



BEFORE YOU CHOOSE SEVEN GESTURES OF INTERCULTURAL HOSPITALITY THE OPENING SONG

Our diverse church of the United States is exploring uncharted territory attempting to meld together diverse groups for the occasional multicultural celebration. Whether at the local or diocesan levels, no one claims that this is easy. One challenge is that the person often expected to bring together these diverse groups has training in sacred music or liturgy, not in cross-cultural diversity facilitation or intercultural communication. Yet these are the new skills that are now called upon. With the rapidly changing demographics of our church, the pastoral musician is often asked to serve as the person who will bridge various ethnic groups by forming a parish “union choir” or organize some multicultural liturgical celebration.

In some locations, the very approach in preparing these “union liturgies” or multicultural Masses tends to be counter-productive. Sometimes diverse groups are huddled into one building and expected to worship together without any relationship development outside the context of liturgy. Once I was at a trilingual Good Friday Service. Afterward, I asked some members of the Vietnamese choir how they felt about the service. They had sung two Vietnamese songs, and the Mexican and American choirs had also sung two songs each. Most of the Vietnamese singers could not give me the name of the American choir director. Some did not even know the name of the American pastor!

The opening principle of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions’ document on multicultural celebrations clearly addresses this issue:

No liturgy, however welcoming and participatory, can substitute for a truly multicultural approach to pastoral care in the parish at large. Extra-liturgical interaction and cooperation among the various groups in the parish serves as the indispensable context for multicultural liturgy. (Francis 10)

The following suggestions are intended to encourage the music and/or liturgy director to foster mutual relationships with an immigrant group or groups, so that extra-liturgical interaction and cooperation precede and enhance the parochial intercultural celebrations.¹

1) EAT NEW FOODS

Nothing bridges the gap between strangers like the openness to taste the unique foods of another culture. Visit the cultural festivals of other groups or attend their special feast day celebrations. Ask how to peel *las ojas* off a Mexican *tamale*, learn how much *nuoc mam* to pour over your Vietnamese *banh cuon* or discover that you use your fingers, not a fork, to munch on Salvadorian *pupusas*. Eating another’s food demonstrates an openness to their culture and a willingness to move out of one’s comfort zone. Often choirs share meals of food traditional to them after a Sunday liturgy or choir rehearsal. Ask them to take you along! Not only does this break the ice in a non-liturgical setting, but you might discover some incredible restaurants in a part of town you might not typically explore.

2) REQUEST A CULTURAL MENTOR

American music ministers have one way of running a choir and preparing liturgy: the American way. It is neither right nor wrong, but it is culturally specific. It is important to acknowledge that other choirs work differently. Some will have a president responsible for negotiating the choir’s activities who is not the choir director, the person responsible for music. Ask the gate-keeper, the respected elder of the ethnic group, for a cultural mentor, a respected member of the group available to guide you through possible awkwardness, confusion and/or frustration when developing cross-cultural relationships.

One American choir director told me how frustrated he became trying to connect with the Tongan choir in his parish. He had talked with the choir director about having the Tongans join the upcoming parish Thanksgiving Mass but received no answer. No one told him he was talking to the wrong person. The choir president, not the choir director, would have been the person to introduce the invitation to the choir at large. The American presumed the Tongan choir worked like his own choir.

A cultural mentor can explain the customs and perspective of the immigrant group. Meet regularly with him or her and continue regular conversations even when you think you do not need them

anymore. That person can continually provide vital insights that an American perception would normally miss.

3) MAKE PERSONAL INVITATIONS

Visit other group's rehearsals. Consider that inviting the ethnic choirs of your parish to multicultural gatherings by a mere phone call or e-mail note can be very efficient, but this is not always helpful with more face-to-face, or high-context cultures. Shift from the American direct mode of behavior, low-context directness, and into the relational process of interaction. I have heard of some directors who have never bothered to attend that Spanish, Samoan or Korean choir rehearsal or liturgy and yet expect "them" to join "us" for "our" parish celebration. In a gesture of welcoming and hospitality, show your face and your smile!

