Creation in Divine Diversity
Imaging Community, Respecting Difference

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The mission of bearing witness through our daily living belongs to all of us gathered in the diversity of God. We are all responsible to create the conditions that allow us to live together, to grow together, and to participate as fully as possible in life of the church and in the well-being of the global human family.

Traveling down Highway 26 in Puerto Rico, an attention-grabbing billboard simply proclaimed, “Ustedes están aquí. Nosotros también.” (“You are here. So are we.”) This simple statement, an advertising slogan for a mortgage company, manages to capture much of what is at the heart of making sense out of diversity in our Catholic Church today, especially in the context of the United States.

This statement can just as easily reflect the sentiments of those of us who are newcomers as well as those of us who are established members of parishes and communities across the country. One can feel the tension between the “you/ustedes” who are now here, and the “we/nosotros” who have been here. Or from the perspective of the newcomer, one senses the need to remind the “you/ustedes” who are established that “we/nosotros” are now also here—to stay! At the same time, these two sentences invite reflection on how we all are to live together as church. How will we negotiate our relationships with each other as we become increasingly aware of our differences? How do we create common ground—together? How do we possibly share and live a common mission?

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These are not new questions, nor are they only questions for contemporary faith communities. For centuries people have tried to understand more deeply how they can be both different from one another and still be in community. The Acts of the Apostles recounts that when Peter spoke at Pentecost, each person there heard his telling of “God’s deeds of power” in his or her own language (Acts 2:1-11). From this act of the Holy Spirit comes the invitation to understand what it means to be a community-in-difference.

The changing face of the church in the United States of America, locally and nationally, raises practical questions about how we can worship and live together as Catholics. Our response to these questions requires that we learn how to appreciate one another’s differences at all kinds of levels, including but certainly not limited to culture, language, race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality, physical abilities and politics. In the end, this diversity not only points to human differences; it also indicates the richness of God’s life as God lives among us.

**Our Context: Cultural Diversity in the U.S. Church**

The church in the United States is and has always been diverse. Catholicism came to the Americas in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries with the Spanish, and the first encounters with the native peoples in what is now the fifty states of United States occurred in Florida. The interactions amongst Native Americans, Africans, and Spaniards were complex: in one way marked by conquest, slavery, and violence; and in another way producing a faith renewed in the ongoing lived experiences and cultural exchanges that arose from peoples of different continents. This Catholic evangelizing presence was sustained through an extensive system of missions that stretched across the southwest and California.

Colonization by other European powers of the day continued into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the Netherlands, France, and England claimed territories and established colonies especially in eastern regions of what eventually became the United States. Maryland, the British colony founded to create safe space for English Catholics, became the home of the first diocese in the newly formed nation. In 1808 the Diocese of Baltimore was elevated to an archdiocese, and from its territory the dioceses of Bardstown (now Louisville), Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were founded. In fact, the first pastoral visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States in April 2008 coincided with the bicentennial of this event.

Over the next two centuries, the growth of Catholicism in the United States was primarily due to subsequent waves of immigration and the policy of Manifest Destiny. The expansion of the United States throughout the 1800s, sometimes via negotiations and other times through invasion and war, resulted in the addition of lands and peoples to the newly formed nation. These lands included predominantly Catholic territories held by Mexico, Spain, and France.
Immigration fueled the growth of the church from the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries. Initially immigrants arrived from Ireland, then later Germany, Italy, and from across Western and Eastern Europe, as well as Africa and Asia. Discrimination that sadly pitted one ethnic and racial group against another often marked the immigrant experience. Today those of us who are descendants of these immigrant communities are left with a handful of customs and some recipes. Lost to generations are the tales of struggle; “Irish Need Not Apply” and anti-Catholic sentiment are erased from many modern memories. “English Only,” is not a recent phenomenon, it was used against the languages brought by earlier waves of our immigrating families. It resulted in removal of countless Native American children from their families and into boarding schools. It was forced upon the people of Puerto Rico under U.S. rule.

