Multicultural Liturgy:
Its Ongoing Challenge to the U.S. Catholic Church

The celebration of the liturgy in multicultural parishes has been a pastoral concern in the U.S. Catholic Church ever since the reform of worship set in motion by the Second Vatican Council. This concern is reflected in the attention the topic has been given by the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions (FDLC) as far back as 1978 when resolutions were made at its national meeting that signs and symbols proper to culturally diverse assemblies and the incorporation of languages other than English be introduced in the celebration of Sunday Eucharist. In 1986 the FDLC, working with Fr. Juan Sosa, then Director of Worship for the Archdiocese of Miami, and in conjunction with the Instituto de Liturgia Hispana published Guidelines for Multilingual Masses based upon a compilation of policies submitted by dioceses around the U.S. This publication was a helpful beginning liturgical resource for parishes around the country to take up the challenge of multicultural worship.

In 1993, the FDLC sought to update the Guidelines and asked me to moderate a series of “listening sessions” about multicultural liturgy and ministry around the United States: in Chicago, New York, Orlando, Houston and Los Angeles. These sessions sought to go beyond a focus on language reflected by the adjective multilingual in the title of the Guidelines, and give greater emphasis to the liturgical year, environment and the visual arts, music, gesture and movement, ministries and liturgical participation. The result of these consultations was the short book, in English and Spanish, Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide (FDLC: Washington D.C., 1998, 2000, 2002).

Much water has passed under the bridge since the last edition of Multicultural Celebrations was published. Immigration from outside the country, especially from Latin America and Asia, as well as the demographic shifts from the “rust belt” to the “sun belt” have continued to transform our cities and parishes in the space of just ten years. The trauma of 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the economic recession have brought home to us our own vulnerability and changed our view of our country’s place in world. The election of our first African-American president has also

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helped to re-define our image of who we are as a nation.

Contemporary developments in church and ministry are also affecting our assemblies. As the numbers of priests continue to decline vis-à-vis the Catholic population and more and more parishes are consolidating, bringing together assemblies that are increasingly diverse, the experience of worshipping with people of different cultures is becoming steadily the norm rather than exception in many parishes. The U.S. church’s increasing reliance on international priests has also added to the cultural complexity of our liturgical life.

The U.S. Catholic bishops have been aware of the shift over the past several decades. In 2001 they issued a landmark statement commenting on the changing cultural make-up of the United States and calling us all to conversion:

The presence of so many people of so many different cultures and religions in so many different parts of the United States has challenged us as a Church to a profound conversion so that we can become truly a sacrament of unity. We reject the anti-immigrant stance that has become popular in different parts of our country, and the nativism, ethnocentricity, and racism that continue to reassert themselves in our community. (2)

There has also been further systematic reflection on liturgy in the United States since the year 2000 that has necessarily included reflections on the relationship between culture and worship. The U.S. bishops’ document on art, architecture and worship, *Built of Living Stones* (2000) and *Sing to the Lord* (2007) on liturgical music both offer important insights for those engaged in multicultural liturgical ministry. It is also necessary to note that the Roman Congrega-

**The Need for Another Update**

Given the dynamic nature of the current pastoral context, the FDLC approached Rufino Zaragoza, O.F.M., and me to consider updating *Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide*. Br. Rufino is a fine example of a “border crosser.” He is a musician, of Hispanic background and has worked extensively in the field of liturgy and music with the Vietnamese community both in this country and in Vietnam itself. From 2008–2010 a consultation was conducted with FDLC members around the country asking for their evaluation of the document and requesting suggestions about to improve its recommendations. Working with the critique and commendations offered by pastoral liturgists experienced in multicultural worship from throughout the country we set to work on a revision of this documents with a new working title is: *Liturgy in a Culturally Diverse Community: A Guide*. This publication of the FDLC should be ready in late 2011.

**Moving from Multilingual to Multicultural to Intercultural**

If I were to name a key development in the thinking about multicultural liturgy in the past several years it would be the heightened reflection on the importance of what could be termed the “intercultural” dimension of worship in a culturally diverse assembly. In order to appreciate this development, it is helpful to reflect on three adjectives that have been used to speak about liturgy in a “culturally diverse community: “bi-lingual,” “multicultural” and “intercultural.” These words offer a handy way of
summing up the difference between three different approaches.

