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Reflections on the Dangers

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Reflections on the Dangers of Community Building in a Polycultural Context

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Introduction

The culture is changing. Such a statement is as obvious and non-controversial as they come. No matter what side one fights for in the innumerable culture wars being simultaneously waged in our country and world, all can agree on one thing: the morals, rituals, beliefs, and behaviors of wide swaths of people are changing. New

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morals are crashing into old ones. Old beliefs are being revitalized, and behaviors once thought unimaginable or relegated to distant lands are being championed at home. Infinitely more controversial than the presence of cultural change is what exactly *culture* is. For the sake of simplicity and being generic enough to include most definitions, let this simple definition of culture suffice: "the shared life of the community." Whatever culture does finally end up including and whatever form it takes, there is no doubt: it is changing.

This culture clash goes far beyond the secularization of the West. While secularization has been a significant cultural shift in the last few centuries, the world is also in the midst of an unprecedented period of immigration – from the movement of many Latino peoples from Central America northward, to Middle Eastern refugees fleeing to Europe and elsewhere, to the movement of persecuted peoples in east Asia. As these people make their home in foreign lands, they bring their culture with them, and over the last few years, these new neighbors have often been met in their adopted countries with a resurgent native nationalism demanding either assimilation or exodus from the new arrivals. This nativist nationalism, coupled with the perennial cultural shifts of new generations—now amplified by the progress of technology— have created a maelstrom of concurrent cultures: mixing, fusing, fighting. In many cases it is now difficult to label which of the many cultures are dominant and which are truly counter-cultural.

What is the church to do in such a storm? How is the Church to live in a multi-cultural world, country, or neighborhood? The Church has always developed

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many different cultures in many different places. The shared life of one congregation or church body celebrates a particular style of music while another does something different. It should not be surprising that the American Church lives in an American style. Thus, on one hand, the answer is the same as it has always been, or as Ambrose's council to Augustine is often paraphrased, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." [1]

On the other hand, the Church finds herself in a time unlike any before it. Technologies such as the internet and modern travel have evaporated the long distances that once separated disparate cultures and now separate the present Church from any historical precedent. Undoubtably the Church has always had to jump from culture to culture through translation and modification, but now the borders themselves are migrating. It is no longer only the Church crossing cultural boundaries but cultural boundaries crossing the Church. Look out the window! Foreign customs and strange behaviors are no longer distant. So how does the Church "do as the Romans do" when the Romans are doing a million different things? How does the Church share a common life in a place of infinitely variable styles of life? How does the Church be the Church in a polycultural context?

Three Models of Cultural Interaction

Every community has a culture, namely, a shared life. It could hardly be called a community without it. The Church is most certainly a community, and it has a variety of cultures at every level: congregational, denominational, catholic. What happens when one of these cultures meets a different culture, be it inside or outside of the Church? Should she adapt or stand firm? Should she reach out or retreat? What would Jesus do? Dr. Leopold Sanchez helpfully identifies three possible frameworks for the interactions between cultures that may inform the Church's future: multi-cultural, cross-cultural, and inter-cultural.

Multi-Cultural

The first framework of cultural interactions that Sanchez identifies he calls "multi-cultural." Multi-cultural interaction is simply an awareness between cultures of each other. Multiculturalism has certainly forced its way into the popular mind as it has emerged as a reality, and it is undeniable that in the United States the many different cultures living side-by-side, and often among each other, have become more prominent in the media. Cultural sensitivity, diversity, and representation have become virtues of popular culture, and identity politics has weaponized cultural identifiers. To use Sanchez's own simile, each culture in multi-cultural interaction is like a parallel line.[2] None of the lines cross each other, just as in this framework each

culture remains separate and siloed. Hardly a permanent reality, multiculturalism is at best a peaceful, tolerant coexistence between different cultures. At worst it is an isolationist ghettoization of cultures that says, "You leave me alone, and I'll leave you alone."

On the surface it should be obvious that multiculturalism is an inappropriate framework for any community in the Church to use when engaging with other cultures, even if awareness is a necessary first step towards true engagement. To use a multi-cultural framework to address other cultures within the church is to deny community with other brothers and sisters in the faith and to erect divisions within the church. This is the sad reality when there is no shared life between those of the same parish who attend the traditional service and those who attend the contemporary service. This is a bifurcation of the body of Christ.

