

Pastoring a Multicultural Parish

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After arriving at the airport in Vantaa, I took a bus to my hotel in downtown Helsinki, where I spent a day to catch up on sleep from my transatlantic flight and to walk around the city. I'd never been to Finland before. The next day I walked to the station and took the bus to Turku, where I would attend my first meeting of Societas Liturgica, an international and ecumenical gathering of people who specialize in the field of liturgy. It was 1997. I am a pastor, but I also research and write. I have studied foreign languages, and they take a lot of work; they never come easily for me. Before going on that trip I bought a Finnish grammar and read through it. I had no high expectations about my abilities; I just wanted to see how the language worked, maybe how to say "Good morning," "please" and "thank you," and to learn some numbers. Finnish doesn't look anything like English, and by the end of the conference another participant from the United States who could read several European languages declared in frustration what many of us felt: "I've been in this country a week, and I haven't seen the same word twice."

By sheer luck, the hotel assigned me room number 123. As sometimes happens in lodgings abroad, patrons had to leave their key on the counter before going outside and request it again when coming back in. The staff, who were fluent in English, started to laugh whenever I walked back in because I had learned how to say the first three numbers in Finnish, and I requested my key with what must have sounded like a kindergartner. "Yksi, kaksi, kolme," I would say: "One, two three."

As the week wore on, I asked people at the desk how to get back to the airport in Helsinki at the end of the conference. Everyone gave me the same advice: "When you leave the hotel, go out the door and turn right. Walk down that street about 7 minutes. You'll come to the bus station. Go in there, and you can take a bus directly to the airport at Vantaa. It's a non-stop bus. Nothing could possibly go wrong."

So, when departure day arrived, that's what I did. I checked out of the hotel, exited the front door, turned right, walked 7 minutes, saw the bus station, and entered. However, it was Sunday morning, and the information booth was closed. I looked around for help, tried to decipher the signs describing bus departures, and I couldn't make sense of any of them. I had allowed myself extra time, so I walked out to the parking lot where I saw people getting onto a bus. I had two carryon bags with me - a rollup for the overhead and a computer bag. As the driver welcomed people on board, he was taking money for tickets and throwing

bags in the storage space beneath. I walked up to him and summoned up the courage to say one word. I screwed my face into a question and asked, "Vantaa?" which is the name of the suburb where the Helsinki airport is located. He looked at me, nodded, took my larger bag, tossed it underneath, accepted my money, and let me board.

Minutes later he got behind the wheel and drove away. A few minutes after that, he stopped to pick up a few more people on the roadside. A few minutes after that, he stopped to pick up a few more. This continued for a while, making me wonder what the words "non-stop bus" really meant. There was a longer stop at a highway intersection, and then he continued on to the city of Helsinki. He stopped at a couple of hotels, and then pulled his bus into the same station where I had boarded the bus to Turku a week earlier. Everyone walked off. Except me. This was not the airport.

The driver noticed me, came up, and said something in Finnish. I said to him, with the same facial expression I used earlier, "Vantaa?" His face went completely white. His eyes opened wide, and he struggled for words, none of which I would have understood anyway. He was able to speak enough English to start explaining things to me. Obviously, I was on the wrong bus. He was in an absolute panic, but I still had plenty of time before my flight. I calmly said, "Just show me where to find the right bus." He said, "You don't understand. Your luggage." I said, "My luggage?" He then spoke frantically to someone on a cell phone. Mind you, this was 1997. I didn't own a cell phone until 2001, but half the population of Finland already used them. He ended the call and turned back to me. "Yes, your luggage," he said. "Your luggage is at the airport."

I was on the wrong bus, but the bus I had taken did have a transfer point onto another bus going to the airport. It was at that longer stop by the crossroads on the highway. At that time, the driver courteously transferred all the bags going to the airport from my bus to the connecting bus, which had since arrived at Vantaa, while I sat in downtown Helsinki.

The driver said to me, "Sit here. I will take you to the airport bus." I sat down, and he chauffeured me, alone in the bus, over a few blocks and pulled up next to another bus. "Go in there," he said, pointing. "No charge." This was also before the euro, and I had only a few Finnish markkas left in my pocket.

