

# Loss of Language, Loss of Catholic Identity?

This past August, an Associated Press-Univision poll found that “younger Latinos, as well as those who speak more English than Spanish, are much less likely to identify as Catholics than older Hispanics who mostly speak Spanish.” The article affirmed a highly visible reality among our Latino youths across the country. However, seeing the data was in fact disconcerting for all those involved in ministry. The article alluded to the repetitive reality of immigrant communities of faith in the United States throughout history. The piece led the Department of Evangelization of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to initiate a dialogue regarding the lessons learned from the dwindling of different ethnic expressions of Catholicism (Irish, Italian, Polish, German, etc.). Above all, the article started the conversation about how to equip adults of diverse cultures to evangelize the emerging cultural and ethnic demographics of our Catholic communities.

Our Latino youths in high school, for the most part, speak English and have similar developmental needs as any other youths. However, Latino youth often grapple with the complexity of the acculturation process and often do not “fit” in either the Spanish-speaking or mainstream faith communities. Whether they are the descendents of generations who have long been in this country or the sons and daughters of new immigrants, culture plays a major role in the identity and faith of Latino youths. Those who are fluent in English often lack familiarity with the spiritual or religious vocabulary in Spanish. Thus, they are often not equipped for meaningful conversations about faith and values with their families or other adults in their community.

The Vatican Council II document, “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*,” expresses the key relationship between culture and the full development of humankind. While the Gospel and culture are independent from each other, “the Kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men (and women) who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture.”

So, as church, what to do now? How do we practically apply the wisdom of our church documents and embrace the diverse culture of our young people? First, we have to start with ourselves. How many times do we have the opportunity to ask ourselves, “Who am I?” “What defines me?” How often do we get to discuss these questions with others who are willing to listen?

While the answers will vary, fundamentally, the underlying message in answering such questions is that our stories and personal memories make up a large part of who we are. These experiences have been enriched by our culture or the patterns of behavior and attitudes shared by members of our community. In the same manner, we must not forget that our young people not only come from the unique culture of adolescence, but they may also have roots in distinct cultural settings. It behooves us to be intentional to get to know who our young people are and what experiences they part from.

We must not forget the great flavor and richness that culture adds to our human experience. As Catholics, we are called to embrace the areas of our culture which provide fertile ground for the Gospel to flourish. At the same time, we are called to transform the arid areas or deserts of our culture into oases of living water through the Spirit of God.

As church, we are in the “trade” of helping our young people embrace the fullness of their humanity (including their cultural richness). Our overall goal, however, is to aid our young people in determining how their culture harmonizes with Catholic identity. As Archbishop Pietro Sambi, apostolic nuncio to the U.S., said to a Diversity Network Convocation at Notre Dame, “the answer will always be: ‘sometimes yes, and sometimes, it must be purified (by the Gospel).’ ”

*Vaca is archdiocesan coordinator of Hispanic Young Adult and Youth Ministry.*