The first kind of liturgy could be called a “bi-lingual” or a “multi-lingual.” The emphasis here is largely on language; the spoken word. What is considered necessary to bring cultural groups together who speak different languages is simply to “divvy up” the words proclaimed at worship among the languages spoken by the groups of the parish. For example, the first reading in Spanish, the gospel in English, the communion rite in Vietnamese, the dismissal rite in English, etc. The language in which the music of the Mass is sung would be similarly divided. All this can be accomplished without much interaction among the groups of the parish. What is important is simply to know which group has which part.

After going along this way, it soon becomes obvious that more needs to be done to show hospitality and give all the participants in a culturally diverse parish a sense that they are truly “at home” in the liturgy than dividing up the spoken and musical texts. The next level could be described as “multicultural” liturgy. A liturgy that is truly multicultural will employ not only the different languages of the assembly, but use the signs and symbols that spring from the various cultures have interpreted their Catholic faith—movement, art, music—to celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ. A multicultural liturgy will involve more than language and preparing for it will necessarily involve some dialogue among the cultural groups preparing the worship.

Finally, an “intercultural liturgy” would be at the same time multi-lingual as well as multicultural, but with this difference: the various cultural groups of the parish would work at preparing and celebrating the various parts of the rite with each other. The U.S. bishops’ 2007 document on liturgical music Sing to the Lord sketches the difference between celebrations that are “multicultural” and “intercultural” and offers “intercultural” worship as a goal toward which to work:

When prepared with an attitude of mutual reciprocity, local communities might eventually expand from those celebrations that merely highlight their multicultural differences to celebrations that better reflect the intercultural relationships of the assembly and the unity that is shared in Christ.

(59)

Intercultural Liturgy and the Basic Goal of Liturgy

The intercultural ideal is the basic goal of liturgy with a culturally diverse assembly. While there is always a place for celebrations particular to certain cultures within the parish to which all would be invited (our Lady of Guadalupe for example) regular Sunday celebrations ought strive for interculturality. As with all Christian liturgical celebration, the goal of intercultural worship is to celebrate what God has done for us in Jesus Christ and what the Spirit of God continues to do for all humanity through, with and in the Son who suffered, died, and rose again for our salvation. The adjectives “bi-lingual” “multicultural” and “intercultural” may leave the mistaken impression that this kind of liturgy is primarily about celebrating culture. Rather, the overarching goal of worship in culturally diverse assemblies must primarily be about celebrating Jesus Christ, in whom “there is no East or West.” This celebration must be incarnated, however, which entails cultural forms. There is no liturgy that is “culturally neutral.” It is how we arrive together at this liturgical celebration of the love of God in Christ that is the focus in preparing a truly intercultural liturgy.

Paradoxically, the real preparation for this liturgy does not begin at liturgy plan-
ning sessions but in the way the diverse members of the parish relate to one another outside of worship. Common parish activities such as shared meals, ministries to the poor and emargined, as well as the many ways in which the members of the parish interrelate in parish life make intercultural liturgy both possible and authentic.

This intercultural dynamic, then, goes beyond matters liturgical to our basic response to the Gospel itself. It is a matter of justice. In her eloquent way, the late Thea Bowman put it well:

The quest for justice demands that I walk in ways that I never walked before, that I talk and think and pray and learn and grow in ways that are new to me. If I’m going to share faith with my brothers and sisters who are Chinese or Jamaican or South African or Winnebago Indian, I’ve got to learn new ways, new means, new languages, new rituals, new procedures, new understandings, so I can read my brother’s heart, so I can hear my sister’s call, and I can live justly. (37)

Witness to God’s Love and Justice

Because of the historic moment and our country’s tradition of welcoming the stranger and the immigrant, the Catholic Church in the United States is in a position to be a source of unity; to uphold the vision of the common good that extends to all people and cultures who make up this nation. Intercultural liturgy, when reflecting the unity in Christ to which we are all called, is a powerful, incarnate witness to God’s love and justice.

References


