

The church has a Spanish voice

A source of some tension in dioceses and parishes throughout the country today is the question of language. Of course, for the Catholic Church in the United States this is nothing new. Given that the majority of immigrants today – both documented and undocumented – coming to the U.S. are Roman Catholic, it stands to reason that our church will have an ongoing need to reach out and serve people in other languages besides English.

Occasionally I have met good Catholics who are distressed that the parish offers services in Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean or many other languages. My baby boomer generation and the generation before us had been brought up on the melting pot analogy, the idea that language and cultural differences would and should resolve themselves by everyone learning English as soon as possible and conforming to the “majority” American culture.

The church, in this way of thinking, was really one of the main vehicles for the assimilation process. The church served to Americanize immigrants. So serving them in their native languages was viewed as a disservice, an impediment to the role of cultural assimilation played by the church.

This way of thinking is problematical from several points of view. Of course, common sense tells us that learning English is a value. Immigrants should be encouraged to learn English for many reasons, and most immigrants would agree. For the church, however, there are other considerations. One of them is that the church’s mission is not to inculcate the values of any particular culture, much less to teach languages. Rather, the church exists to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to each and every culture, including our U.S. culture.

What that means practically is that in our preaching and teaching as bishops, priests, deacons, catechists, theologians, etc., we learn how to discern between what comes from our postmodern American culture and what comes from the Gospel. This is often not easy; it does not come naturally, but it is at the heart of the church’s mission to evangelize. While encouraging people to learn English and, more importantly, helping them find the means to do so, is commendable, it can

sometimes be misconstrued as an encouragement to just adapt to the prevailing culture.

This may be counterproductive if, for example, adaptation to American ways means becoming an individualist, a materialist, or making equality a value that trumps every other moral consideration.

Actually there are always important values in the culture of origin of our immigrants just as there are in the prevailing American culture. History shows that it takes at least a generation for an immigrant group to become comfortable in English. Most immigrants do not have the luxury of studying a foreign language. They work long hours in demanding jobs. It is their children who master English relatively quickly.

The church has a longstanding attitude toward the use of languages in ministry. Already in the 13th century the Fourth Council of the Lateran decreed that local pastors should find ministers who speak the language of tribes coming into central Europe from the East. The principle is that the mother's tongue is the language of preference for communicating and teaching people about the reality of God.

Yes, for the church, this is fundamentally a pastoral matter. Unfortunately it gets mixed up with political controversies and even an unhealthy nationalism that is fed by fear and flamed by influential media figures. For decades now, the bishops have held a steady course. They have insisted on the pastoral need to carry out the church's mission in whatever languages are necessary.

Spanish has a special role today in U.S. Catholicism. The bishops, with Rome's approval, have made Spanish an official language for liturgy in the U.S. That is why, for instance, a special committee of bishops is working on a suitable translation of the Roman Missal in Spanish for use in the U.S. Presently various missals from other Spanish-speaking countries are being used. Given the magnitude of the use of Spanish in our country – it has the fifth largest group of Spanish-speakers in the world – there is a practical need for the bishops to have their own copyrighted texts for local use rather than be borrowing texts from Mexico, Colombia or Spain.

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