

MINISTRY IN A MULTI-CULTURAL CHURCH
Dallas Ministry Conference ~ September 8, 2007
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This talk is organized around the beginning of a foot race: “On your mark, get set, go...and teach.” “On your mark” means taking stock of where we are and how we got here. I will try to give a brief analysis of the multi-cultural situation in Texas. “Get set” has to do with what we should be doing now; because what we do now will have a bearing way into the future. “Go...and teach” refers to the mandate of Jesus for us to make disciples of all nations. This is a reminder that from the very beginning of the Church, the little band of original disciples were given the task of creating a multi-cultural following of Jesus, a following made up of people from all nations.

I. “ON YOUR MARK!”

I grew up in Bay City, Texas, in a multi-cultural setting. The Church along the Gulf Coast and in other parts of Texas has been multi-cultural for well over 150 years, yet we did not until recent times recognize our Texas Church as multi-cultural. In Bay City, we knew there were different cultural groups around us. Besides people of the Mexican background, there were African Americans, Cajuns, Czechs, Polish, Irish and German.

Later I would happily learn that there more: Alsatians, Italians, Vietnamese, Chinese, Salvadorans, Cubans, Canary Islanders, French, Lebanese, Jewish, and people from practically every nation in the world. It seems like everybody wants to come to Texas!

We liked knowing we were so ethnically diverse. But that sentiment did not create a real multi-cultural Church, with our parishes welcoming and involving everyone.

We were not unlike other areas of the United States, where national parishes were the rule, particularly in the great urban centers of New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston and St. Louis. This was probably because in Texas people of the same culture tended to live in the same communities and rural areas. Actually downtown San Antonio had that parallel parish organization based on cultural and language sameness. There was San Fernando Cathedral which usually served Mexicans. St. Mary's was for the Irish, St. Joseph's was for the Germans and St. Francis de Paula for Italians.

The pattern followed in most of Texas was that of a larger parish which served the so-called "Anglo" Catholics and a smaller one on the other side of town which served the Mexicans. In my hometown, my grandparents' family and other Mexicans were barely tolerated in the Anglo parish; my grandfather remembered attending Mass outside the church. When they were allowed in, they sat in the

back. The Anglo parish bought the Mexicans a discarded railroad passenger car which I remember as the first church I attended. As I said before, it was not a multi-cultural church; it was a Church, separated and divided along cultural lines.

Allow me to attempt to give a working definition of the term *culture*. Culture is the confluence, the coming together of a people's experience in history, common memories, ways of relating with one another (such as men – women, parent – child, young – old relationships), shared values, ways of measuring success, by their exceptional ancestors, those seen as heroes and heroines. Culture also includes a common language, music, dance and other forms of art. All these things make up our cultural heritage.

For many self-identifiable groups in the United States, that heritage tells them the way things were back in the father or mother land. When European-American or white people speak of their culture, they often refer to something peculiar in their heritage: Irish may speak of their music, dance and humor; Germans may also speak of their music and dance, but also of their technological genius; Russians have their own contributions to classical music, the ballet and literature; Italians may mention their operas, their food and art and architecture; the French will of course speak of their cuisine, impressionist art and Gothic cathedrals. But more important for us in addressing multi-cultural ministry is the idea of *cultural identity*.

Cultural identity has to do with our way of life now. Cultural identity changes and is constantly re-shaping itself. When people come to the United States, from anywhere in the world, they begin to change; they leave much of their cultural heritage behind. This may include their language and ways of relating with others. Newcomers take on new ways of being and living, those things such as the language, the food, music and family patterns they find in their new homeland. It doesn't take long for newcomers to embrace new preferences in entertainment and sports. Mexicans become Cowboy fans and fathers and husbands even start cooking...on the backyard grill.

For better and for worse this happens when Latin Americans come to the United States. It is called assimilation. It does not happen right away; it takes time, certainly in the first generation. The assimilation process will be more noticeable in the second generation.

But the process is not simple. In the case of Mexicans coming to the U.S.A. these may have more of a tendency to hold on to their cultural heritage. From a pastoral point of view, it is to be hoped that they hold on to their *Catholic* cultural heritage.

