



Parishes should help all members of the community see God in the symbols and imagery of other cultures.

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Celebrating as One: Meeting God in Another's Signs, Symbols

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"We don't go to that Mass; Our Lady of Guadalupe is *their* celebration."

Expressions such as this are familiar to pastoral teams who minister in parishes comprised of disparate cultures.

Many resources are available to assist members of the dominant culture to welcome members of the non-dominant culture to liturgies in parishes. These resources consider that the non-dominant culture may be relative newcomers to the parish and in a place where they may not speak the language, and where the culture and customs may be foreign to them. But how can the dominant culture—the one that speaks the language and

perhaps has deeper roots in the community—be encouraged to attend a liturgy they may consider "ethnic," or belonging exclusively to one culture? How do parishes help their communities overcome a mind-set that considers certain liturgies "their celebration"? Why is it important to seek to draw the whole parish to such celebrations?

This piece will briefly explore the "why"—a discussion that will be familiar to anyone who has pondered this question from the reverse side—and then move on to the "how."

To a certain extent, the principles of welcome, sensitivity, and awareness remain the same no matter from which side the question is approached, and so some of the same resources may be applied.

In preparing this piece, I spoke to many people, both professional ministers and people in the pews, for whom this quandary has been part of their parish experience. All of them had experiences and suggestions in common. It is unlikely that readers would need to be convinced of the reasons for drawing the entire parish into a particular celebration, but a brief discussion of that will also help keep us grounded in the fundamental purpose of liturgy.

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

Why does it matter if Anglos participate in the Simbang Gabi celebration or Vietnamese in the Mass for the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe? It is important that members of the parish, no matter their ethnic background, are part of these celebrations since liturgy is about bringing the richness of God to the ends of the earth—to all people. Also, no single culture, dominant or otherwise, owns the completeness of that richness. Sadly, there is no quicker way to give the impression that *only* a certain group owns the Gospel message than by implying that the devotions and spiritual insights of other cultures have no value to anyone outside that culture.

As noted, much of the work regarding cultural literacy in prayer is presented from the perspective of needing to welcome the stranger, to make room, as a dominant culture, for newcomers to our parishes. This is an important aspect of culturally diverse liturgies, but the most important reason to pay attention to this element of our celebrations is that we need to serve the thirst for God by seeing him everywhere—by finding him in the symbols, metaphors, imagery, and experiences of other cultures. We get lost when we behave as if these liturgies are solely about welcoming others, or even about becoming a unified community, because those two things are, in fact, by-products of the purpose of liturgy: entering into the Paschal Mystery, accessing the salvation God has offered us in that mystery. Certainly each culture in a parish should invite the “other” into “their” liturgy because a fully functioning, whole parish depends upon that mutual encounter; but primarily we do this because every liturgy has something of the Paschal Mystery, some aspect or facet to offer, that those unfamiliar with the tradition might not otherwise be able to see.

BEFORE YOU GET THEM THERE

Virtually every one of the parishes I spoke to for this article said the same thing about the beginning of the process: The parish pastoral team has to lead the way. Certainly the nuts-and-bolts work can be done by the laity, and, in the end, must be done at that level, but without pastoral buy-in and encouragement, any attempt to lead people outside their comfort zone will fail. Led by the pastoral team, the parish’s first step is to consider where the community has been before starting down the path to where it wants to be.

Consider the Cultural History of the Parish

Begin by considering the history of the relationship between the various groups in your parish. Of what duration is that relationship? How were various groups introduced into the parish, and



The traditions, signs, and symbols that are part of a celebration can be explained in a worship aid or by other means.

what is the perception, if you can discover that, of who owns the parish and who is inviting whom? Are there second- and third-generation representatives of the non-dominant culture who may be fluent in both cultures? Can they be drawn upon to act as liaisons or guides?

In considering your parish’s cultural history, acknowledge the obstacles that history presents. For most communities, two main areas of concern or conflict tend to rise to the top: a difference in language and a difference in cultural approach to worship. Ministerial leaders can begin by discussing the demographic in the room. What was their experience, growing up, of the domestic church? (The importance of this query on the domestic church will be more evident later in the article.) What sorts of devotional practices did each family have or bring to the larger community? As children we formulate our ideas about God. As children we experience our faith community and a daily lived faith as it is presented in our homes. And as children we “learn,” in the truest, most embodied sense, by doing and by observation, what the Church wants us to know about God, prayer, and the Church itself—and our place in the larger Church. All of these personal traditions deeply inform and form us. We bring them to our communal, public prayer, and they are rooted in the culture in which we grew up.

