

One Song, Many Voices / Many Voices, One Song: Making It Work

Paul Turner

[March for Piano, Prokofiev]

Sergei Prokofiev composed and performed that piece when he was a student just to show his music professors what they were up against. He wrote music his way. In a multicultural parish we will always have some people just wanting to do things their way. Many anglos and hispanics prefer to use their own language, follow their own customs, and stereotype the other group.

At St. Anthony Catholic Church where I serve as pastor, we have about 800 families; Spanish speakers outnumber English speakers about 5 to 1. The Vietnamese community always seemed different. They are small in number but faithful at church. Several come to daily mass and a larger group on Sundays. Many of them do not speak English, and some members of the younger generation who do have limited abilities in Vietnamese.

Let me explain how the Vietnamese ended up coming to St. Anthony's. Twenty-five years ago our bishop decided to establish one parish for the Catholic Vietnamese population that had grown because of a refugee crisis. We also had a growing Korean Catholic community. The Kansas City metropolitan area sprawls across a street called State Line Road that divides not only two States but also two dioceses. There are two Kansas Cities, one in Kansas and one in Missouri. Kansas City Missouri where I live has the Royals, the Chiefs, the airport, the zoo, the symphony, the opera, the ballet, downtown, the Plaza, the national World War I Museum, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Union Station and Bryant's barbecue. Kansas City Kansas has a view of Kansas City Missouri. It also has soccer, minor league baseball, and NASCAR. It is the center of the Archdiocese of Kansas City in Kansas. I belong to the Diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph.

Prior to 1956 there were three dioceses in Missouri: St. Louis, St. Joseph and Kansas City. The Vatican reconfigured the boundaries into four, creating Jefferson City and Springfield-Cape Girardeau, while combining parts of two others to become Kansas City-St. Joseph, with the center in Kansas City. Here in Texas, where St. Mary's remains the cathedral in Galveston, Sacred Heart Parish in Houston was elevated to the status of co-cathedral. In St. Joseph Missouri the cathedral was diminished to the status of co-cathedral. To this day we in Kansas City call the old cathedral of St. Joseph the co-cathedral, and the people in St. Joseph call the same building the cathedral. The Missouri River forms a physical and psychological boundary between the two parts of the diocese. Usually when we need to get together, people near St. Joseph are expected to commute south of the river to Kansas City because asking people from Kansas City to drive to St. Joseph is usually as successful as asking them to drive to the moon. It wasn't ethnicities that originally made our diocese multicultural; it was the river.

Something similar happened with the two Kansas Cities. Our priests go to different seminaries, so many of us don't even know one other, even though we serve people who live, work and play on both sides of the State Line. Anyway, twenty-five years ago the two bishops decided that something should be done to help out the Korean and Vietnamese Catholics in the area. In an unusual show of unity - or diversity depending on how you look at it - Kansas took Korea, and Missouri took Vietnam.

Coincidentally our bishop was closing and consolidating a number of parishes at the same time. One of those was St. Augustine's, a neighborhood church that had lost many members and stood sufficiently near another thriving parish that its closure seemed logical, at least by chancery standards. Of all the parishes closing that year, which included two in the neighborhood where I now live, St. Augustine's had the sturdiest physical plant. Consequently, the bishop gave that church, school, convent and rectory to the Vietnamese community, who renamed it the Church of the Holy Martyrs. People in that neighborhood who had grown up patronizing a blue collar, anglo Catholic Church discovered one Sunday morning not only that their parish had closed, but that it had reopened as a center for Vietnamese-speaking Catholics. There was one additional difficulty. Very few Vietnamese lived anywhere near St. Augustine Catholic Church. Most of them lived near St. Anthony's about ten miles and half a dozen parishes away. Over the past 25 years, the Church of the Holy Martyrs has developed into a great parish, but some of the Vietnamese in my neighborhood are not commuting there for Sunday mass. They just come to St. Anthony's. I have been trying to serve them.

One Sunday this year I decided to engage the Vietnamese population more directly. I practiced this phrase in their language: "Taught be our Savior's command and formed by the word of God, we dare to say." I thought it would encourage everyone at the Sunday morning English mass to pray the Lord's Prayer in their own language. Our neighborhood was founded by Sicilian immigrants, but others have arrived. Among the 200 people in attendance at the 9 am English mass each Sunday some speak Spanish, Italian, French, Creole, German, Arabic or Triginya. But the second largest language group at the English mass is Vietnamese. I wanted to unleash some cultural diversity with reverent cacophony during the Lord's Prayer. So, on this particular Sunday, after the eucharistic prayer, I took a deep breath, buried my head in the book in front of me, and haltingly recited these words for the first time at St. Anthony's: "*Vâng lệnh Chúa Cứu Thế, và theo thể thức Người dạy, chúng ta dám nguyện rằng.*" Now, before I tell you what happened, let me explain that up to this moment, the anglo population of St. Anthony's thought all our Vietnamese members were meek. But in that moment, I pulled my finger out of a leaky dyke. The roaring floodwaters of a hitherto walled-up faith burst into the church with a wind force that toppled the entire Beaufort scale. The Vietnamese community did not meekly recite the Lord's Prayer with the anglo community. They sang the Lord's Prayer with such strength that it completely shut down every English-speaker in the church. To our regulars it felt like the teenage Prokofiev playing a piano march that totally baffled his music professors. We knew that this faith was out there,

but we didn't know how to unlock it or how to control it. We are now working a more effective balance of these languages at the 9 o'clock mass.

The original sin afflicting multiculturalism is individualism. Each of us has a song inside. Some people hide it there until someone encourages them to sing. Others sing when the rest of the community is not prepared for that song. Every multicultural parish has individual members wanting to do things their way. Well, we each have something to contribute, and we should give it, but we also need to listen for the gifts of other members. We may not understand their song, but good community will listen for it and one day sing along.