Mexicans are close to their father/mother land geographically. Families communicate often daily with the folks back home. Sometimes children are sent to spend the summers with their grandparents, so that they will not lose their

language of origin. Mexicans are bringing their culture with them, including a deep seated faith. This is good news to us pastoralists, but we also have cause for concern. The U.S. is multi-cultural but also very multi-religious. The newly arrived Mexican will find that different faiths will be vying for his or her membership. Some of these will be Evangelical who will be very aggressive in recruiting them.

Then there is the U.S. culture itself. We will be the first to admit that there are many things in our U.S. culture that we would rather not share. We Americans, like other first world people, are consumeristic and materialistic. We measure success by how much we earn and how many things we possess. Our culture is cynical about truth and all forms of authority. There is a superior attitude about us and wonder, “Why can’t everybody be like us?” The dark side to our present culture is a negative attitude towards people of color, toward the poor, and toward the new immigrant. The Christian answer to the question raised a moment ago is, “No, we don’t want others to be like us, at least in the bad things.”

II. “GET SET”

In my opinion every parish faced with the multi-cultural reality in our country must ask if it is ready to welcome newcomers. There is no room for any trace of racism or prejudice among our parishioners, and especially parish leaders.

I would like to suggest three levels where parishes may presently find themselves.

1. Racial and cultural differences seen as deficits.

This is the level where many of our parishes have been and we hope few remain. An extreme is what I saw in a diocese in the Deep South, where the Church was immersed in the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties. The bishop there told us that entire parishes had turned Protestant after they had seen Catholic priests and women religious marching with those advocating civil rights for African Americans. At this level there is intentional exclusion of African Americans, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, and Arab Americans. The racial bias at this level is present in the policies (perhaps unspoken nor written), practices and decision making. At this level there could be limited tolerance of people of color. The common phrase heard is, “We don’t have a problem.”

2. Tolerance of racial and cultural difference.

At this level official policies may be announced regarding the acceptance of multi-cultural diversity in the parish. A consciousness of white power and privilege may be recognized. There are efforts at recruiting people of color on the parish staff and committees. Yet there may not be any noticeable changes in the continuing patterns of privilege, paternalism and control. The

common phrase heard is, “Let’s include and involve them, but let us not lose our ‘American’ identity.” In some parishes in the Southwest, I suspect the phrase is, “We’ll let the Mexicans in, but let us not become too Mexican.”

3. Racial and cultural difference seen as assets.

This is the level towards which we should be aiming, if indeed we have yet not attained it. At this level the parish adopts in its mission, policies and practices a concerted effort at eradicating the social sin of racial bias from the parish and the wider community. Involved in ministries, committees, councils and decision making are people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This multi-cultural style is expressed and celebrated in the liturgical life of the parish and in other community fiestas and celebrations. The common phrase heard at this level is “All are welcome in this place!”

III. “GO ... AND TEACH ALL NATIONS”

By the quote from Jesus’ mandate to the apostles, “go and teach,” I see the teaching that Jesus refers to as more than just communicating ideas. First of all, Jesus taught with authority and authenticity. He practiced what he preached. He preached prophetically. By this is meant not so much that he prophesied the future, but that he spoke to the people about their present situation and what they had to change if they were to be part of his Kingdom. His disciples were not just expected to know certain truths, but to know him, the Lord, as Savior and

Redeemer. What they learned was a way of life. What he taught was the dream of the Father for the world, what the will of the Father is for people of all nations. Like Moses who taught from a mountain, Jesus teaches from the mount of the Beatitudes, the summary of his message. His message fits the deepest and the most common aspirations in the minds and hearts of all people. What we most yearn for, peace, justice, love and understanding among all people, respect for everyone's dignity, is precisely what the Father wants for us.

To preach and to teach people of any culture, it is important to know them, their background, their language, their stories, their heroes and heroines. Some ministers are able to learn the language of the new comer. This is a definite advantage.