The Church Responds to U.S. Immigration

These transitions in parish life were marked by tensions, especially when the priest did not share the culture of the community in the pews. Men and women religious accompanied some immigrants from their nations of origin and a number of religious communities were founded specifically to accompany migrating peoples. For example, Bishop Giovanni Battista Scalabrini founded the Missionaries of St. Charles Borromeo, also known as the Scalabrinian Missionaries in 1887 and an order of religious sisters in 1895 to accompany emigrating Italians. These religious men and women, moved by the plight of their migrating brothers and sisters, followed them to new lands, especially to the Americas, with the intent of providing pastoral care, attending to their spiritual, social, educational, and material needs. In addressing the needs of a particular community of migrants, the Scalabrinians developed an ongoing commitment:

...to become migrants with the migrants, so as to build with them, even by the witness of our life and our community, the Church, which in its earthly pilgrimage associates itself particularly with the poorest and most abandoned classes of people; and also to help people discover Christ in their migrant brothers and sisters and perceive in migration a sign of [hu]mankind’s eternal calling. (Congregation of the Missionaries, no. 3)

Another ministerial response to the growing diversity of cultures and languages was the establishment of national parishes, where pastoral care and preaching was conducted in the language of the particular community. Cities like Boston, New York, Chicago, and Baltimore were sites of numerous such parishes that coexisted with territorial/geographic parishes. These parishes reflected the people of the neighborhood and sought to ease the newcomers’ acculturation into U.S.
society. Today in many parishes across the country, original ethnic populations are no longer the primary source of parishioners.

For example, the Bronx parish I grew up in, Santa Maria in the archdiocese of New York, was founded in the 1920s as an Italian national parish with clergy from Italy. In 1951, a school was built to educate the youth of the parish. By the 1960s and 1970s, the parish and school were primarily populated by Italians, with a significant Irish presence and a few families from other ethnic and racial backgrounds. Today the parish is overwhelmingly Hispanic with Italian, Filipino, Indian, and most recently, Vietnamese parishioners. The clergy who minister in the parish belong to a religious order from Spain, the Idente Missionaries of Christ Crucified.

This example illustrates the situation in many parishes today—where new populations replace dwindling founding populations. In some cases, the parishes thrive or experience a renewal. However, sometimes frustrations can mount and dissension arises especially when fiscal and personnel constraints force parishes and schools to merge or even close. These tensions reflect a concern over the possible diminishment or even loss of familiar parish services, ministries or facilities. These changes can threaten the cohesion of a parish’s identity and generate a fear that the story of this community will be erased.

Sometimes these tensions result in a fear of difference. In other places, they challenge parish communities to examine their mission in light of the changing “signs of the times.” Consider the experience of St. Bridget Parish in Postville, Iowa. In May 2008, one of the largest worksite federal immigration raids unsettled countless families. The roundup, detainment, imprisonment, and deportation of alternately documented immigrants who worked in the local meatpacking industry affected all in the region. The parish of St. Bridget found itself in the center of a self-described “disaster relief response” as predominantly Latin American immigrants sought refuge and support in the church (Rubiner). The situation underscored the complexity of the immigration issue and the interdependence of U.S. communities and international labor. It also highlighted the reality that the face of this local church was more diverse in terms of nationality, ethnicity and race than some imagined. Archbishop of Dubuque, Jerome Hanus, O.S.B., affirmed the efforts of all those who responded compassionately to the crisis and its aftermath of insecurity, fear, economic instability, and family separation. He also reminded all of our mutual responsibilities as Catholics:

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Our religious and social response is based on the Judeo-Christian scriptures which call believers to welcome the stranger among us, to treat the alien with respect and charity, and to provide pastoral and humanitarian assistance. While we do not condone illegal activity, we do give spiritual and moral support to suffering families. All of us should urgently reiterate the call to our legislators to work for comprehensive reform. (Hanus)

In the aftermath of the raids, the parish continues to provide social services and pastoral care for those whose lives have been uprooted. At the same time, parishioners and pastoral leaders, through prayer and action, advocate for comprehensive immigration reform that includes justice for workers and the unification of families.