I walked to the other bus, got on, sat down and waited. Now I was getting close to the departure time of my flight. And, I started to think of what I had put into the other bag. Both my bags were carry-ons, so I had left several things in there, such as my paper airline ticket, my extra cash and my passport. When the new driver came on board, he tried to reassure me. Then other passengers walked on, and this bus too made several stops at various hotels before going to the airport. When we finally got there, the driver pulled the bus up to a drop-off point near one of the doors into the airport lobby. I was getting a little testy. I asked him, "Where is my luggage?" He pointed to a traffic island opposite the drop-off area, and said, "Wait ten minutes. A shuttle will pull up there. Go on board. Your luggage will be on that shuttle." I got off, and he drove away. These

were the longest ten minutes of my life. But I took comfort in this: I had spent a week in Finland already. I had not mastered Finnish, but I did learn this about the Finns: The people of Finland are unfailingly polite, honest to a fault, friendly, courteous and sincere. If any people on earth would get me reconnected with my luggage, it would be the Finns.

Ten minutes after I stepped off the second bus, a shuttle careened up to the concrete island where I was waiting. All six passengers got off. I walked on. Behind the driver stood a rack with only one bag remaining. I said to the driver, "That is my luggage." He nodded and spoke the internationally recognizable words, "Mm-hm." I picked it up, stepped off the shuttle, entered the airport, and boarded my flight on time.

Now, transfer this story from the capitol city of Finland to the capitol city of the United States of America. If this had happened to a Finn visiting Washington DC, I wonder if he would ever have seen his passport again. Maybe, but a lot of things could have gone wrong and have gone wrong to foreign visitors who arrived here with insufficient knowledge of the local language.

Fifteen years after that conference I learned that the personnel board of our diocese was considering me for a different parish. I was working in Cameron, Missouri, population 10,000, and lecturing extensively about the revised translation of the Roman Missal, as many of you will recall. I told my representative on the personnel board that I was open to a move, and that I was even open to doing something ethnically different from where I had been. I loved small-town Missouri, but I felt that I became a better priest by trying out different types of assignments - from an urban parish with a Catholic grade school, to a rural community with prison ministry. The diocese needed a priest to serve St. Anthony Catholic Church in northeast Kansas City, a largely hispanic community but with considerable cultural diversity. Originally settled by Italian immigrants, some of whose descendants remained, the parish also had people from Vietnam, Germany, Haiti and the Philippines - not to mention Mexico, El Salvador and other countries of Latin America. The Chancellor called me into his office one spring day and asked if I would consider becoming pastor there. I had lived several years in Italy as a student. I had studied Spanish off and on. I knew Latin pretty well. I had even acquired some skills with French and German because I needed them for research purposes. In Finnish I could count to three. But I could not on that day carry on a conversation in Spanish. He asked if I really thought I could pastor a Spanish-speaking parish. I said, "Yes. I have studied enough to know what my abilities are. If I go in there, the first few months will be painful for everyone. But after that, I'll be OK." He was impressed with my self-confidence; perhaps he also spotted that I was also a bit cocky. Well, the bishop appointed me to St. Anthony's, and the adventure began.

It was every bit as frustrating as I had expected. I could not understand what people were saying to me, even when they were smiling and warmly welcoming me to the parish. I could pronounce Spanish well enough, so I made it through the mass without much difficulty. For preaching, I had an advantage. For all my 30-plus years of priesthood, I had written out every Sunday homily I ever

gave. At the beginning of my priesthood, I was not self-confident as a public speaker. I felt much more relaxed if I had the complete text in front of me. Many priests find this idea distasteful, but by writing I could economize my words, build an argument, and sound more convincing if I knew exactly what I intended to say. So, I've always done it. I still do. That also meant that upon arriving at St. Anthony's, my bilingual secretary could translate my homily from English into Spanish, as long as I gave her a copy in advance. I developed the discipline of writing out my homily by Thursday, so that it appeared in her inbox when she showed up for work Friday morning. I then tweaked what I wanted to say in both languages before I started preaching on Saturday.