Multiculturalism is also an inappropriate method for dealing with cultures outside of the Church. The mission imperative of Christ demands that the Church does more than simply acknowledge the existence of others; she is to reach out to them. Peace between people is not the mission of the Church, but salvation is — however unpleasant it might be. Thankfully the Church has a long history of engaging with outside cultures and developing new communities for both its old and new members to share.

Unfortunately, as the cultures of the world and the cultures of the church drift further apart, multiculturalism becomes an ever more powerful temptation for the Church. There are those who, worn down by the conflict between the Church and the world, seek the peace that is promised by multiculturalism. This is a peace that is satisfied with sacrificing Sunday morning to the Church so long as the world holds sway over the other 6½ days. It inevitably results in a privatization of faith, where the shared life of the community is no longer shared, and necessarily, the community can no longer exist. There is also a second group that opts for the worst of multiculturalism in the hope that it will preserve the Church. Choosing isolation to escape the foreign ways of life around them, they retreat into a metaphorical monastic fortress where those inside the walls are Church and those outside are *Alien*. This has the twofold problem of sanctifying the mundane that had by historical chance occupied a place in the Church when the walls when up (such as the style of music or language used) and demonizing the good the Church has yet to baptize. It snuffs out the mission imperative of the Church—even if the door is left cracked—for a fatalistic outlook on the *other*. It abandons the one for the ninety-nine and starves the angels of joy.

Cross-Cultural

The second framework Sanchez describes is "cross-cultural" interaction. This

is where one crosses over a cultural boundary, from one's own to another. To rely on Sanchez's line imagery again, the cultures in cross-cultural interaction would be a set of perpendicular lines that intersect at a particular point.[3] One enters into the cultural setting of another. Much like multiculturalism, the cross-cultural jump is a common reality in a multi-cultural world. It can hardly be avoided. Cross-cultural interaction is certainly a step in the right direction and the appropriate next stage of multiculturalism's awareness of others. However, there are unique dangers that arise when one culture crosses into another.

Perhaps the most common failure of cross-cultural interaction within the Church is the instrumentalization of the other, or (to use a more culturally charged word) colonialism. Both the host and the visitor can be guilty of instrumentalizing the other. Often the Church can be guilty of objectifying the brave soul that has crossed from his or her own culture into that of the Church. Even when the visitor is invited into the community, he or she is preserved as "the other:" the token of proof that the congregation is multi-ethnic, missional or welcoming. They must remain different to continue to serve as proof, and so in the mind of a culturally homogeneous congregation, the cultural immigrant is too often stamped as "the black member," "the autistic girl," "the foreigner." He or she remains a welcomed oddity whose purpose is fulfilled not as a member of the Body of Christ, but in being different.[4] This is the dehumanizing effect of tokenism that prevents true community from being built.

But even when the Church crosses cultural borders, she can still instrumentalize her host. This is the selfish mission-trip model wherein the needs of the neighbor are subservient to the goals of the missionaries. Missionaries traveling great distances to see new places, spending exorbitant amounts of money to experience a life altering event, or taking a week off work for a religious high are all examples of instrumentalizing the hosts. This is more than an issue of efficiency; this is an issue of the neighbor's humanity. Is the neighbor primarily a fellow or potential brother or sister in Christ, or are they a savage in need of saving? If the former, then they should be accorded enough respect to be served by the Church in an honest humility that is willing to listen to the hopes, desires, and needs identified by those being served. If the latter then they are hardly more than animals to be used to fulfill whatever goal the visitors have in mind and undeserving of full membership in the community.

A second danger of cross-cultural interaction is assimilation: the demand that the other conform to one's own culture. In this problem, the lines of culture intersect on the person while excluding other aspects of their culture. In its most extreme form, everything other than the physical body of the neighbor is rejected. Names, rituals, values, and any other cultural signifier can be rejected and replaced

by the assimilating culture. At first, it might seem that assimilation is a good thing, so long as the culture of the Church is doing the assimilating. The question both within and without the Church quickly becomes, "Who gets to assimilate who?" With the plethora of cultures existing within the Body of Christ, which one gets to be dominant? What voter's assembly in an American church would not revolt at a demand from a European bishop to give up its voting rights? What Thai congregation would not chafe under a liturgy in Swahili? This was the fault of the Judaizers who demanded that the Gentile believers assimilate into Jewish culture before becoming Christian. There are, undoubtably, boundaries that all Christians are obliged to follow (and every culture bends towards and away from these guideposts to varying degrees), but these regulations are not there to tie down burdens too heavy to bear or civilize the savages into one's own culture but to conform the faithful to the image of Christ. Not to recognize the difference between the two is to confuse self with God.

