



Multicultural ministry in your parish

Become a border-crosser and a bridge-builder

■ RUFINO ZARAGOZA, OFM

Last winter, while visiting Vietnam, I attended a Christmas party of expatriate Catholics who were living and working in Ho Chi Minh City. We were from Singapore, England, the United States, India, and the Philippines. After drink and food, the Christmas carols began. We went through the Western favorites known throughout the world. Then the Filipinos, numerous in the room, belted out one of their favorites, “*Ang Pasko Ay Sumapit*.” Ismael, from Mexico, led us in “*Feliz Navidad*.” We all tried to join along with Huy and Duy as they sang the Vietnamese standard, “*Hang Be-lem*,” but we just mouthed la-la-la as they sang the lyrics.

The invitation to the party did not designate this as a multicultural Christmas party. It happened naturally. A group of people in a crowded apartment one night had a common focus of celebrating the birth of our Savior and entering the joy that the season brings. All were familiar with well-known favorites



like “Joy to the World” and “Silent Night.” But eventually individuals and groups wanted to contribute songs that had nourished them as children, songs from

their cultural memory; they wanted to release melodies in their mother tongue.

Going home that night, I realized I had never experienced such a party in

the United States, and how blessed I was to be part of such a diverse multicultural celebration.

In the United States, our parishes and dioceses are becoming more diverse as various ethnic groups and immigrants enter our neighborhoods. Some communities attempt multicultural liturgies, with limited success. What can we learn from that Christmas party in Vietnam?

Border-crossers

Some people are called to leave their comfort zone and initiate relationships with members of other ethnic groups. As they become comfortable with another culture (in food, communication styles, social background), they can introduce this new ethnic group to members of their own culture. At the Christmas party, key people in the room were already familiar with other cultures and helped each group move through any fear or anxiety of the other to a spirit of mutual celebration. In parishes, those who are willing to cross cultural borders help form the necessary relationships between the various groups before a common liturgical celebration occurs. Such intercultural communication is clearly supported in Mark R. Francis's helpful resource, *Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide* (FDLC). Extra-liturgical interaction and cooperation among the various groups in the parish serve as the indispensable context for multicultural liturgy. This contact makes common prayer a natural part of parish life.

Bridge-builders

Also at the Christmas party were bilingual, bicultural members of one ethnic group, who were able to explain and display the songs of their culture to all present. So even though most could not comprehend the lyrics, the bridge-builders were able to introduce the song and allow outsiders to enter into the spirit

of that particular Christmas selection. In parishes, such bridge-builders have a double role. They introduce their particular cultural expressions of worship to the mainstream culture and also explain the worship and leadership styles of the mainstream culture to their own ethnic group. From the efforts of these bridge-builders, parishes can develop multicultural celebrations that are celebrated "with an attitude of mutual reciprocity" (*Sing to the Lord*, 59, usccb.org/liturgy/SingToTheLord.pdf).

Eat your way into new cultures

As you see your neighborhoods and parish becoming more diverse, do you have a role? Are you bilingual and bicultural? Then you might serve the two communities by being a bridge-builder. Or maybe the Spirit is calling you to be a border-crosser. Reach out to find the gatekeeper, the leaders of the ethnic groups in your parish. Request that they provide you with a cultural mentor to teach you about why they came to the United States, how they settled in your section of the city, and what cultural richness they bring with them. Attend Mass and devotions in their language, join in cultural feast days, and let your heart be touched by their music—those melodies express their love of the Divine.

Most importantly, try new foods. Duy Nguyen, a college student born and raised in Vietnam, returned home to his family and told them about a wonderful party he attended with foreigners. The people were of all different cultures and languages, but all loved Jesus and wanted to celebrate his birth. Throughout the night, they told stories, sang songs, and ate a meal. He told them about the singing of the men from India, about the applesauce and ham, food he had never seen before. His mother asked him if he would go back next year. His eyes smiled a big yes, and he told her about another food he had never tasted until that night:

brownies! Become a border-crosser...lots of new songs and food await you. □



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From bilingual to multicultural to intercultural

Bilingual/multilingual liturgies—focusing primarily upon language

The mainstream culture invites other groups to join a common celebration that includes a non-English reading, song, or prayer.

The immigrant culture is given a token opportunity to fill some slot within the liturgy, as a first step from isolated co-existence. As a response to this development, the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions issued *Guidelines for Multilingual Masses*.

Bicultural/multicultural liturgies—expanding the awareness to culture

The parish begins to see language as only one segment of culture. Vesture, colors, symbols, processional movements, gestures, instrumentation, and devotional practices are eventually included within the "union" liturgies. See Mark R. Francis, CSV, *Multicultural Celebrations: A Guide*.

Intercultural worship—mutual reciprocity in preparation and expression

The community no longer views the presence of minority groups as a problem to be addressed but as a blessing and enrichment. See *Sing to the Lord*, 57-60 (usccb.org/liturgy/SingToTheLord.pdf).