Hearing confessions, though, was another matter. There's no safety net in the confessional. At the beginning, I found this the most challenging part of hispanic ministry. I considered myself a pretty good confessor, but I knew how to help people in English, not sufficiently well in Spanish. I couldn't understand everything. The style of confessing was different from what I'd known in the past. Many women, for example, first served up a litany of lamentation over the injustices in their lives - a husband who doesn't appreciate them, children who misbehave. Their own sins embroidered this landscape of sorrow. It was hard for me to formulate words of appropriate advice when I was still struggling with grammar and vocabulary.

But, I knew that I would learn. It's just that I didn't learn fast enough. The people deserved better than what they were getting, and I needed help. I signed up for a week's classes in Guadalajara. And I started devoting about 30 minutes every day to a computer-based learning program. All of this helped. I probably should have done a more intensive study before showing up for work on the first day. Before I could go to Mexico, Mexico had come to me. In time my comprehension got better and better. The people realized this and appreciated it - that I cared enough about them and their language to work at it and to improve.

I received many blessings, most of which I had anticipated and which motivated me to accept that parish assignment. I encountered a people of deep faith and devotional life. They inspired me by their piety and their world view. They cared passionately about their families and demonstrated a high respect for elders. In their country of origin, they faced insurmountable difficulties of poverty, violence and gangs. They loved their family more than their homeland. Leaving it for the United States posed huge problems - language, culture, work, and prejudice. But they judged that the sacrifice would be worth the effort. They envisioned a better life, they desired to stay connected to family, and they retained an unwavering identity with the Catholic Church. Writing in The Tablet this past June, Jonathan Tulloch of England compared the plight of migratory birds with refugees from Africa. Both groups crossed borders; both groups sing. He wrote of refugees and birds, "If survival is not possible at home, it must be found elsewhere.... Here is our opportunity to meet people who have seen the worst the world can throw at them and yet retain their hope. Our chance to learn from the most entrepreneurial group imaginable - those who have lost everything but kept the great riches of their humanity." At St. Anthony's, I was hoping that

when I ministered to these people, their faith and prayer would reawaken my own. All of this happened.

So, by the end of my second year, I turned my attention to an underappreciated group in the parish: the Vietnamese immigrants. Most of them had moved to the United States after the fall of Saigon. They too had a profound faith, a love for family, and frightening stories to tell about their life-threatening exodus from Vietnam. As with the hispanic community, the kids were bilingual, but many of the parents and especially the grandparents were not. Our diocese has a Vietnamese-language parish, but many of the immigrants lived in my neighborhood. At a typical daily mass at St. Anthony's, 24 people showed up: 8 anglos, 8 hispanics, and 8 Vietnamese. I'd always heard that Vietnamese was an extremely difficult language to learn, that it was very different from any Western language. But I found inside myself the same two feelings I experienced with the hispanic community when I first moved to St. Anthony's. One: I wanted to communicate with people who had preserved their faith and friendship amid insurmountable struggles of their lives. And two: I still felt cocky. So, one day, I took a deep breath, opened a Vietnamese grammar, and began.

It was every bit as challenging as I had been warned. A politician from the parish told me that he had tried once, and he made some progress. He urged me to go to the Vietnamese cultural center for lessons because with this language more than any other, you needed a teacher. You needed someone who could listen to the inflection in your voice and school you in the tones. In Vietnamese, words have only one syllable. Many of them share the same spelling except for the tonal accent and diacritics. The same three letters can be pronounced more than a dozen different ways. If you use the wrong tone or vowel color, you have the wrong word. One Vietnamese priest told me that when American priests celebrate mass in his language, we often mispronounce "Lift up your hearts" so badly that it sounds like "Lift up your lobsters."

So I started going to language classes for several hours on Saturdays - the only day they were offered. After just a few weeks I was able to tell people confidently, "It will take me 30 years to learn Vietnamese." But I expected I was going to be at St. Anthony's a long time, and there was no way to progress without trying to learn every day. My goals were simple. I wanted to do basic conversation - "Hello, how are you?" And I wanted to be able to read prayers out loud in a way that the Vietnamese could understand them. I had already been asked to anoint a sick parishioner, and I hated having to do it in English. I thought, if I applied myself, I should be able to master enough of the language to handle the pastoral needs of these people when they need me the most.