Unlike multiculturalism, cross-cultural interaction is not a repudiation of the mission of the Church. In fact, cross-cultural interaction is often a necessary first step, especially in times of emergency where urgency is important.[5] In that way cross-cultural interaction is much better than multiculturalism. However, many of the barriers that stunt true community building are still present within this framework. The focus on differences both in assimilation and instrumentalization remains a factor. The Church cannot be satisfied with only cross-cultural interaction and must seek something more.

Inter-Cultural

The final framework Sanchez suggests for the Church is that of inter-cultural interaction. Perhaps reflecting the more complicated nature of this framework, a simple line metaphor hardly does inter-cultural interaction justice. One might propose two lines: one blue and one yellow. Instead of remaining parallel or only intersecting at one point, these two lines run on top of each other—at certain points more blue than yellow, at others more yellow than blue—sometimes even green! Although the blue line can never be yellow, nor the yellow line blue, together each culture combines, accentuates, shades, and informs the other. That is because the chief characteristic of inter-cultural interaction is not simple awareness (multi-cultural) or even the crossing of cultural boundaries (cross-cultural) but a mutuality and interdependence between cultures.[6]

It should become apparent from the line imagery that inter-cultural interaction is infinitely more demanding from both cultures than either parallel multiculturalism or perpendicular cross-cultural interaction. Perhaps that is why Sanchez decided to drop the line imagery for a marriage metaphor:

> Like an effective sports team, inter-cultural engagement uses the gifts and strengths of each partner or player in developing a common project or vision, avoiding the danger of unilateral border crossings. Think of a partnership, perhaps like a marriage, where each member, while retaining his or her uniqueness, nurtures the other, and where both partners develop their relationship over ongoing, sustained, creative, and faithful engagement. Partners are critical and constructive of each other, but they also seek to build something of value together. We have a model that, while taking into account particularity, works toward common values and community.[7]

It is this "working towards common values and community" that allows the various cultures of the Church to have a shared life—a super-culture—true catholicity. Only through this mutual partnership of cultures can the beautiful image of Revelation 7 be tasted here on earth and we prepare to worship before the throne by adding our accent to the chorus. This super-culture of the Church is not simply the lowest common denominator or the characteristics shared by every church body. It includes every God-honoring expression of the Church. Catholicity is universality, not homogeneity. It is the catholicity of the Church that allows the Christian to adapt to local customs, be that Roman, American, or Contemporary. Even when the newly baptized carry their once alien culture into the pews, the Church can make free use of its resources—though, not unthinkingly. Although inter-cultural interaction is the best framework for the Church to manifest its own catholicity, it is not without its hurdles.

Challenges of Inter-cultural Interaction

Inter-cultural interaction is often profoundly uncomfortable. Humans crave the security of familiarity any first inter-cultural step will lack. An inter-cultural interaction is a leap of faith into uncertainty—into diversity. Inter-cultural interaction is predicated on mutual engagement with those who are different—other. That should come as no surprise. However, this diversity requires a degree of vulnerability from authentic inter-cultural interaction from all participants—and more so when occurring in the Church. In the Church each member has a claim on his or her servant-neighbor, and each owes a duty to their neighbor-lord. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject of all, subject to all."[8]

When cultural diversity is introduced to a congregation or church body, there is now an otherness that has a claim on a member. It is now not only those with whom one shares a common worldview and familiar customs who may make a claim on one's services and love but also those with whom there is not a shared culture.

Following Luther's statement, the perfectly dutiful servant of the neighbor from a different culture serves not at the convenience of the servant but at the need of the neighbor.[9] This *other*-neighbor will have *other*-needs that can only be met in unfamiliar ways. What is to be done with the neighbor from another culture who needs to hear the Gospel preached in their heart-language? What is to be done when they need to contribute to worship (as all Christians do)? What is to be done when they need to respond loudly to the joy of God's grace during the service? Are those needs, both big and small, to be met according to the traditions of one neighbor or the preferences of another? Whose needs are met when? The mutuality of the inter-cultural interaction prevents a simple or, as is often the case, consistent answer one way or the other, because catholicity is constantly being built by all those involved. It is a continually morphing reality of new needs being met in needed ways.

