices to the parents, stressing that no special cultural variations would be allowed at First Communion in order to symbolize the unity of faith and practice. Felino did not understand the new rules. All his brothers had worn the traditional Filipino white suit for their First Communion. Just before the service, Felino changed into the brother's white suit that fit him best. When she saw him enter the sanctuary in a white suit, Cecelia Gallagher sent a note to the pastor suggesting that Felino not receive First Communion.

I

The vignettes describe everyday situations occurring in most parishes. They also lift up some of the complexities of ministry across cultures. In each circumstance, traditional patterns of faith or worship or new church rules for Christian practice are in tension with the need to honor diversity. These tensions are seldom easily resolved because resolution usually requires a deeper transformation and more systemic change. Keeping rules or seeking uniformity or enhancing the musical norms of faith communities are not necessarily unacceptable aims, but they are not easily reconciled with a commitment to welcome the stranger and honor the gifts of the one who is different. These stories encourage the basic signs of Christian hospitality in order that what is different might function prophetically to expand the vision of the dominant culture.

Roman Catholic parishes today often determine membership through registration cards and annual contributions. Rarely are facilities open

to those who either are not registered or cannot pay a rental fee for the rooms. Many new immigrant populations (from Latin and South America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands) do not recognize the emphasis on registration as attempts to foster community. In fact, the custom of Mexican Catholics often mitigates against registration and thereby affects their inclusion in parish communities. Policies of registration, measuring support, administering sacraments only to those who attend regularly and are recognized by the priests and lay ministers *all* inhibit and sometimes threaten already marginalized people. Sooner or later, the parish secretary at St. Gabriel's will need to assure people in the parish that everyone has equal and easy access to what is owned in common.

The inability of St. Gabriel's Parish to bend its rules to make room for a group of people who desired to study Scripture created an intolerable situation for at least the Mexicans who were illegal aliens. They could not register with the parish in order to have access to a room without at the same time putting themselves in double jeopardy. Because the staff was inflexible about the rules governing the use of the parish building, the people of St. Gabriel's missed an opportunity to discover and be transformed by a commitment to study Scripture not readily found among church-going folk in the dominant culture. At another level, the inability to find space deprived these Mexican farm workers of an experience of hospitality that would have diminished their experience of being marginalized by affirming their belonging to a Catholic faith community.

Making space available is a simple action with profound significance. In my experience in multi-cultural ministry, the dominant culture often fails to honor diversity in our midst in seemingly insignificant actions or small decisions handled routinely. The pastor at St. Gabriel's may not have wanted to challenge the power of the schedule-keeper on this issue because he intended to question her authority on another matter closer to his passions. On the other hand, the pastor may not even have understood fully the impact of his concurrence with the secretary who kept the calendar. What is required in order to receive diverse gifts is an attitude of hospitality and flexibility in the use of power. While a seemingly simple solution, the act of finding a room for a Bible study group of Mexican farm workers points to larger realities that beg for systemic transformation on the part of Christian faith communities. If the parish welcomed these Bible students, they would also become more aware of the plight of the Mexican worker: housing, wages, language barriers, fear of deportation, education, health, etc. By receiving the faith stories, the values carried in song and poetry, and the significance of family held by these workers, the people of St. Gabriel's would enter into a relationship by which they might be changed.

II

The willingness to be changed by the other who is different is one disposition necessary for effective ministry across cultures. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we are all changed by encounters with the other. That is how globalization is different than colonialism. Welcoming the stranger is a process that curves back upon its origins. This possibility of being changed by the difference of another is what I mean by the prophetic dimension of authentic hospitality. The mutuality of influence at the center of this process is also similar to what St. Thérèse of Lisieux once called the “evangelist’s gamble.” The evangelist has no guarantee that his understanding of faith will remain unaltered after an encounter with someone he or she is seeking to convert. “How can anyone expect that the person who is listening to him should be ready in principle to change his life and way of thinking if he, the evangelist is not notionally prepared to submit to the same discipline?” (Thérèse of Lisieux, 1949: Letter LXXIII, July 14, 1889). If St. Gabriel’s Parish had welcomed the Mexican farm workers Bible study group, they too may have been changed.