Five years after arriving at St. Anthony's a new bishop asked me to move from there to the cathedral, where I remain now. But during those last three years, I worked again with computer-based programs and with a tutor to improve my pronunciation. I was reading prayers at mass. I could bless religious articles. I learned the formula for anointing the sick. And in a couple of cases, I even heard confessions. Between you and me, I'm not sure I understood what sin each one

was confessing, but because I had once again worked on the numbers from one to ten, I knew how many times they had done it.

Before beginning what would be my fifth and final year at St. Anthony's, I took some vacation time with my sister Mary's family in and around Paris, staying on another week with a friend from school. My family likes to have me around on European trips because they think I'm a walking Rosetta Stone. Really, I'm not. My knowledge of French is adequate; I speak enough of it that the French have to deal with me. But it is a difficult language for me to hear; I haven't used it enough to understand what people say back. After two weeks in France that summer, I was getting better. But because languages are work for me, I was glad to get back home where I could forget about French for a while.

Or so I thought. Shortly after that vacation a couple of new families showed up at St. Anthony's. They came to the English mass, but they seemed out of place. I surmised from their skin color and clothing that they were from somewhere in Africa. I introduced myself; they struggled with English, but were able to tell me that their home countries were Cameroon, Chad, and the Central African Republic. They were refugees from the war. If you know your African geography, you know that the European language that they hold in common is not English. It's French. So at the English masses on Sundays, they asked me to make one or two announcements in French. We discovered quite a few children and adults who were requesting baptism. Nowhere in our diocese are we offering sacrament preparation in French. These families came to St. Anthony's because it was within 2 miles, and they could walk there - and because no other priest in the diocese could speak French any better than I could. I ordered a copy of the French baptismal rite from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, and at the Easter Vigil that year I baptized 19 people in three languages: English, Spanish and French.

These refugees needed jobs. They had no driver's license, no car and a poor grasp of English. If you speak only Spanish and you need a job in Kansas City, you can probably find someone who knows someone who will hire you to work with other latinos. But if you need a job in Kansas City and you speak only French, you don't have many options. Eventually we got other groups involved, including the local chapter of Alliance Française. The needs far outweighed what we could provide, but like the kid in the gospel with five barley loaves and two fish, we gave what we had. And we put it in the hands of Christ.

It was harder for me to leave St. Anthony's than I realized it would be. I had invested a lot of myself into that community. Still, at the end of it all I still had some questions about hispanic ministry. The most important one was simply, "What is my mission here?" As an anglo pastor of a largely hispanic community, was my mission to help them become more americanized, or to help them preserve their ethnic customs? Let me explain why this question became so difficult.

In Kansas City, the latino community had its origins in the area we call the West Side. The population there today is at least third generation hispanic.

Spanish is spoken on the West Side, but English is spoken even more. That's a community where the integration into Kansas City life has taken root. At St. Anthony's, though, in what we call Historic Northeast Kansas City, we had a more recent immigration population. As we heard yesterday, the difference between European immigration in the past and Latino immigration today is that the Latino immigration is still going on, the numbers are far greater, and the homeland is within reach. I could not answer the mission question because I do not understand the demographic energy. What is the future of Northeast Kansas City? In a generation or two, will it look like the West Side? Is that the model toward which I should be steering my people? I still don't know, but I think the answer is in a word we heard yesterday: integration.

I have lingering concerns over the effectiveness of my ministry. Take liturgy, for example. We heard yesterday about the importance of maintaining popular devotions among ethnic cultures. I loved celebrating the presentation of a three-year old at mass and including the arras and lazo at weddings. I had other concerns. For example, our community sang musical versions of the parts of the mass that took liberties with the words: "Holy, Holy, Holy sing the cherubim." Or "To the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, I ask for mercy." One choir even retained the custom of singing during the sign of peace, "Give me your hand." I let a lot of it go, though I had reservations about it all, especially when they sang versions of the Lord's Prayer that tinkered with the words. It seems especially brazen for composers to think they can improve on the words that Jesus taught his disciples.