4) LISTEN TO SONGS AND STORIES

Before inviting these immigrants "to dine with you at the table of the Lord," find out why, when and how these people left their home country, chose to come to the United States (Was it by choice or by circumstance?), migrated to your city and found themselves at your local parish. Ask them to sing for you some of their favorite church songs and explain the meaning these songs have in relation to their prayer and spiritual journeys. Unlearn your stereotypes and preconceptions of these people. Learn about these people as gifts given to enrich both society and church.

5) IDENTIFY RESISTANCE

When encountering another culture, we have to continually face our own (sometimes internal) cultural fears. Some can arise from language barriers and the discomfort that comes from having to rely on an interpreter. These can reveal or create feelings of superiority or, even, the complete opposite. Seeing another culture's rich heritage of music, festival and dance can make American culture seem plain or could bring up questions of one's own cultural identity as an American.

Besides these potential struggles with personal resistance and identity, there are institutional obstacles.

Sometimes parish staffers or diocesan workers are reluctant to get involved with ethnic groups because power sharing and mutuality will eventually follow being truly hospitable and welcoming. No one is naturally inclined to give up control, so the interaction remains tokenistic: if we just give this group a little space on the program, a little song or dance in the liturgy, then we can say we are being multicultural. But deeper issues remain unaddressed. Naming these fears and resistances is an essential obligation when developing relationships with ethnic minorities and immigrants.

6) INFORM THE DOMINANT CULTURE

Often a majority of the dominant culture has few encounters with those who attend the 12:30 pm Spanish Mass or the 5:00 pm Portuguese Mass. Brainstorm about ways to acquaint the larger parish with the other groups. Post pictures in the back of the church of various celebrations from all the various groups (including the ethnic group of European-Americans). Post a map of North America and invite parishioners to place pins from where they originate, be it Tullahoma, Tennessee, or Guanajuato, Mexico. One parish did this and the Americans were surprised to learn how many of those "Mexicans" were really from Nicaragua and Guatemala. If your parish is even more diverse, put up a world map, and the Latinos can discover that those *chinos* are really *vietnomites* or *coreanos*.

Excellent documents, videos, study guides and other resources are available from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (usccb.org). Inform your community of the church teachings on racism and immigration through regular bulletin inserts and programs in your adult education series.

7) COLLABORATE

Invite some members of the non-English choir to come to your American rehearsal to tell stories and introduce some of their most treasured hymns. Then reverse the interchange and have some of your choir members visit their choir rehearsal. Some parishes have a yearly choir festival when fa-

vorite songs are shared from each ethnic group. Celebrate our common love of Mary during May or August with a Marian festival. Come together to reverence the ancestors during November with a remembrance of all who have passed away the previous year. Take turns leading these celebrations, and rotate how the preparations are organized.

These suggestions speak of a prophetic move to "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 communities. We are challenged to get beyond ethnic communities living side by side within our own parishes without any connection with each other" (USCCB 2). The intercultural Eucharist, which flows out of the suggested gestures of welcoming and hospitality, both strengthens and continues to develop the common bond we have in Jesus. Even though musicians and liturgists may feel inadequate due to a lack of experience or foreign language facility, they are now being called to develop bridges between these mini-parish communities that often exist in parallel universes. Are you ready to face that challenge of exploring and celebrating our solidarity and catholicity as a church? Okay, then. Let's start with that Salvadorian *pupusa*...

Endnote:

¹ In using the word "intercultural," I seek a term that implies a language of reciprocity. See "Redefining Multicultural Liturgy" in *Ministry and Liturgy*, Volume 29:5, June-July 2002.

Works Cited:

Francis, Mark. *Guidelines for Multicultural Celebrations*. Washington, DC: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 1998.
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