

Don't be indifferent to difference

<http://www.uscatholic.org/church/2010/06/dont-be-indifferent-difference>

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Living with other cultures takes practice, Father Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D. wrote in U.S. Catholic's July 2000 special issue on multiculturalism.

Last Sunday's bulletin had announced a parish meeting for 7 p.m. Wednesday. So, at about 6:40 a number of cars began to arrive in the parish parking lot. Slowly folks began to take their places in the parish hall. A few more straggled in at about five minutes to 7. By 7 o'clock there was a healthy turnout of parishioners, except for one thing-almost everyone in the hall was white!

At about 7:20 you could hear more cars arriving. Voices came from the parking lot as people greeted each other. Slowly these new arrivals filed into the parish hall. A few more cars drove up at 7:30 and unloaded their passengers. Somewhere around 7:40 p.m. it seemed that everyone who was coming to the meeting had arrived. The hall was almost full now, and everyone who had arrived after 7 o'clock was brown!

The white folks by this time were seething. "Why can't these people come on time?" they were saying to each other under their breath. "Do they always have to be late?"

A couple of the Latinos overheard the mumbling. "Why would anyone come so early to a meeting as these Americanos do?" they asked one another. "I don't understand why they're getting angry with us. Everybody knew the meeting wouldn't start until quarter to 8!"

This scene is not an uncommon one in parishes with Anglo and Latino parishioners. While some church leaders might claim that the multicultural reality of the Catholic Church in the United States is a gift from God, most of the people who have to live that reality every day find it a pain.

After all, what many of us experience in our parishes isn't so much multiculturalism (where people of different cultures live side by side with each other) but interculturalism (where people of different cultures have to interact with each other). Each group might live in its own little section of the parish, but when it comes to parish activities, our differences collide around meeting times, the role of women in ministry, how to relate to the pastor, which language to use at staff meetings, and on and on.

Intercultural living is always difficult because it means crossing into other people's cultural space and having them bring their customs and values into "my space." That produces tension and friction. It's always easier to live with "my own kind" than with people who think and act

differently, whose behavior I don't understand, whose customs I find quaint if not downright strange.

The first step in dealing constructively with intercultural living is to recognize its difficulty and not to blame the tension on my own or the other's lack of goodwill. Learning to cross cultural borders is a set of skills that needs to be learned-it's not something we're born with.

Second, for most of us, the formal education we've received hasn't given us much help in acquiring that skill. Few of us, even if we've graduated from college in the U.S., know very much about how culture works. We know our own culture because we were brought up in it. But if someone asks us to describe our culture, to explain how it works, to teach them why Americans act the way they act in given situations, we're more often than not at a loss for words.

Learning how to cross into someone else's cultural world first requires some understanding of the dynamics of culture in general and, only then, the particular contours of the Euro-American or Latino cultural world. Often too much attention is given to the specifics of individual cultural groups and almost none to helping people understand how culture works. As a result, when I see behavior among African Americans that I didn't learn about in the last workshop I attended, I have no way of understanding what that behavior means.

Cultures are really like worlds. The behaviors, values, family systems, and customs that make up that world form a fabric with each other, each piece interwoven with the other pieces of that culture.

The attitude a cultural group has toward time, for example, is usually linked to its understanding of relationships, to its sense of personal identity, to how it understands hospitality, and so on. To begin to understand someone else's cultural world is to begin to understand how it's organized, how the pieces fit together, not just to understand one particular value or behavior.

The Euro-Americans in my initial story arrived at the parish hall before 7 p.m. because in their cultural world time is a commodity to be used wisely. It's something that belongs to me ("my time"), and how well I use it says a lot about how mature and responsible I am. Moreover, it's my integrity as an individual (doing what I know to be right) that is of paramount value in that cultural world.

The Latinos in the story inhabit a very different place. In their cultural world, time exists for exercising relationships with others. So if friends drop by unannounced, I visit with them rather than rush off to the parish meeting. Living out the responsibilities and obligations of those relationships is the mark of a truly mature person. And it's the quality of my relationships with others that is of paramount value.

Unless I understand the different way someone else's cultural world is organized, I won't be able to negotiate my way through that world without painfully colliding with behaviors and values that are quite different from mine.

Learning how to live interculturally is a complicated set of skills that can be developed only by understanding how cultures work, how another's cultural world is organized, and then how the individual pieces of that world play themselves out with each other.

Learning that set of skills takes a good deal of time and effort. So it's no wonder that many parishes settle for multicultural, rather than intercultural, living. They really don't try to form a community, to help people learn how to cross cultural boundaries and negotiate new cultural worlds. Rather they opt to be two or more communities that happen to share the same parish facilities, where one group is usually the "owner" and the other groups just "rent" space.

Settling for multicultural instead of intercultural living in our parishes, however, backs away from the central mission of the church in the United States.

When I was studying in Spain in 1989 and 1990, many Spaniards asked me why people in the United States couldn't get along with each other. With a certain attitude of condescension they would express their amazement that blacks, whites, and Latinos couldn't seem to live in peace.

When I returned to Spain three years later, the European Community had become a reality. The border checkpoints had been dismantled. Spain now had growing communities of Romanians and Czechs and Slovaks. Those same Spaniards who had made fun of the U.S. three years before now wanted to know what they could learn from us that would help them deal with their increasingly diverse population!

Demographers assert that never before in the history of humanity have so many people been on the move at the same time. The population shifts that occurred in the United States during the 20th century with the large immigrations from Europe and Latin America are now beginning to be experienced by countries throughout the world.

How to live with each other across our cultural differences is becoming a pivotal question for many nations. At the same time, the news is full of the disastrous consequences that can happen when cultural worlds collide: ethnic cleansing, tribal genocide, religious wars. Historically speaking, the statistically "normal" way for human beings to deal with difference is to kill the other.

As Christians, however, we believe that the value of the human person is not determined by culture or race or religion. The human person is valuable because we are all children of God, made in God's image and likeness. As people of faith from many cultures, we Catholics in the United States are being challenged to live what we believe. We are being challenged not just to tolerate cultural difference but to engage it. We are being challenged not just to live next to

each other but to live with each other, not just to rent parish space to other groups but to form a community with them.

If the power of our faith doesn't provide us with the strength to form intercultural communities in our parishes, how can we expect others to live across cultural difference? As a church in this culturally plural country, we have a chance to create new models of how peoples of various cultures can live with each other on the basis of their real value, as children of God. It's our challenge, but it's also our mission, the witness we can offer our world.

Father Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D. was associate professor of cross-cultural ministries and vice president at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago when he wrote this article. It appeared in U.S. Catholic's July 2000 special issue on multiculturalism (Vol. 65, No. 7, pages 19-21).