The number of blessings I gave every Sunday practically wore out my right hand. Before mass, parents who saw me standing by the door presented their children for a blessing. Then at communion time, the same children came up in the procession requesting an individual blessing. After communion the people wanted me to invite all the children forward to receive a blessing with a sprinkling of holy water. On their way out, parents would press the same children close to me for yet another blessing. In the liturgy there is a nice blessing at the end of the mass, and it really does count. I'm all for popular devotion, but this one made me feel that the liturgical action was suffering as a result.

Hispanics treat Ash Wednesday as a holyday; it was our best attended mass of the year, with numbers that exceeded those on Christmas Eve. For weeks later, I'd hear the confessions of those who missed mass on Ash Wednesday. One year, after everyone came forward for the lengthy distribution of ashes, I asked if at communion time, only those who were planning to receive communion could come forward, and they complied. If I hadn't, the same children who just got ashes, would all be back in line for a blessing that I thought made little sense. I don't know what people thought, but to me it led some integrity to the lengthy liturgy.

I kept wondering if I should introduce bilingual elements into the Spanish mass. At the English mass, we were hearing the second reading and a couple of the presidential prayers in Vietnamese, and a few announcements in French. To their credit, the Anglos who came to that mass loved this, and the multicultural

approach to Sunday worship became an incentive for them to come and bring their friends. At the Spanish masses, we had children who did not speak Spanish very well. One of my predecessors told me he always gave a summary of his homily in English especially for those kids. But I wondered if we shouldn't have done more. I never pressed it because I was afraid it would look like the Anglo priest trying to force his culture on Hispanics. But if the population was shifting as it did on the West Side, I wondered at what point we would make some changes. I never figured that out.

Most heartbreaking to me as a Catholic priest and a liturgist was the reduced number of people at Spanish masses who presented themselves for communion. Some were in irregular marriages. Some of these needed an annulment, which is culturally rare in Mexico, but culturally common in the United States. I would try to identify those couples, meet with them, and ask them if they'd start filling out papers. For example, before baptizing a child, if I learned that the parents were not married in the church, I required them to meet with me. In a few cases, I was able to move them a step closer to communion. But in many cases, the parents simply did not bother. Others had no need for an annulment; they had married civilly but never had a church wedding. They were waiting until they had enough money. They were waiting until family could visit from Mexico. I could never understand this. The reception of holy communion is so much a part of Catholic identity, that it should have driven people to receive as soon as possible and as frequently as possible. But it didn't. Others whose marital status did not keep them from receiving communion refrained from receiving on a given Sunday because they felt that they had committed a mortal sin. That so-called "mortal sin" may have been something like missing Sunday mass to take care of a sick child, or having an argument with a spouse. Somehow embedded in the culture is a respect for those who do not receive communion.

Perhaps it's related to humility, a lovely but often abused trait among Hispanics. Many of them possess an amiable docility, but the same trait especially among women encourages men to exercise machismo. In the worst cases, women suffer physical abuse at home. And more than once I was told that my preaching needed to include more scolding. Many Latinos expected it from their priest. We priests have somehow perpetuated a culture making people think that they were not worthy to receive communion. I don't know how to change this practice.

Apart from the liturgy, in the field of catechesis, popular piety also had an impact. Parents wanted their children to prepare for first communion, so they registered the kids for classes, but only for first communion classes. Most of the children in our parish got exactly one year of formal religious education in the Catholic Church. Some parents with three children waited until the youngest had reached first communion age, and then registered all the kids for classes that year. That way they could drop all the kids off at the same time in the same year, and have one fiesta when it was all over. We offered six different levels of catechesis, but it was all first communion prep; parents did not bring the children back for five more years of faith formation. I pleaded with parents to do this, and I

was treated with blank stares. In my view, this is a national problem of utmost importance. Maybe I'm looking at this with anglo eyes, but it looked to me as if parents did not support the religious education of their children: First communion prep yes, but continuous faith formation at church, no. Again, I never could figure out how to improve this.