**What’s Diversity?**

In some ways diversity is one of the more complicated concepts to understand perhaps because it has been used—or overused—in numerous circumstances. In the workplace, diversity often describes practices that seek to employ a variety of people in order to create an environment that ideally is beneficial to the company as well as to the workers. For some businesses, a variety of perspectives and experiences among its employees is seen as a profitable investment that attracts new markets or customers. For other employers having workers across racial, cultural and gender lines is necessary to comply with federal or state guidelines on equity in hiring. In education, diversity reflects a goal of recruiting and retaining students and faculty from populations that have historically been under-represented and/or excluded from particular schools or fields of study. It also indicates attention to a variety of perspectives in scholarship, resources and in the development of curricula. In politics, the term indicates sensitivity to and a tolerance of difference. Too often however, people use diversity to describe “those who are not me.” In other words, whoever is different or in the minority is labeled as the diversity, but the rest of “us” are not.

From a theological perspective, diversity embraces human variation and includes “the overwhelming beauty, the vast array of creatures, the complex and interconnected weave of ecosystems” (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, no. 5). Diversity is the condition of all creation, even humanity. Brother [Fray] Juan de Torquemada, a Franciscan friar, missionary, and historian tried to explain human difference and the racial variations among the peoples of his time. From his position in sixteenth century Mexico, he concluded that God must be the source of this “marvelous variety of colors”; therefore, diversity is an expression of divine intention, not an accident. He explains:

There is no other reason for this [variation] than God’s wish to display his marvels through the variety of colors. Like the colors of the flowers in a field, he wished
for them to preserve that given to them by nature. In this way, just as God is praised in the many shades of flowers, so too is the Almighty blessed and praised in the different and varied colors of humanity. It is through his artifices and paintings that he chose to show the boundlessness of his wisdom. (Quoted in Katzew, 47)

Church teaching claims that it is the very image of God reflected in the divine creation of human beings. This teaching is rooted in one of the creation stories found in the book of Genesis whereby God creates humans, male and female, in the divine image (Gen 1:27). Through this creation in the divine image all humans are honored “with a transcendent dignity”; so much so that Pope Benedict XVI observes, “Before God, all men and women have the same dignity, whatever their nation, culture or religion” (Address in Cologne).

From this perspective, our human differences are not a problem; rather they are a source of our necessary diversity, a reflection of the divine, a gift of our creation. “Human creation in the divine image is creation in the divine diversity. Reflected in our embodied, engendered, and located differences are the splendor, the complexity and the very mystery of God” (Nanko-Fernández, 54).

**Reality Check: Diversity and Daily Life**

**Family**

Diversity is a reality of our daily living. Each of us, with our own differences, participates in diverse contexts including but not limited to family, parish, school, neighborhood, and nation. In many ways, families are the most basic unit of human diversity. They are established in difference, contain elements of intentionality [for the most part we can choose our spouses] and elements of accident [we cannot choose to whom we are born]. As kin we share some commonalities, for example biological traits, cultural practices, even our names.

However, our families are marked by differences: we are male and female, we vary in age, and our physical characteristics are not always similar. For some our first language is Spanish or American Sign Language or Polish, but our children’s first language is English. Some of us are U.S. citizens, others are residents, and still others of us are immigrants who are alternately documented and living in the shadows. Sometimes we come from different ethnic or racial backgrounds; some of us may have autism and others live with Alzheimer’s; we remain with our biological parents or we are adopted by and in turn we adopt parents that are genetically unrelated to us.

If this range of intersecting difference exists at the level of family, then clearly diversity is the condition of our living together even as nation or church. The challenge is: how with our differences can we be in relationship? What is the connection between diversity and community? Can the many truly be one?
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Nation

On all U.S. currency there appears the Latin phrase *e pluribus unum* and, in the case of paper bills, it is present in the context of the Great Seal of the United States. These words, meaning “out of many, one,” attempt to communicate a national understanding of how unity is possible in the diversity that is the United States.

In the United States, one of the ways of trying to explain how the many can be one has been through the image of a “melting pot.” This image seeks to portray a unified nation born out of generations of immigrants from across the world. Once in the United States their differences are melted together and they conform to something new, thus out of the many they become one—Americans. There are limitations to this image of a melting pot. It does not take into account those First Peoples who were here long before the Europeans arrived or whose lands were taken as the nation expanded. Also ignored is the sinfulness of slavery, which uprooted millions of Africans against their will and resulted in centuries of discrimination against African Americans. With respect to immigrants, a melting pot implies a loss of distinctive identity in order to become one. How many descendants of immigrants can no longer speak the languages of their grandparents? How many have forgotten the stories of their ancestors’ journeys?

