



LIVING THE
FAITH

How to Navigate Cultural Shifts in Your Parish

*The faces of many of our parishes are changing. The Catholic Church in the U.S. is the most ethnically diverse denomination in one of the most multicultural countries in the world. New parishioners bring with them many gifts, insights and experiences. At the same time, changing demographics in a parish can leave others feeling overwhelmed and unequipped. Maybe your own parish has experienced discomfort due to change. There is hope and help! The U.S. bishops have created a workshop and a practical guide called **Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers (BICM)**. This guide is broken up into five modules, the first of which is entitled, “Frame Issues of Diversity Theologically in Terms of the Church’s Identity and Mission to Evangelize.”*

Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/intercultural-competencies/> for more information about the BICM.

Growing Pains

For the past 10 years I have served in a parish whose face has been changing just like many across the country. It’s a small parish in a small, rural town in western Kentucky that has seen enormous demographic changes over the last 20 years. Hispanic immigrants have been moving in while the people who were raised there have been moving out and into the cities. At our parish, St. Michael’s, about 75% of our 350 families are first and second generation Hispanic immigrants. Of those Hispanic parishioners, the majority are from indigenous cultures with their own ancient languages and cultures. As the introduction to BICM says, “Today’s urban and suburban parishes are becoming ‘shared’ or multicultural

parishes. They find themselves serving a daunting combination of nationalities, language groups, cultures, and races” (p. xiii). Sometimes this shift comes with seemingly constant growing pains and cultural clashes. I’m reminded of a recent situation during our Saturday vigil mass in English. Our parish is always open and people pop in at all times of the day or night to pray, especially people from cultures where doing so is the norm. When a woman and her three kids came in to pray right in the middle of Mass, kneeling in the corner by St. Michael with her candle, praying out loud in her native language, while the three kids climbed around and played behind her, some of those attending Mass felt distracted and confused. Thankfully those participating in Mass were

understanding, helped manage the kids, and Mass continued.

BICM Provides Guidance

As part of my efforts to help my own parish navigate these growing pains and cultural clashes, I attended a BICM workshop and found it extremely useful—even after so many years of being immersed in Hispanic cultures through family and ministry. The workshop helped participants name the cultural dynamics we experience as well as see the natural stages and movements most parishes follow as we work to integrate new groups into the parish. It was also helpful to be encouraged to use neutral terms. For example, to speak of the *prevailing* culture instead of saying *predominant*, which expresses



more power. And then there's the problem of what we call each group. While recognizing there is diversity even in each group, we still need a respectful way to speak about each other. We were always running into this in our parish—do we say Americans, Anglos, whites, English-speaking, non-Hispanics? None of those seem to fit. At BICM we were taught that the USCCB has decided to say: 1) European Americans, 2) Hispanic/Latinos, 3) African Americans, 4) Asian and Pacific Islanders, and 5) Native Americans. Even just that small change has helped me in intercultural conversations and has given us a common language.

In the first module of BICM, we were reminded of the Church's

mission to evangelize not just individuals but also cultures. The Church is called to represent the communion of the Trinity, "to mirror that communion of Divine Persons in the way it welcomes and gathers all peoples – 'every tribe and tongue, people and nation' (Rev 5:9)" (BICM, p. 4). In order to be faithful to our mission, we need "intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable ministers of the Gospel to proclaim Christ's message effectively among all nations" (BICM, p. 5). These are necessary at all levels of ministry – from the leadership to the people in the pews.

Going Deeper

Visit the webpage of the USCCB Secretariat for Cultural Diversity

(<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/resources/index.cfm>) for more information about intercultural competencies and other useful resources.

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