

JAMES LEACHMAN

## Where strangers find a home

Each generation in a Catholic parish is likely to be different from the next in its origins, culture and outlook. Communities must also adapt in accordance with the gifts that newcomers bring

**T**he only thing constant in life is change. Tradition, treasuring our heritage, and seeing ourselves as part of the communion of saints, is highly significant in the Catholic Church – but, that does not mean that change is to be avoided. No, it implies change in continuity with the past. Blessed John Henry Newman is often quoted on the change process and its relationship to time. In his “Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine”, he says “time changes in order to remain the same. In a higher world it is otherwise, but here on earth, to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often”.

At the beginning of this year, I visited the parish of St Anthony in Kansas City, Missouri, with a couple of friends. As we parked in the street next to the church, we made our first personal contact with the parish – an African-American man who had also just parked his car. We followed him into the parish centre, which was set up with classrooms and desks for a school of English. There, the Caucasian American school secretary told us we would find the “pastor” (another name for parish priest) in the rectory across the road, where the Mexican-American parish secretary welcomed us warmly. It was only after these three inter-cultural encounters that we greeted the pastor.

The parish was founded 100 years ago by Italian immigrants. Their descendants have now moved out to the suburbs and local cities. Today, the parish community is made up mostly of Mexicans, Vietnamese and non-Italian Caucasians – some from central and Eastern Europe – with smaller numbers from Nigeria, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Brazil and the many Spanish-speaking countries of central and South America. This experience of encountering a rich mix of nationalities and hearing about how this Catholic community has responded to the cultural changes in the parish prompted me to reflect on how they have dealt with the changes.

The word “Catholic” comes from the Greek *katholike* – meaning “universal”, “for all”. The pastors and parishioners of St Anthony’s

parish have faced the reality of the many cultural and social changes that have taken place, and have faithfully responded to them in a most Catholic way. Parishioners and priests are fully aware that everyone is entitled to participate in such a shared project which is a parish, and have made great efforts to include immigrants, whether they understood that as the parish, the Catholic Church worldwide or the “reign of God” in terms of social justice and the care of life.

Just as in families we keep photographs and the best of the children’s toys, so too families do not outgrow the traditions they develop of how they celebrate Christmas and birthdays. But there are times when a family has to adapt to new situations, to grow up or move house. The Church, in the same way, has developed her universal tradition of teaching and moral behaviour. This tradition includes enduring values such as our belief

that Jesus is both human and divine and that the Eucharist is the centre of Christian life.

However, local churches and parishes can develop traditions which include things like their local calendar, some of the Holy Days, devotions, rules of fast and abstinence, kneeling and standing in church and local expressions of architecture.

What struck me at St Anthony’s parish was the welcoming attitude of the people. Every individual has been made

welcome as a full member, while respecting others and their differences. Each continues to make their unique contribution and affirms others as they make their own. Ever-vibrant and ever-responding to changed social conditions, the parish community has embraced change, relinquished aspects of its cultural history and adapted to welcome new immigrants.

They are living our Catholic belief that of whatever age, gender, social or economic stratum, culture, race or language we may be, each parishioner has their own contribution to make to the larger project of building the ecclesial communion of faith and justice.

Generations, communities and each of their members have, in psychological or soci-

ological talk, a “differentiated self-identity”. This means that each generation, parish and Catholic understands one’s self to be different from the next generation, parish, or person that went before or follows. Thus, it is important that each generation, parish and believer clearly understand its proper contribution and helps others to contribute theirs.

The pastor is a native English speaker; but he has learned Spanish so that he can minister to the Hispanic parishioners and he celebrates Mass in English and Spanish. The parish secretary offers a warm welcome to Spanish-speaking parishioners and by maintaining bi-lingual access for all in the parish. Because the Vietnamese community is growing, the pastor is now learning some Vietnamese. I met a Vietnamese man while we were visiting who does not speak Spanish or English; but when he comes to Mass every day, he sings the Sanctus and Agnus Dei in Latin – ministering in his own rite at the Liturgy. The pastor knows that, once he can say Mass in Vietnamese, a ready-made Vietnamese community will rapidly gather.

One way of “doing” theology in our parishes is by carefully observing the way we live and encounter people. My encounter with the people at St Anthony’s parish in Missouri brought me to reflect on the kind of attitude people have there to new immigrants. They are not treated as intruders or newcomers who are made to wait until they are embedded in the community before they can become involved in the various ministries. No, all ministries include representatives of all ages from all cultures as catechists, readers, Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, musicians, welcomers, ministers of hospitality.

When we begin to welcome the stranger and take care of one another, new life is at work in us and this new life will attract others. Ever-vibrant, this Catholic community has embraced change, relinquished aspects of its cultural history and adapted to welcome new Catholic immigrants and new life for all in their parish.

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