

Popular religiosity reveals richness of faith

Any pastoral agent working among Spanish speakers quickly encounters a phenomenon very distinctive of Hispanic religious practice - popular religiosity. Included in this broad category would be processions, novenas, religious plays and even dance.

At first glance, we might see these celebrations as quaint - holdovers of a Catholicism that we have "grown out of." After Vatican II, many devotional practices that we in the U.S. did have, including public recitation of the rosary, adoration and benediction, the veneration of saints and processions, nearly disappeared from Catholic practice.

If we look a little deeper, what might seem simplistic and even slightly embarrassing, we find a phenomenon rich in theology and social organization.

When the Spanish arrived in the New World, they encountered a civilization as sophisticated as their own, especially in what is now Mexico and Peru. In trying to evangelize millions of indigenous inhabitants, the missionaries turned to the experts. Contrary to what seems to be the accepted wisdom that the missionaries simply wiped out the cultures they came into contact with there was often (but not always) careful effort made to evangelize peoples with a rich and complex "cosmovision." Among the early missionaries to the New World were theologians trained at the University of Salamanca, Spain's finest university.

What they came up with as an approach to work with the new converts wasn't simply syncretism - a mishmash of Christian and pre-Christian practices, nor a "baptizing" of things pagan. Rather there was a thorough reworking of pre-Christian customs to express the truth of the Gospel. An Aztec dance to the bloodthirsty god of war was refashioned as a dance performed on Corpus Christi to recall and celebrate the God who became human and bled for our salvation. Customs remembering the dead developed into the practices now associated with the "Day of the Dead" or All Souls Day. Elaborate altars are built with various levels including pictures of saints

and dead relatives – reflecting the union of believers in the communion of saints. Food and drink are placed on these altars recalling the hoped-for heavenly banquet. Fruits are common on these altars, reminding the observer that Christ is the “firstfruits” of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20) – and that the rest of us who believe follow. The message is overwhelmingly one of hope in the resurrection.

Very early in the evangelization, dramatic customs such as the Advent (not Christmas) posadas were begun. During the last nine days before Christmas, when the readings of Mass shift from last judgment and conversion to the events surrounding Christ’s birth, groups of people recall Mary and Joseph’s search for lodging. There is a ritual knocking on doors and singing of verses of a song where a weary Mary and Joseph look for a place to stay. After initial rejection, those inside the home welcome the “pilgrims” singing outside. The message that the Franciscan authors of this custom had was this: “When you recall that the Christchild needed a place to be born 2,000 years ago, remember, too, that in the present day, Christ still looks for lodging in a world that still rejects him. Welcome him, make of yourself a home for the Savior.

Jesuits began the pastorela, a play performed on Christmas Eve or the day before. It was a creative reenactment of the Nativity story. Shepherds try to visit the newborn Jesus, but a devil – or sometimes seven of them (personification of the seven deadly sins) try to make them stray from their path. Angels protect the shepherds and do battle with the devils. The play works with stock characters and incorporates contemporary references, there is often much humor. Clearly the message is, “meet Christ, the world will try to keep you from doing so, God will protect and guide you, and you will find your fulfillment in the newborn Savior.”

Newly arrived Spanish-speaking Catholics enrich our church with these and other customs. Popular religiosity engages our spiritual imagination and creativity. Since numbers of people are required for these customs, they help build community and develop leaders. They teach us the richness of our faith. Perhaps the best possibility is that these customs are adaptable and can be shared – their message belongs to us all.

Father Shay Auerbach, S.J., is pastor of Sacred Heart in Richmond, Va., a bilingual parish. He previously worked in the Archdiocese of Baltimore with the Hispanic communities of St. Joseph, Cockeysville, and St. Gabriel, Woodlawn.