For example, the cultural history of Hispanic Catholics has been, in this country, deeply oriented in the domestic church. Latinos experience their way of being Catholic as relationship-centered and rooted in the home before the parish. The Christianity brought to Latin America was pre-Tridentine,



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When parishioners get to know each other outside of the liturgy, the invitation to a liturgy is an extension of friendship.

deliberate intention of bringing different communities together. Families from the Hispanic and Anglo communities signed up to share meals together, taking turns hosting each other in their homes for barbecues, birthday parties, and other family events. Slowly, as individuals in the parish got to know each other, their experience of the other community began to feel less alien and more welcoming. In this way, when it came time for a particular liturgy, the invitation to celebrate became an extension of the family gathering.

At the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Boise, Idaho, the pastoral team hosted a women’s spa day, at which women from all the cultural communities in the parish could relax, visit, and get to know each other. Moments of engagement and communication were facilitated that could never have happened in a formal ritual structure. In this way, trust was built and strange faces became familiar ones. A familiar face is the one you will see when you enter the doors of the church to take part in a liturgy you have never participated in before.

While families and individuals are meeting informally and socially, another step can be taken by the pastoral team, an effort that can be characterized as ministry visits. Ministers from one community—musicians, ushers, deacons, readers—can visit the ministers from the other cultural group: they can attend each other’s choir practice, retreats for proclaimers of the Word, or other trainings. During these visits, ministers should be encouraged to discover the values held in common, which are unique to each group, and reflect on how these values might go over in their own community.

planted in the Americas two generations before Trent. These roots contributed to the non-institutional character of Latino Catholicism, to a non-clerical, family-rooted approach, with a vitality drawn from its intimate connection to domestic life. On the other hand, the Church that was transplanted to the English colonies—essentially a northern European tradition—was a post-Trent Church, identified with institution, hierarchy, structure, and clergy. This form of Catholicism was much more clergy-overseen and had a devotional life regulated by the clergy. Anglo-Catholicism was and remains distinctly individual in character, while Latino Catholicism was and is distinctly communitarian.

This is just to discuss two cultures in the Church in the United States, a vast institution comprised of many different cultures. Each parish will need to examine its demographic and history. Knowing some of the historic reasons for some of the cultural differences may help with overcoming feelings of defensiveness, triumphalism, and judgment. To pretend that there is not an experience of “other” is not useful. Instead, be honest, at least within the liturgy preparation team, about any level of discomfort, and go slowly. Be open.

Establish Informal Gatherings

The next step is perhaps the most crucial. No one can feel comfortable in prayer if they don’t feel comfortable in person. Parishes should start small and socially, getting to know each other outside the liturgy. At Holy Rosary Parish in Idaho Falls, Idaho, the pastoral team initiated a mentoring program with the

Incorporate Ethnic Traditions into Celebrations

Finally, attempts can be made to infuse community liturgies, those celebrated by all Catholics, with traditions and spirituality unfamiliar to the dominant community. Some celebrations (Corpus Christi and All Souls’ Day, for example) lend themselves naturally to this practice, because these feasts are not specific to one culture, but many of the traditions surrounding them are. The unique devotional practices and narratives that exist outside the formal Mass structure can serve as gateway practices for other cultures. By introducing some of these elements or practices slowly, at parish-wide liturgies, parishes begin to introduce a particular spirituality and particular deployment of and approach to symbol, gesture, etc., of one group to the whole parish. This paves the way toward a certain amount of comfort and fluency with the practices, symbols, and spirituality that is “other.” This could be called the “ascending order of liturgical comfort.” As people gain familiarity with an event, they become comfortable and are then able to locate themselves inside the event. They are then able to say, “Yes, I find myself in this picture. I find God in this prayer.”

Consider the way the Cambodian community of the parish of Our Lady of Assumption, Battambang, Cambodia, described their celebration of the Feast of All Souls: “We remember the dead as we read their names out loud at Mass. Families come together. It is a time when the living are united closely with the dead. The living pray for the dead that God may welcome them into heaven. The dead are remembered for the way they lived their lives. It is that time of year when we remember



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Community celebrations can be infused with particular flavors from an ethnic group in the parish.

that the living and the dead are journeying together to God. We celebrate the Communion of Saints—the loving bond between those who have died and those who live. This is why it is fitting that we call this feast *Bon Pchhum Ben: Feast of Gathering.*”

The story of a people informs the story of the liturgy. Their particular understanding of this feast enriches the understanding of those outside their cultural story and allows others to enter their culture, their story, through the access point of liturgy.

This ascending order of comfort is a process, a process by which the unfamiliar becomes the familiar, by which several cultures become one people in God.

ONCE THEY SHOW UP, THEN WHAT?

No one would invite someone into their home without considering how best, within reason, to make their guest comfortable. You wouldn’t have a family over for dinner and, once they arrive, stick them in the corner and ignore them, assuming they’ll fend for themselves and figure things out as the meal progresses. You welcome your guest; you greet and seat them. You make sure they are comfortable. In the same way, liturgy preparers need to be deliberate about hosting newcomers at Mass.

