

Catechesis in a Multicultural Church

If you have been involved in catechesis for very long, you have probably noticed that the ethnic and cultural diversity of your parish has changed over the past few years. Even parishes that have long been dominated by one ethnic group are experiencing change. There has been an influx of new Hispanic and Asian immigrants in every region of the United States. The Northeast is providing a new home to eastern European, Caribbean, and Vietnamese immigrants. The South, long the home of a large African-American Catholic population, has experienced an extraordinarily rapid increase of the Hispanic population. The Midwest, long influenced by northern European roots, has experienced a similar Hispanic influx.

Hispanic populations have always been large in the West and the percentage of California Hispanics in 2000 as a percent of total population was over 32 percent, compared with 13 percent in the nation as a whole. The West also includes a larger Asian population than any other region. A large number of immigrants from Southeast Asia have arrived in recent years, particularly in California.

This changing ethnic and cultural makeup is a great gift to the Church in America for the welcoming community as well as for the immigrant. *The National Directory for Catechesis* points out:

The diversity of ethnicity, education, and social status [in this influx] challenges the Church to integrate the new immigrants in ways that both respect their diverse cultures

and experiences of Church and enrich both the immigrants and the Church. The Church of the twenty-first century in the United States will be a Church of many cultures, languages, and traditions—yet one in faith.

(NDC 11C, 1)

Inculturation

How do we rise to this challenge as parish catechetical leaders and catechists? The National Directory offers some guidance by pointing out important features of the rhythm of inculturation (see *NDC 21C*). To enculturate the Gospel message is to make it come alive for those you catechize and to help it take root in them within the context of their various cultures. Here are some suggested guidelines to bear in mind in any catechetical situation:

- **Listen** before you speak. God was speaking in the lives of the people you are catechizing before you met them.
- **Discern** what Gospel values you can already see in those you catechize. Acknowledge the presence of these values and build upon them.
- **Purify** the culture where necessary. This is not done by delivering a negative judgment. It is done by telling the story of faith and inviting the people into dialogue with it.
- **Invite** conversion to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of these four guidelines, the hardest to implement is often the first. Many parish leaders

and catechists feel inadequate when faced with cultural diversity. If you have responsibility for parish catechesis, invite leaders from each cultural group in your parish to participate in planning. Ask them to help you identify cultural events that could be opportunities for catechesis during the year. Ask them to share examples of religious celebrations and devotions. Invite volunteers to talk with your catechists and acquaint them with their traditions.

Language is frequently a barrier for new immigrants, particularly among adults. While children, however, adapt more quickly to the English language once they enter schools in the United States, learning a new language is often more difficult for adults. Parents may want their children to be catechized in their native language so that prayers, religious traditions, and devotions will be maintained. Some parishes respond by offering catechetical classes in other languages where sufficient numbers of children require it and qualified catechists can be found or trained. Other parishes concentrate on providing good materials for parents in their native language and make a special effort to make Catholic prayers and practices available in the child's native language.

Many parishes celebrate liturgies in languages other than English

and some parishes have bilingual liturgies from time to time so that the whole community can worship together. For the same reason, some program coordinators team with a partner in order to conduct parent meetings bilingually. Some parishes offer ESL classes or job training programs to help recent immigrants have a more successful entry into American culture. Such outreach shows that we are willing to respond in practical ways to the Gospel mandate “to proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15).

Respect the Dignity of All Persons

What Catechists Can Do

If you are a catechist, pay attention to the behaviors of your students and invite their parents into dialogue with you. Asian children who will not look at you when you are speaking to them may frustrate you until you learn that in their culture such behavior is a sign of respect for one's elders. When you become aware of a religious tradition, such as Las Posadas, ask parents about it or even research it yourself. Find simple ways to make such celebrations part of your catechesis and

classroom prayer. Learn about recently canonized saints from the cultures of the immigrant children and celebrate their feast days in your classroom. Take time for community-building activities and familiarize yourself with the past religious education experience and the traditions of immigrant children. In all cases, express your delight in them both by your words and your actions.

All who are involved in the ministry of catechesis are actively responding to the Gospel mandate to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). A successful approach to inculturation involves living the social teachings of the Catholic Church, which call us to respect the dignity of all persons. Catechists and parish leaders who do this well are usually not experts. They are simply people who care, who listen well, who try to love one another, and who help others do the same.

Note: You will find another article on the cultural lens of catechesis in the *Faith First Legacy Edition* resource *Keeping Faith First: A Resource Supporting the Whole Community of Faith*.

FOR REFLECTION

- *What is the cultural landscape of your parish?*
- *What have you gained by being a part of this landscape?*