

What is it like providing pastoral care to immigrants and their families?

**At Home Together: The Church and the Immigrant Family: A Discussion in Advance of the
World Meeting on Families**

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Being part of an immigrant family myself, I can somewhat relate to the experience that many of our newly arrived brothers and sisters have when they cross the border into the United States. My maternal grandmother hated it here when she first arrived from Poland in 1904 so she went all the way back to Poland only to find that her widowed mother had remarried and her new stepfather wanted nothing to do with another mouth to feed. So she had to come back and entered into an arranged marriage with my grandfather. My grandparents raised six children, my mother being the youngest. My mother said that the only way my grandmother was able to cope and acclimate herself somewhat to this country was through her participation in her church, St. Adalbert's, here in Philadelphia. She had a lovely singing voice so she sang in the choir and at weddings and at church socials. She found an anchor in this very foreign and hostile country in her Church. She died at 89 without learning a word of English. She lived in a Polish ghetto here in Philadelphia where everyone spoke her language, sold the food she was accustomed to and supported her in her religious customs and practices. She never became a US citizen. But she was always a faithful and loyal Catholic.

I tell my grandmother's story, and I am sure that many of you in this room have similar stories of your families' arrival here to this country, because a significant difference between the arrival of my grandmother and that of our newly arrived immigrants, is that when my grandmother arrived and went to the Church to find help, she found priests and sisters who spoke Polish and who were very familiar with her culture and her way of expressing the faith. Today that is not always the case. It is a fact that the first place most Catholic immigrants do seek out when they first arrive here is the Church. Some find help immediately; but sad to say, others do not. However, regardless of what kind of reception they receive, the first person they usually encounter is not a priest or sister or lay person who is from their country. The person

who opens the rectory door or who is sitting in the parish Catholic school office will probably be someone who looks like me. Hopefully, that person will be of *buena voluntad* or good faith, as the people say, who has turned themselves inside out to try and understand how to help people from other cultures feel welcome and part of this American Catholic Church. Thank God, there are many such people. But more often than we would like to admit, the first person they meet is someone who is not able to get past this prevalent attitude that these people are more trouble than they are worth. The script usually reads like: These people are going to come in here with their devotions, their processions, their strange way of doing things, they'll want a Mass in their own language, we'll have to buy bi-lingual textbooks and materials which the parish will have to pay for because they aren't registered and don't give in the collection, and the list goes on and on.

Sound familiar? So I believe that the greatest challenge for us pastorally as Catholics is to help our newly arrived sisters and brothers to feel welcome in our parishes so that they will continue to grow in their Catholic faith here in this country and not feel compelled to seek out other faith communities who may appear more open, accepting and familiar.

In my experience, another pastoral challenge which has affected immigrant families as well as faith development is the work ethic that many immigrants have assumed since their arrival here in this country. The pressure to work 24 hours, seven days a week has affected the way the faith is or is not transmitted to the next generation. I understand completely that many are not only supporting themselves and their families here in this country but also family members in their country of origin. However, when work keeps you from growing spiritually, it becomes a problem, pastorally and otherwise. An outgrowth of this work ethic is seen when instead of sharing the cultural and spiritual richness of their countries of origin, many, especially among our youth, are sucked up into the secular consumerism and spiritual vacuity which are becoming more and more a part of our American culture.

I believe those who are newly arrived in this country have the additional challenge of trying to fit into the mainstream Catholic Church. We Americans, many times, are a hard lot to deal with and that carries over to how we practice our faith. There are also the pragmatic issues of our present Church reality as well. When I was in Guatemala, there was no such thing as closing a Church. The people worshipped in ruins; churches that had been destroyed by war, earthquakes or simply by time. They gathered amidst a bunch of stones that had been there for 500 years, and to them, that was a sacred space. So to come here and experience this spiritual diaspora from one parish to another sometimes two or three times after each one has been closed is very disconcerting and confusing. Most of these people left their country because of traumatic reasons; they experienced trauma getting into this country and then have had to adapt to the trauma which is now endemic in the closing and merger of parishes, many of which have occurred in the economically strapped areas in which the immigrants themselves are forced to live because of their status. In some respects, we may be taking care of the bottom line which I completely understand and completely agree with, but in doing so, are we effectively making it harder and harder for people, especially newly arrived folks, to practice their faith?

Being someone who has filled in many a Baptism, First Holy Communion and Confirmation book, I have found that our American Church, at least in some of our big cities, where many immigrants seem to gravitate, is number driven and not necessarily relationship driven. We think our numbers reflect our effectiveness. For most of our Latino brothers and sisters, at least, it is the relationship which is important. They may not all be married in the Church, confirmed or at times, even baptized. But deep within most of them whom I have met is a strong Catholic identity and a deep, personal relationship with God and Mary. We need to begin there and try, as best as we can, within the constraints of our realities, to bring them to a fuller understanding and acceptance of their Catholic faith.

All these realities require catechesis, formation and accompaniment. A common pastoral challenge among our immigrant brothers and sisters and members of the American Church is

this idea that the Church is actually a sacrament machine. You come to Church “to get the sacraments.” You enroll your child in religious education when you want them to receive a sacrament. The idea that being a Catholic is a conversion process which requires a deep commitment and a shared responsibility for the life of the Church is rather foreign to many of our newly arrived brothers and sisters as well as people who have been born and raised here in the Catholic Church.

How do we help people to move beyond this? I think that there are several popular movements which are helping immigrant families grow in their faith:

- Programs for Youth and Young Adults
- Family Catechetical Programs (Pastoral Familiar)
- Retreat Programs for Adults and Youth (Cursillo, Juan XXIII, Siervos de Cristo)
- Support of each Culture’s Devotions
- Accompaniment of Families after Baptism
- Pastoral Visitation

I have spoken briefly about some of the pastoral challenges the newly arrived face but there are also challenges for the people who are ministering to these immigrant families. In my experience, one must have courage, openness, humility, a sense of humor, trust and most of all love. We need to live where the people live, try to understand how they live and, most importantly, provide them with the spiritual support they need to overcome the huge obstacles which they encounter practically everywhere they go. Learning their language is important, but, I have found that the language of love supersedes fluency in any language. People know if you want to be with them or not. My experience has proved to me that most people prefer authentic concern to perfect grammar.

It is said that the future of the Catholic Church in America is with our immigrant brothers and sisters. I believe this is true. We can see this reflected in the number of vocations among the immigrant communities. Hopefully, we can become more creative in our approach to ministry so that we can tap into the deep spirituality present in many of these folks who have suffered and endured experiences which most of us can only imagine. In closing, I have to say that I believe my experience serving with those who are culturally different from me has

strengthened my spirituality far more than it has probably strengthened theirs. Their acceptance and love of me has transformed me and has helped me to accept the great grace of vulnerability, my dependence on the power of God working in the hearts of others, and the grace of appreciating how different we all are as well as how similar we all are. I feel truly fortunate that I have been called to this type of pastoral ministry and hope that the American Church will continue to reclaim its missionary spirit so as to help our newly arrived brothers and sisters find a home in our Catholic Church in the United States.