These are just a few of the challenges that will face a Church attempting to realize true catholicity, but beyond the struggles of vulnerability, sacrifice, and shared ownership that are present even in the best-executed inter-cultural interaction, there are dangers here not present in the other frameworks.

Dangers of Inter-cultural Interaction

Syncretism and Unionism (the interdenominational equivalent) are the dangers even honest attempts of inter-cultural interaction face. Both are the inappropriate and inauthentic pairing of two incompatible things that result not in an aggrandizement of culture but a bastardization that, for the Church, amounts to unfaithfulness. It should come as no surprise that the sinful nature can corrupt even the good intentions of the faithful, and the Church should always be on guard. It would be impossible to enumerate even a fraction of the ways syncretism can creep into the Church. From Gnosticism to the Prosperity Gospel, however far and wide catholicity may carry the God-honoring shared life of the Church, there is always an edge just beyond it in which sin waits. The Church must always be watchful for this edge—though, perhaps, not any more so than the more mundane places where sin is to be found within the community. Arguably, the Church should be less concerned with how foreign forces may corrupt the communal life than with how one's native culture leads one to sin: a log in the eye of one's culture.

These dangers cannot dissuade the Church from striving after the true catholicity afforded by honest inter-cultural interaction, even if our own church body's culture is still haunted by the threat of Unionism. Inter-cultural interaction is the most difficult framework to enact of the three outlined by Sanchez, for in it the dichotomy of *us-them* is dissolved into a we that cannot be dismissed as *other*. This framework forces the Church to confront what she assumes as givens and how she

might grow, develop, and change. It demands a realized vulnerability and sacrifice inherent in Christ's command to be the neighbor, but it is only in the beautiful mutuality of many different nations, tribes, peoples, languages, accents, ethnicities, backgrounds, generations, etc. that the Church can be who she is.

Hope for the Future

Regardless of which framework one's local Church expresses, there is the hope of the Gospel and God's life-giving power. Those who have lived their lives in the relative safety of a multi-cultural framework can rejoice that they have already taken the first step in authentic inter-cultural community-building. Only with an awareness of other cultures can the Church begin to form catholic communities, but she cannot be satisfied being the *Many,* Holy, *Segregated,* and Apostolic churches. She must be the *One,* Holy, *Catholic,* and Apostolic Church.

Those with experience in cross-cultural interaction have already taken the necessary next step towards fulfilling the Creed. Simply by exploring other cultural contexts or by inviting others into their own, they have reached out with the hands of Christ across the multi-cultural divide. That is no small feat! While the Church cannot rest content with intermittent, one-sided cultural tourism, cross-cultural interaction can lay the foundation and build the relationships necessary for a mutual inter-cultural movement.

Even for experts in building inter-cultural communities, the work is never done. Culture is not stagnant. It continually shifts and changes, and the content of catholicity does as well. It is a promised present reality that the Church continually works towards and out of. In that regard, it is no different than being Holy or being Apostolic. The Church can take comfort in knowing that these characteristics are sure. Christ has promised that the gates of Hell will never prevail against His Bride, so she may devote herself to the vulnerable, uncomfortable task of sharing her life with others, even in a polycultural context.

Endnotes

1   Augustine relates the actual quote from Ambrose in a letter to Januarius: "When I visit Rome, I
     fast on Saturday; when I am here, I do not fast. On the same principle, do you observe the custom
     prevailing in whatever Church you come to, if you desire neither to give offense by your conduct,

nor to find cause of offense in another's." St. Augustine, "Letter 54," in Prolegomena: St. Augustine's Life and Work; Confessions; Letters, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1886), 687.

2   Leopoldo A. Sánchez, "Hispanic Is Not What You Think: Reimagining Hispanic Identity, Implications for an Increasingly Global Church," Concordia Journal 42, no. 3 (2016), 232.

3   Sánchez, Hispanic Is Not What You Think, 233.

4   Robert D. Lupton, Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It) (New York City, NY: HarperCollins, 2011), 12.

5   Lupton, Toxic Charity, 6.

6   Sánchez, Hispanic Is Not What You Think, 233.

7   Ibid.

8   Martin Luther, "Freedom of a Christian," in Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1962), 53.

9   Sánchez M. Leopoldo, Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 214.