Melting pot is just one image that has been used to describe the experience of the United States; other images include mosaic, tapestry, or even quilt. Here the focus shifts to the ability of difference to maintain its identity while contributing to something new and greater than the sum of its parts. In a quilt individual pieces of fabric are stitched together to produce something new. In many cases, the fabric used had another purpose and sometimes the piece may hold a special memory. It might have been a tablecloth or an article of clothing or a baby’s first blanket. This is especially true in the Appalachian quilting tradition where no fabric is purchased for use in the quilt; rather they are remnants from other sewing projects.

When one looks at the completed quilt, the individual panels are recognizable and memorable yet they now also tell a new story. In African American quilting traditions, for example some quilts are like family albums, telling a particular family’s story by recording in cloth major events like births and marriages, geographical location and religious commitments. Quilts reflect the cultural traditions...
of the quilters as well as innovations introduced in response to new places and circumstances. The power of the quilt imagery also extends to the process that is used to create them. Quilts are often made “in community” by more than one person sewing together.

Diversity is the condition of the United States and many images try to explain it. Images are concrete; they capture in a picture what words alone sometimes cannot express. They create comparisons that establish a relationship between something familiar and something more elusive, for example, the United States is a quilt, or Juan de Torquemada’s image of the field of wild flowers to describe human racial variation. An image communicates an insight about a complicated reality, but it is not the only insight. It is open to interpretation and is not meant to be taken literally.

**Imaging Church**

Images are also used to describe how the church can be diversity-in-unity or, to borrow a phrase from the U.S. bishops, how the “many faces in God’s house” can live and grow together. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that diversity is not new to the church:

> From the beginning, this one Church has been marked by a great diversity which comes from both the variety of God’s gifts and the diversity of those who receive them. Within the unity of the People of God, a multiplicity of peoples and cultures is gathered together. Among the Church’s members, there are different gifts, offices, conditions, and ways of life. . . . The great richness of such diversity is not opposed to the Church’s unity. (814)

The New Testament recalls the struggles of the early communities of Jesus’ followers as they tried to understand themselves as united amidst their differences. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, the disciple Paul begs the quarrelling factions to find agreement so “there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same purpose” (1:10). The Acts of the Apostles records tensions between Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking members of the community. In this case, complaints arise over the equitable distribution necessary to meet the daily needs of the widows of each group. The pastoral response was the creation of a new ministry: “Brothers, select from among you seven reputable men, filled with the Spirit and wisdom, whom we shall appoint to this task . . . ” (Acts 6:3). Those chosen included Steven, Philip, and Nicholas of Antioch, a convert to Judaism. Steven later loses his life for the sake of the gospel, and Philip baptizes the Ethiopian court official (Acts 7:58-60; Acts 8:27-40). The diversity of gifts, ministries and activities within community is at the center of yet another Pauline
concern (1 Cor 12:4-11). Paul resolves that it is “one and the same Spirit” responsible for the diversity that enriches the entire community. It is this concern that leads Paul to use the human body as an image for a community united in Christ. In a rather humorous way, Paul places the different body parts in conversation (1 Cor 12:12-27). One reads between the lines and finds the realities causing disension at the time. The insecurity of the foot for not being a hand reminds the community that all belong and each brings a necessary component for the body to function.

The head cannot easily dismiss the other parts as unnecessary, even those parts that may be weaker or even less presentable. The message is clear, diversity is a necessary condition for communal life, and it is God-given. Diversity should not be the source of division. Rather, animated by the Spirit, the whole is invited to feel with each part so much so that when anyone suffers, all suffer; when anyone is honored, all share the joy. This insight also serves as the basis for the principle of solidarity in Catholic social teaching. In the words of the Catechism, “The body’s unity does not do away with the diversity of its members” (791).

