

Catholic

UPDATE

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Building Communion in Culturally Diverse Parishes

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THIS EDITION
OF CATHOLIC
UPDATE IS ALSO
AVAILABLE
IN SPANISH

A group of about fifty Catholics of all ages, made up of families and individuals, approached the priest at the end of a Spanish Mass and asked him to stamp what appeared to be passports. They represented a number of countries and spoke several languages. As the priest stamped their papers, he smiled, shook each person's hand and said, "*Bienvenidos*" ("Welcome"). Onlookers naturally were curious about these newcomers.

Something similar happened at the end of the Mass celebrated in Vietnamese. The priest stamped cards that looked like passports, smiled, shook hands, and said, “*Xin Chào mừng*,” which means “welcome” in Vietnamese. The story was the same at the end of the Mass in English with yet a different priest. Cards were stamped, he smiled, shook hands, and said, “Welcome.” The reaction of those around was the same: curiosity. For four weeks, the three priests stamped cards for people they hadn’t previously seen.

Were these Catholics on an intercontinental pilgrimage? No, they’re all members of my home church, St. Patrick Parish in Lawrence, MA. We belong to a community that celebrates our faith in Jesus Christ in three languages grounded in the many cultures that give life to the neighborhood in which the parish is located. The “passports” were cards that included the names of three languages our parishioners speak most commonly to celebrate their faith. Those who procured three stamps could claim a Bible in their preferred language. This is one of many exercises over the years that the pastoral team at St. Patrick’s has developed to increase awareness about the importance of being a culturally diverse parish where everyone who seeks an encounter with God in the Scriptures, the sacraments, and serving others is welcomed.

Although celebrating the Eucharist in a language other than our mother tongue may make us feel like we’re in a different country, it’s important to understand and embrace the reality that we’re all God’s children in the same parish community.

Culturally Diverse Parishes Long Ago and Today

The first Catholics in what today is part of the United States arrived from Spain in the sixteenth century, many decades before the foundation of our nation. Since then, countless Catholic immigrants have settled in this land and established faith communities. Throughout most of its history, Catholicism in the United States has been practiced in parishes. Yet our understanding of the word *parish*, or communities that function like a parish, has evolved.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Catholics established missions mostly in the South and West that functioned as centers for catechesis and worship as well as trade schools. Missions not only welcomed immigrants but also served as a place of refuge for Native Americans. During the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, millions of Catholics migrated from Europe. They settled mainly in the Northeast and Midwest and built more than 20,000 parishes in every major city within those regions and beyond. It was common that Catholics from each national group would build their own parish, allowing them to use the language, cultural, and religious traditions they were familiar with. These faith communities, which came to be known as national parishes, represented safe spaces where members could acclimate to their new home. As generations passed, their descendants integrated more fully into the whole of society. They embraced English as a common language and learned new ways of being Catholic that didn’t always mirror the traditions of their immigrant relatives.

Toward the middle of the twentieth century, a new way of



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