

Immigration and Communion: Building American Catholicism in the 21st Century

Inaugural Fr. Lydio F. Tomasi, C.S. Annual Lecture

Hosffman Ospino, PhD

Assistant Professor of Theology and Religious Education, Boston College

Delivered on October 1, 2015 in El Paso, TX

What an exciting moment to be a Catholic in the United States of America today! The source of the excitement comes certainly from the many challenges that we face together as a Church, because they serve as clear tests to our Christian identity, witness, and commitment. But perhaps the most powerful source of excitement is the fact that we find ourselves at this juncture engaged, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us through the ages, in the process of fashioning a new moment in the history of American Catholicism. This fashioning is a true moment of creation and rebirth, a *kairos* in which we are invited to experience anew God's salvation in Jesus Christ, here and now; a time to affirm the best of who we are and open ourselves to new horizons with a sense of trust in the God of Life who, faithful to the revealed promise, walks with us on our journey.

Immigrant and U.S.-born, young and old, women and men, single and married, ordained, consecrated, and lay; poor and rich... Catholics of all cultural traditions, races, ethnicities, and social locations find ourselves participating in the process of building and rebuilding the Church in this country from the bottom up, particularly at the level of our local communities. We did not have to start from zero. Thanks to earlier generations of immigrants and their descendants, thousands of Catholic parishes and schools were built throughout our geography, many organizations and ecclesial movements emerged to support Catholic life, and networks of social services were created to share with millions —Catholic and non-Catholic— the best of our resources and hopes as we recognized the face of Christ in them. Not all these sojourners became part of the American Catholic experience in the same way. For many it was not a choice: some found themselves as residents of a new nation when geographical borders were redrawn; others were colonized; others were brought by force when the evil of slavery roamed unbridled in our land; others arrived as exiles. For many others the United States was a chosen destiny, a land of dreams and opportunity. Millions of Catholic immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Europe and many other parts of the world, made the United States their home.

Despite their different stories, all these Catholics coincided in the same land, all shared the same faith in the Lord Jesus, all together were the Church and were tasked, as Christian disciples, to build the Church in this corner of the world.

What made it possible that despite the different historical, socio-cultural, and ecclesial experiences that shaped the lives of all these Catholics, now coinciding in the United States of America, Catholicism in this country did not fragment or become something different? Who were the Catholic structures (i.e., parishes, schools) built to serve? Whose needs were the Catholic organizations and networks that emerged to address first? The formulation of these three questions serves as an entry point into a series of thoughts that I would like to share with you on the theological concept of ecclesial communion. I want to invite you to explore how this important concept can be instrumental to affirm the contributions of the new generation of Catholic immigrants to the fashioning of a new American Catholic experience in the twenty-first century.

Building the Church, Building Communion

The Church is both a given reality and a project; to be more exact, God's given reality and God's project. Its existence can only be fully understood from an eschatological perspective in which God is the beginning and the end. The Church is the community of those called by God, within the realm of history and beyond, to experience the fullness of the mystery of divine love and salvation through Jesus Christ. The ecclesial community in its historical existence remains a project to be actualized and sustained at any given moment before the end of time. All the baptized, then, share the unique responsibility to remain faithful to the divine calling to *be* church and to *build* the Church through witness and action throughout our lives. Such responsibility is sustained on the triple dynamic: vocation, witness, and mission.

For Christians, this baptismal identity transcends in many ways the differences and particularities that shape our lives, whether in terms of language, race, ethnicity, social location, ideological positioning, and even migratory status. However, the term "transcend" here should not be read as a synonym to "obliterate," which would be a serious misinterpretation. "Grace builds upon nature," we are constantly reminded by our theological tradition. Baptismal identity transcends

the particularity of our lives in the sense that it becomes the interpretive framework to make sense of the quandaries of our daily existence, to understand ourselves as relational beings who are accountable to more than the whims of our individual selves, and to gradually discover that our lives have a purpose, an ultimate end.

Embracing our baptismal identity is at the very core of being Church and building the Church. Christian life is fundamentally about being in intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit, and in light of that existential dynamic, fundamentally about being in intimate relationship with others—in history and beyond—and the created order. This being in relationship with God who is Triune, others, and the created order is at the core of the Christian concept of communion.

Much has been written about the theological meaning of communion in our days, particularly as Catholics continue to delve into the depths and richness of the Second Vatican Council. Of particular attention is the continuous reference to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which offers several key pointers to the understanding of an ecclesiology of communion. Three come to particular attention as we reflect on the contribution of Catholic immigrants to the constant process of building and rebuilding ecclesial communities in the United States.

One, the Church is the People of God. The Church is willed by God from the beginning and is called into existence through the mystery of Jesus Christ. Those who, with divine faith, accept Jesus Christ and the Church, his body, and through the waters of baptism participate in the Paschal mystery of the Lord are the Church: “This was to be the new People of God. For those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people . . . who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God’” (*Lumen Gentium*, 9). The baptized anywhere, anytime, regardless our differences are the People of God.