The story of Patricia illustrates so wonderfully the conviction of Thérèse of Lisieux that we must be willing to be transformed by our encounter with difference. Most of us who have found ways to change our attitudes toward those who we perceive to be different have had some experience like Patricia. We have been able to encounter otherness as gift and sign of the splendor of God’s extravagant creativity. The idea of being transformed by a stranger is both the consequence of and a prelude to effective ministry in a multicultural context. Like many ministers committed to social justice and education toward conversion, Patricia demonstrated a willingness to work with a marginalized population. One can presume that Patricia’s own experience of marginalization made her more willing to be transformed by her experience with this particular Mexican American community of practicing believers. And her experience of that community was prophetic in her life in the sense that it expanded Patricia’s vision of the world. One can imagine that Patricia’s experience of being transformed by the other may have led her to lobby for more appropriately scheduled bi-lingual Masses, initiate small group conversations about prejudice, and encourage the parish to explore multiple ways to pray and image God.

III

Cecelia’s story is a little more difficult to respond to because it puts obedience to church authority (at least as she understands it) in opposition to an attitude of welcoming diversity. We may presume that the

pastor did not honor her request to deny Felino his First Communion because he had violated the rule by dressing traditionally. Even if the request was denied, these families preparing their children for First Communion would not have experienced the Church through Cecelia as a community willing to honor their diversity. Her story also lifts some of the complexities of lay ministries. We have no assurance that every lay person who finds himself or herself in positions of leadership within a particular faith community or diocesan structure has come to understand that people are more important than rules.

Someone less committed to following the archdiocesan rules may have been prompted to respond with a different set of important questions. Whose norms regarding what is “right dress or behavior” undergird the catechetical guidelines? What evidence is there that uniformity of dress fosters community better or more quickly than honoring diversity? What if the guidelines had been written by a team that included the wisdom of multiple ethnic and racial groups? What if reverence for the other was so profound that difference was assumed to be a gift of God? What if multiple spiritualities were embraced so that people in a congregation could freely share the rosary, Stations of the Cross, walks in natural settings, centering prayer, daily Eucharist, and devotions to Guadalupe? What if congregations were expected to include images that reflected multiple spiritualities and nationalities? What if ministers assumed they were to receive the other rather than exert power over the other?

Ministry in parishes embracing multiple cultures challenges each person to re-examine entrenched rituals. Those who embody biblical hospitality genuinely welcome the “stranger” in a spirit of humility and service. They are able to freely invite the “other” to share resources, to contribute to the faith of the community and to build trust. These ministers learn new languages both verbal and non-verbal, invite all to reflect on new policies, and explore the traditions of others so they can discover new and flexible ways to incorporate multiple expressions within the guidelines. Expressions of hospitality begin the process. Understood in this way, hospitality is an essential part of living the Christian life. Like the exchanges between Abraham, Sarah and the visitors or Elisha, and the widow or Jesus and the Syrophenecian woman, acts of hospitality create miracles.

Hospitality to the stranger opens the door to belonging, mission, justice and mercy. Sometimes this also means addressing the issues of contribution, stewardship, commitment to social justice, and “standards” imposed as indicators of those who “really belong” to a faith community. The work of embracing the other in mutuality challenges us to live new ways of hospitality, belonging, mission, justice and mercy. The work begins with simple actions, openness to being transformed, and a

good heart. It also requires humility and commitment. Most of all, it is important to believe that an authentic multicultural ministry that honors the prophetic dimension of diversity is possible. It is, in fact, our call.

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How are we to welcome today's newcomers? Eight of the twenty nations that are now the principal sources of immigrants have a strong Catholic tradition: Mexico, the Philippines, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Colombia, Peru and Poland. We need to look at how we welcome these people to our parish life, so that they are seen and heard among us and can proudly display their own religious symbols and images.

—Archbishop Joseph Fiorenza