Knowing their stories is a good way to begin to know people. Something I learned at the *Encuentro 2000*, the official project of the U.S. bishops for the new millennium, was the power of sharing one's stories. Every people has its "exodus" story, how God has accompanied it throughout history, what brought them to this country, what has happened to them in the country of adoption. It is important to share the way the Church has related to particular people over the years, either positively or negatively. I have share a bit of the story of my family in Bay City. When we were critical of the way our non-Mexicans treated, we would be

reminded by our parish priest how that non-Mexican culture had suffered either in Europe or when they arrived here.

When we share our stories we are more likely not only to understand one another better, but also to be reconciled. Sharing stories can lead to conversion from bias to loving acceptance in the spirit of Christ.

We must continue to pay attention to the way the Eucharist and other sacraments are celebrated, in order to help people feel at home. They feel at home when their cultural identity is affirmed and celebrated. When they feel at home they are more likely to understand the liturgy and the sacraments and make the commitment that must accompany any Catholic rite.

At Confirmation, if the logistics are favorable, I have the parents come and embrace their child right after the anointing, and have the parents and sponsors (*padrinos*) embrace also, as a sign of their new relationship as *compadres* and *comadres*. At weddings I usually include the blessing of the bride and groom by their parents.

Newcomers must be brought in to the Church that is already theirs. In Spanish, we say “*Esta es su casa!*” “This is your house.” That is not just a courteous phrase, it is an acknowledgement of the all-important truth that the Church belongs to everyone; the Church belonged to the newcomers even before they arrived!

The implications of this welcome extend not only to be ministered, but to minister. They bring their gifts, and we are blessed as receivers of those gifts. As children, we sang this song as we danced in a circle, “*A la rueda, la rueda de San Miguel, todos traen su caja de miel,*” “In the circle of St. Michael, we all bring our box of honey.” To the circle of our parish, we bring the sweetness of God’s love, for no matter where we come from, how long we have been here, we have all experienced, in different ways, the grace of God’s love.

But let us not be satisfied with involvement of newcomers in liturgical ministry, as important as this is. There are other urgent needs. Catechists need to be trained, especially those who have the advantage of being bi-lingual; children and youth may understand and communicate very well in English, but their parents may not. Catechists, after all, are those who assist the parents as the first instruments of the faith for their children.

There is an urgent need for prison and jail ministers. Our correctional institutions are filled with Catholic Latinos, these often happen to be in the majority. The sad reality is that many of these go into prison as Catholics and leave as Protestant Evangelicals.

The Catholic Church, including my diocese, is failing in reaching out to drug and alcohol addicts. We do not like to think about it, but one of the tragedies of our day is the unfortunate great amount of those addicted to chemical substance.

I would like to touch on another affliction, one that affects all cultures, races and, economic groups. It is that of domestic violence. Women are the usual victims of this horrible sin and crime, but men, children, infants and the elderly. Perhaps support groups for those victimized would be helpful.

An excellent way to minister to newcomers is that of small faith-sharing and Bible study groups. In these groups we grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, we experience fraternal love and support, we experience Christian community.

Essential to this ministry is the identity and training lay leaders. These are important especially in the areas of Catholic Charities and social ministry. In Texas community organizations based on the methods of the Industrial Areas Foundation can be very effective in dealing with social and neighborhood issues.

I just returned from a short sabbatical in Mexico, where I spent a week each in the states of Chihuahua, Chiapas and Oaxaca. Once more I was convinced of the deeply rooted faith in the Mexican culture. I witnessed the people's faith traditions. These are commendable for their Christian base and inspiration. There the people continue fascinating rituals that surround the rites of passage of baptisms, weddings, funeral and other key moments in their lives.

The Diocese of Dallas is currently attracting thousands of new comers, especially from Latin America. The majority of these are Catholic. I pray for you

that all we be welcomed in this place, not only with words, but with a hospitality that says, “This is your Church as much as ours. We welcome you to share in the sacrificial banquet of the Eucharist. Share your gifts with us. Together let us build up the Body of Christ. And may each parish say, LET ME HEAR YOUR STORY!