Two, ecclesial communion is fully expressed in the Church's universal character. The catholicity (or universality) of the Church, and consequently membership in the community of those called by God to experience the saving mystery of Christ, cannot be restricted by exclusionary categories such as political affiliation or cultural background or even legal circumstance: "though there are many nations there is but one people of God, which takes its citizens from every race, making them citizens of a kingdom which is of a heavenly rather than of an earthly nature. All the faithful, scattered though they be throughout the world, are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium*, n.13). Ecclesial communion, as a dynamic and profoundly spiritual category, escapes the entrapments of ideological reductionisms that purport understandings of Catholic identity as exclusionary –particularly within the same ecclesial community– and homogenizing, ignoring the values of diversity and difference that are essential to being human.

Three, ecclesial communion is profoundly Eucharistic. Catholics discover who we are, and our communities are truly centers of authentic Catholic life, when we celebrate and partake of the Eucharist. At the same time, the Eucharist builds the ecclesial community when the People of God is convoked to celebrate our faith, share with one another, nourish our hearts and minds with the Scriptures, receive the Body and Blood of Christ, and ultimately are sent out to give witness of who we are while journeying together as children of God. As *Lumen Gentium* affirms: "Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, [the faithful] offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It... Strengthened in Holy Communion by the Body of Christ, they then manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which is suitably signified and wondrously brought about by this most august sacrament" (n. 11).

A Church Built in Communion and for Communion

Let us then return to the three questions formulated earlier. What made it possible that despite the different historical, socio-cultural, and ecclesial experiences that shaped the lives of immigrant or journeying Catholics, now coinciding in the United States, Catholicism in this country did not fragment or become something different? Who were the Catholic structures (i.e.,

parishes, schools) built to serve? Whose needs were the Catholic organizations and networks that emerged to address first?

The reflection on the highlighted three characteristics of ecclesial communion, as a theological concept, somehow paves the way to address those questions. A close historical analysis of the experience of the groups that eventually shaped American Catholicism, as we know it today, indicates that an implied theology of communion was the ultimate glue that allowed for this experience to grow and thrive, a practical theology that embodied those three characteristics.

The establishment of national and ethnic parishes throughout the country may have given the impression that the claim to some form of Catholic unity was an illusion. Towns and cities in the Northeast and the Midwest in particular saw the erection of multiple Catholic church buildings just a few blocks from each other. Parishes serving Hispanic and Black and Asian Catholics in the South and the West of the country functioned as segregated entities for too long—and many continue to do so in our day—without much relationship to those churches where White, Euro-American Catholics worshiped. But a particular sense of communion, nevertheless, allowed them to remain Catholic. Regardless of their country of origin, language, or socio-economic status, Catholic immigrants encountered faith communities that would welcome them because these immigrants were the Church. In many cases, they built them. These were faith communities to which they belonged, oases where they could drink from the fountains of sacramental grace and be nourished with the Scriptures in their own languages, through familiar rituals, while still imbued in their own cultural traditions. They were welcomed into these communities for who they were, namely baptized Catholics, children of God, knowing that they participated of something universal and larger than these small, separate communities. Week after week they gathered to celebrate and partake of the Eucharist and often celebrated other sacraments. There they were convoked, instructed, nourished, and sent. Even the small attempts to consider national churches separate from the larger Catholic communion either never materialized or never gained momentum.

As the immigrant generation dwindled, their children and grandchildren became more assimilated into the larger culture. National parishes had fulfilled their purpose and yielded to

more mainstream experiences of being a parochial community, thus giving rise to a more standard way of articulating and celebrating the American Catholic experience, which still prevails in many parts of the country in our day. But not everything has been perfect, of course, since many areas remain to be addressed in many of our faith communities, including racial biases, classism, and even harmful ideological polarization that often divides families and parishes. Yet, one thing is certain. This early generation of American Catholics harvested the fruits of an implied ecclesiology of communion that is easier for us to identify and name many years later. These women and men of faith were the Church; their parents and grandparents had built the Church in communion and for communion.

What made possible that American Catholicism as shaped by millions of immigrant Catholics from the first wave, whose lives were shaped by different historical, socio-cultural, and ecclesial experiences, did not fragment or become something different was a strong desire to *be* and to *build* the Church. They built a large number of structures, Catholic parishes and schools among many others, to serve Catholics, particularly families and the young. The many organizations and networks that they saw emerge in time sought to address the spiritual, educational, ministerial, and pastoral needs of Catholics first. This did not mean that these Catholics had no regard for others who did not share their religious convictions or concerns for the realities of the larger society. They did and such engagement has evolved over the years in very creative ways as any history of contemporary Catholicism would attest. Yet, they took good care of their own and wanted a strong Church. In that regard this was a story of success.

A Church to Be Built in Communion and for Communion

American Catholics in the twenty-first century have a unique opportunity to continue to *be* and to *build*—and in some places *rebuild*—the Church in this corner of the world. Catholic immigrants are to play a major role once again. The majority of these immigrants this time does not come from Europe, but from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean, with a growing number of them from Africa and the Middle East. It is the second wave, as Allan Figueroa-Deck,

SJ has wisely observed.¹ Catholic migration from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean is not a new reality. Our faith communities have been welcoming immigrants from these parts of the world for several decades. Just as the immigrants from yesterday, the immigrants of today arrive with the hope of a new and better life and are often encouraged by their faith convictions.