Accompany the newcomer. Those families who have gotten to know each other at the small community events already described should now invite one another to a particular Mass, and arrange to sit together. (The Ayalas invite the O’Reillys to the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe; they meet them at the church door with a hug and sit with them in the pew. They

accompany their guests through the Mass—the familiar and unfamiliar aspects of it—and then take them to the gym for the after-party.) This has the dual advantage of providing a kind of “endorsement” of the newcomer to the unfamiliar community while also allowing the one fluent in that particular devotion to explain and assist throughout Mass.

Make sure the story of the liturgy is front and center. Provide an explanation of the tradition in worship aids or in another fashion. Any unfamiliar practice or symbol could also be explained: What is the meaning of the *parols*, or star lanterns, seen at *Simbang Gabi*? Why are there so many roses displayed during a Guadalupe celebration? These elements are crucial to understanding the story of a particular culture’s faith history, and it is the stories that we share that bind us together in understanding and empathy. It is also a good exercise for those familiar with a particular devotion to reflect on its meaning: What is the story of this for us? Why is it important? How can we help others enter this experience? What part of our story resonates for those outside it?

Provide appropriate resources in various languages. What is the principle language of the assembly? Think long and hard about this question. If most of the liturgy is in one language, but many of those present are also comfortable in another, worship aids or spoken announcements can provide a short synopsis, in the second language, of the readings, announcements, etc., as a hospitable gesture.



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Authentic engagement is as valuable as a seamless multicultural liturgy.

Reflect on and emphasize universal elements. What elements can be emphasized that speak to all people of faith? Lights, incense, posture are all built into the liturgy, so make sure to pay particular attention to these elements and what they express. All Catholics understand processions, candles, the sprinkling with holy water, etc. All of these reaffirm our common Christian identity as the community moves through the ritual.

Music can be especially effective. A United States bishop who was born and reared in Mexico once told a bemused group of liturgists that he was so moved by the sound of bagpipes played at the funerals of police officers in the United States, he was determined to have them at his own funeral. And an Anglo principal of a Catholic school in southern California identified her experience of the Easter liturgy strongly with the song “Resucito,” so much so that, one Easter spent at her childhood parish in Idaho, it didn’t feel like Easter morning to her when she didn’t hear that song at Mass. “I kind of felt like Jesus hadn’t really risen,” she jokingly said. “That song really says, ‘resurrection’ to me.”

Always host a reception after liturgy. Whether it’s doughnuts and coffee after Sunday Mass, or a sit-down dinner to celebrate a holiday, Catholics are accomplished at carrying their celebrations outside the doors of the church and into the parish hall. Encourage worshippers to attend a reception after the liturgy, at which they can ask questions, talk about their experience, and allow the cultural experts to inform and guide as they welcome. A beautiful completion is apparent in this practice, too, if the community begins at small dinners in each other’s homes and ends up at a community gathering in the parish hall.

CONCLUSION

Pastoral teams and liturgy preparers must ask themselves: What does success look like? Is success about a number or can the process be thought of as the success?

Rufino Zaragoza, OFM, has said that liturgy preparation teams and parishes must convert from a “product to a process mentality”¹—to learn to value the process rather than the goal—because the process is the goal. Encounter, authentic engagement, is more valuable than the most seamless multicultural liturgy. And the most seamless multicultural liturgy falls short if there is no real encounter among those celebrating it. The fact is, if goodwill is present among the various demographics in the community, the liturgy will speak to all.

While liturgy is truly acknowledged as the source and summit of the Church’s activity, the Church’s activity certainly does not end there. “No liturgy can substitute for a truly intercultural approach to pastoral care in the parish at large; such hospitality must inform all levels of parish life and not be limited to liturgical celebrations. It’s impossible for liturgy to reflect the life of the community if liturgy is the only place the community interacts.”²

Parishes accomplish this crucially via the lens of a thorough knowledge of the rite and the community, a knowledge that can’t be attained without real encounter. What do we share, intrinsically, in our common humanity and our common baptismal identity, in our common faith celebrated in the context of daily lived experience? Some of these experiences we understand, and some we are just beginning to know about each other. Whatever our experience is, with a shared symbolic, ritual language, we can delve deeper into the underlying theology that is being expressed by our practice. We can become one in Christ. We can, with joy and eagerness, begin to partake fully in the mystery that we all are to each other and, ultimately and most importantly, in the Paschal Mystery by which God offers all of us one salvation. ♦

Notes

1. Rufino Zaragoza, OFM, “Theory to Practice,” *Today’s Liturgy*, Ordinary Time 2 (2003).
2. Mark R. Francis, csv, *Liturgy in a Culturally Diverse Community*, (Washington, DC: Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions, 1998).

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