

Praying As One . . .



"If we can pray together, we can do anything together." Father Jim often says. But how can a faith community of so many different cultures and languages pray together and not just side by side? We can hum or clap along but can we ever all come together singing the same song despite language differences? It's a difficult challenge but one that St. Leo's has been and continues to work on asking such questions as: Is there room for my neighbor at the table? How do we deal with multiple races, cultures and languages? How is it possible to make worship welcoming to all?

In a very real sense it's a matter of getting back to our roots. The Church was multicultural and multilingual from the first moment of its existence. There are many examples in Acts of the Apostles of the new church listening, respecting, stretching, and adapting to welcome the Gentiles.

Some Guidelines

We need to recognize the rich diversity and cultural heritage of the many people of our country today and foster and celebrate it. The United States of America is a nation of immigrants and refugees—a country in which people speak many tongues, live their lives in diverse ways celebrate events in song and music in the traditions of their cultural, ethnic and racial roots. Thus liturgical music should be as diverse and multicultural as the members of the assembly.

Multicultural, multilingual and intercultural worship is constantly evolving and changing. Worship in a multicultural community—like worship in every Christian community—will always be a work in progress. In planning multicultural liturgies, the goal is assisting a diverse congregation to find its unity in Christ rather than merely showcasing cultural differences. The liturgy should promote wanting to be one Body of Christ and full, conscious, active participation of people without being a show. Saying Mass in multiple languages doesn't make liturgy multicultural. Rather, a multicultural liturgy will employ not only the different languages of the assembly, but use the various signs and symbols that spring from a particular culture's interpretation of their Catholic faith. Thus, it is more than just language, but also music, art, active participation and other rituals that make the liturgy multicultural.

The ultimate goal of multicultural liturgy is: "Did we do what was in our power

to provide the opportunity for all our brothers and sisters in Christ to give thanks and praise God in Jesus Christ within our common Catholic tradition?"

The African Perspective

Christianity in Africa has to be viewed from the perspective of being an African Christian not a Christian African. Identifying oneself as an African is seen as just as important as identifying as a Christian. The two can't be separated. One example of this African Christian identity relates to the community. In the African worldview the main characteristic of the human person is not individuality but relatedness in order to form a community. This communal identity extends to all aspects of life, especially the African Christian's religious life. First and foremost, African Christians see the Church as the "Family of God" It is a church built on love that is welcoming to all: There is a home and a place of belonging for everyone in the extended family of God, from which nobody is excluded. The church is a place of hospitality. And in this church, songs and worship style reflect the idea of community. For example call and response songs used during worship reinforce community identity. Even spirituality and the sacraments reflect the African Christian communal identity. Thus reconciliation, often seen as an individual and private matter throughout most of western Christianity, is a communal act in Africa: The communal nature of African societies and the communal effects of wrongdoing make it necessary to symbolize reconciliation as a communal act.



In Africa, singing is just as important to congregational worship as preaching is. Due to the many oral cultures in Africa, the music that is sung at worship services has to be easy to sing. Most praise songs composed by African artists have three basic qualities: a melody that is easy to sing, a danceable rhythm, and a meaningful text. It is the drum that is the instrument of choice in Africa. The different drums and beats of the drums are reflective of the oral culture and are used in many different ceremonies, both sacred and secular.

Latin American Point of View

In Latin American countries, Christianity is a part of daily living not just something found in the church. Since Christianity established itself in Latin America, it has not been limited to the official church and its teachings or even to the religious practices and devotions recommended to the laity by the clergy but actually combined in a variety of ways with other religious practices and beliefs. Thus, worship and what was taught in a parish setting were only a small part of the life of Latin American Christians. In addition there is a history of things being led by the laity because of a scarcity of clergy and ordained ministers.



Small groups have played a large role in any Latino worship community, especially small base ecclesial communities. There are often home-based communities as well as communities that meet at the parish. These small groups are as important in shaping Hispanic faith life as the Mass. Because a lot of faith formation takes place in the home setting, home religion and spiritual practices are important. As in Africa, the traditions of the home are combined with the traditions of the Church. Popular religiosity reflects that much of faith formation takes place at home rather than church because in Latin America liturgy has often been the realm of the clergy and popular religion the realm of the people.

In Summary

While each culture brings its unique beauty and gifts to worship, when people of many tongues and nations are able to come together with one voice praising God as one family worship can be said to reflect the face of God, the source of all cultures. This is truly unity in diversity. This is our goal.

—Angela Anno

This article is a brief summary of the master's thesis in theology by parishioner Sara Mankus who is a member of the Sunday music ministry group. References to authors, works and research used here and bibliography can be found at: <http://saint-leo.org/Parish/AboutStLeos.aspx>

"Reflecting the Multicultural Face of God"