Another concern I had about parents was a lack of supervision over children at play. Especially in the light of the Catholic Church's renewed efforts to protect children, I am astonished at the way children run around at church-sponsored events - indoors through buildings and outdoors around them - without adequate supervision. It is a crisis waiting to happen. Some child is going to be abused or kidnapped because parents were too trusting. Before religious education got underway each week, if I saw kids playing outside without an adult present, I would ask, "Where are your parents?" When they pointed to the building, I sent them back inside and put an end to their playtime until some parents went outdoors to watch.

Many did not want to register with the church because of immigration concerns, but registration and having a record of contributions can contribute to an argument for residency. Others did not register because they would not commit to one church - they divided their time among several churches in the metro area, depending on which one had the more convenient mass time, the least demanding baptismal preparation, or the cheapest fee for a quinceañera. These decisions weakened parish membership and parish finances.

We always struggled for money, and the collection basket each week filled up with the coins and bills that people had in their pockets. More than once I had to ask people not to make change in the weekly collection. We had members putting in a \$10 bill and taking out a 5. Or taking out 7, carefully counting the ones. Ushers were accommodating them by making change in the back of church and running it up the aisle to the member who requested it. I pleaded with people to register with the parish, make a pledge, get envelopes, prepare your envelopes at home with the gift you intend to give, and put your envelope in the collection as a sign of your sacrifice. They probably thought this was an anglo approach to finances. But, if you want to succeed in the US, and many hispanics have done so, you learn how to practice financial discipline. These messages are difficult to teach, and they always brought me back to my overarching question - what is my mission? Is it helping the immigrant become more American, or helping them preserve their customs? Sometimes it's one; sometimes it's the other.

I could go on, but the point I'm making is that there's more to this issue than language. Yet languages open a door for conversation. It's hard to move forward when you literally cannot speak to people. Marketers have figured this out. Many of the household products we buy at any store carry instructions printed in two languages.

I know how scary it is to be in a situation where I don't understand the language that other people are speaking. And if you're like most Americans, you think that everybody who comes to this country should speak English, and that

everybody who lives in a foreign country where Americans are visiting should speak English. But you probably have more abilities than you think. Years ago I read a book on physical fitness, which is much easier than actually attaining physical fitness. The author said every human being has the same muscle structure. If you really want a six-pack stomach, you really can get one; your muscles are no different from anyone else's. You do not lack the appropriate muscles; you lack the will to exercise them. I think it's similar with languages. Just as there seems to be an agreement among Americans to avoid eating and exercising properly, there seems to be an agreement against learning languages. Many Americans think that learning languages is an unattainable goal, yet even children can do it.

Learning a language requires the use of your head, but it becomes much easier when you also use your heart. If you love the people you serve, if you desire communication with them, if you hunger to learn their experience of life, you will happily learn their language.

You can also expect to pass several milestones along the way. You will probably be able to read a language before you'll be able to speak it. You will be able to speak some phrases to people before you'll be able to understand what they will say back. And if you're like me, you will never completely get it. There will always be circumstances when you don't understand what someone has said, or you have expressed yourself in the wrong words, sometimes hilariously wrong words. But that can happen in English too. I got an email this summer from a young woman who began by writing, "I sometimes go to confession at the cathedral, and I have had it with you." I had to read on to find out she has had confession with me, not that she was disgusted with me. When you try speaking another language, you will also find that people are there to help you. If you traveled abroad, you know how the relief when someone whose first language is not English stops to help you out in your own language. It feels like doors of hospitality have opened wide. When you make the effort to speak another language, the people who speak it want you to succeed. They will listen attentively. They will help you find the words. They will be grateful that you are trying. And they will know that you have taken seriously your mission to proclaim the gospel to all the nations.

Sometimes the world around us isn't the world that we signed up to see. The challenges are greater than we expected, the mountains and valleys more tortuous than anyone ever told us. But here we are. For some reason, God has created us and called us into a ministry at this time and place. God did this for a reason. God has given us the tools we need to cultivate the vineyard where he gave us a job. When we make the effort to help our neighbor, we experience within the joy that comes from living the gospel of Christ.