This time the new immigrant Catholic wave finds a church in the United States with a longer and more established track record. Thousands of parishes and schools, hundreds of organizations and networks, built and established over the decades, are seemingly ready to welcome and support them not only in their spiritual and pastoral needs, but also their human and social ones. Are they? The three questions that we formulated earlier must be asked once again in our day, although with some nuances. Is it possible that that the new historical, socio-cultural, and ecclesial experiences that shape the lives of immigrant Catholics today will find a home in the already established embodiments of American Catholicism minimizing the risk that those experiences become marginalized or reduced to a permanent life in the peripheries of our faith communities? Are the structures (i.e., dioceses, parishes, schools, universities) built over the years by American Catholics, and the many resources that allowed large numbers of Catholic women and men of all ages to grow in their Catholic identity, intentionally and appropriately serving the new wave of Catholic immigrants and their children? Are our Catholic organizations and networks placing the needs of the new wave of Catholic immigrants and their children first? The answer to these questions calls for some serious soul-searching at all levels in the life of our Church in this country.

At stake is the forging of a strong experience of Church in the twenty-first century, one that builds on the sense of ecclesial communion that already exists—we do not start as black slates—and incorporates the multiple experiences of ecclesial life that Catholic immigrants bring from their countries of origin as well as those that are being nurtured particularly in thousands of shared parishes throughout the United States. The markers of communion for the new immigrant church are very clear to us since we have the privilege of drawing directly from the Second Vatican Council and the many reflections on ecclesial communion during the last fifty years.

¹ See Allan Figueroa-Deck, *The Second Wave: Hispanic Ministry and the Evangelization of Cultures*. New York: Paulist Press, 1989.

First, the new Catholic immigrants and their children are also the People of God. Welcoming and embracing them in our communities is not an option. It is the Church welcoming the Church. Second, the diversity of cultural and religious experiences that immigrant Catholics and their descendants bring to our faith communities is an expression of the universality (i.e., catholicity) of our Church. They enrich American Catholicism and make it stronger. Third, it is in the celebration of the Eucharist, the source and summit of the whole Christian life, where all Catholics, immigrants and U.S.-born, documented and undocumented, find ourselves together convoked, instructed, nourished, and sent as members of the same Catholic family —children of the same God, disciples of the same Lord Jesus Christ, and heirs of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Keeping in mind this last point, it is important to make a key observation. Given the decline in the number of clergy that we experience in our day, the massive closing of parishes in some parts of the country, and the insufficient number of parishes in the places where Catholicism is growing most vibrantly thanks to the presence of immigrants and that of their children and grandchildren, the most important question is not in what language should we celebrate the Eucharist and the rest of the sacraments, but who is going to celebrate them and where will the People of God gather to do so. All signs point to the good news that Hispanic, Asian, Caribbean, and Black immigrant Catholics, among many others, and their descendants want to *be* Church and *build* the Church in the United States. However, without a clear ecclesiology of communion that sincerely embraces the new immigrant experience and allows our Church to be challenged by that same experience, we may simply miss a golden opportunity. An ecclesiology of communion for our Catholic communities presently must be grounded in the conviction that we need to be communities of faith —families, parishes, schools, organizations— where we are constantly welcoming one another, together renewing the commitment to build the Church of today while planting the seeds of the Church of tomorrow.

Communion Engenders Hope in an Immigrant Church

Allow me to conclude with a thought I recently wrote on the relationship between immigration and hope, which in many ways captures what I have shared so far regarding communion:

The Catholic Church in the United States has always been an immigrant church.

Although awareness of this immigrant identity has not always been at the forefront of our

shared historical consciousness, today it is. U.S. Catholicism is being renewed and profoundly transformed by immigrants from all over the world, particularly from Latin America. As immigrants settle in society and in the church, a new set of hopes arise. My sense is that the ultimate hope for community, an authentic Christian community, becomes actualized in a twofold hopeful desire that has much to do with how we understand ourselves in relationship with God. On the one hand, the immigrant desires to be part of the community not as a stranger or a visitor but as a member, someone whose presence is sincerely appreciated and embraced, someone without whom the community would [be] incomplete. On the other hand, because the community desires to grow as a body of witnesses of God's love in Jesus Christ [...], immigrants not only are welcomed into this vision, but also are responsible for making such a vision real. The ultimate hope of the immigrant *for* community and the ultimate hope *of* the community to become what it is called to be, are one and the same in a spirit of faithful mutuality guided by God's Holy Spirit. Both hopes are, in the end, expressions of the desire to allow God's reign to become truly present here and now.²

Both hopes are clearly powerful longings for communion. Thanks.

² Hosffman Ospino, "Glimpses of Christian Hope along the Migrant Journey," in *Hope: Promise, Possibility, and Fulfillment*, edited by Richard Lennan and Nancy Pineda-Madrid. New York: Paulist Press, 2013, 108.