On his first pastoral visit to the United States in 2008, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on this very same passage in First Corinthians. His reflections invited yet another imaging of this passage. Within the context of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York Benedict observed in his homily:

The unity of a Gothic cathedral, we know, is not the static unity of a classical temple, but a unity born of the dynamic tension of diverse forces which impel the architecture upward, pointing it to heaven. Here too, we can see a symbol of the Church’s unity, which is the unity—as Saint Paul has told us—of a living body composed of many different members, each with its own role and purpose. Here too we see our need to acknowledge and reverence the gifts of each and every member of the body as “manifestations of the Spirit given for the good of all.” (1 Cor 12:7)

Communion of Saints

One of the oldest ways of understanding church is as the communion of saints. The Catechism affirms “after confessing ‘the holy catholic Church,’ the Apostles’ Creed adds ‘the communion of saints.’ In a certain sense this article is a further explanation of the preceding: ‘What is the Church if not the assembly of all the saints?’ The communion of saints is the Church” (946). As with the body of Christ image, the communion of saints affirms that relationships are at the heart of our being together as church; relationships, animated by the Spirit, that create community amongst the living; relationships that not even death can break.

In the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, serving more than four million Catholics in the archdiocese of Los Angeles, there are a remarkable series of tapestries covering the walls of the north and south naves. Appropriately entitled Communion
of Saints, these tapestries depict one hundred and thirty-five individuals from across time and place that have been officially recognized by the church as saints and blessed. Included among the saints are “females and males of all ages, races, occupations, and vocations the world over. Saints from the Renaissance are intermingled with people from the 1st century and the 20th century” (Cathedral website). In the company of the known and named saints are twelve figures—children, teens, and adults—who represent the many anonymous holy people who grace the ordinary with their presence. Surrounded by this masterpiece of community from the artist John Nava, one cannot help but reflect on the diversity that is the church.

Even the creative process responsible for this artwork modeled the very diversity it represents. Combining weaving skills from generations past with modern digital technology, Nava and his artisans in the United States and Belgium bring to life this community of the holy in the midst of the contemporary assembly. Nava’s models come from among his friends and acquaintances as well as from “a wide variety of ordinary people from the different ethnic groups and diverse neighborhoods of Los Angeles. . . . to show that the saints have come from every race and culture, and from every continent and corner of the map” (Mulderig).

In this concrete image of the communion of saints, one comes to understand that relationship is at the heart of community. Who are the saints? They are those “of us” who try to live faithfully in the ordinary dealings of their daily lives. They are those “of us” who have preceded us in the faith, those whose lives we look to as models. They are those “of us” who are the “communion of ‘holy persons’ (sancti) in Christ who ‘died for all,’ so that what each one does or suffers in and for Christ bears fruit for all” (CCC, 961). In addition, they are even those “of us” who, in the words of theologian Elizabeth Johnson, “may not necessarily be persons who have found God; in fact they may experience in a profound way the absence of God. Yet they try to walk with others faithfully even in the darkness and their restless hearts do not stop seeking” (231).

The attention of Nava’s procession of saints, together with the assembly gathered within their grasp, focuses on the altar. The words of Benedict XVI remind us, “We cannot approach the eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people” (Sacramentum Caritatis, 84). Benedict continues, and with those we call saint, the “first and fundamental mission that we receive from the sacred mysteries we celebrate is that of bearing witness by our lives” (85).
The mission of bearing witness through our daily living belongs to all of us gathered in the diversity of God. It is not good enough to tolerate our differences. The images of body of Christ and communion of saints remind us that we are all responsible to create the conditions that allow us to live together, to grow together, and to participate as fully as possible in life of the church and in the well-being of the global human family. In his first social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI points to the mystery of the Trinity in modeling this “inclusion-in-relation” to which the human family is invited to participate in a manner that “does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration” (54). Like our Baptism into the Church, “so too the unity of the human family does not submerge the identities of individuals, peoples and cultures, but makes them more transparent to each other and links them more closely in their legitimate diversity” (53). This “inclusion-in-relation” grounds our commitments to each other as neighbors and kin, an obligation to live in a solidarity, where we truly cultivate “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself . . . to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 38).

**References**


