

Multi-cultural parishes and PFG's

Everywhere throughout New Zealand there are indications of people from new cultures joining our parishes. Many of them are from Asia (particularly the Philippines, India and Korea) but they are coming also from various African cultures. While it has long been expected that this would be the case in a city like Auckland, now rural parishes are also welcoming these cultures.

A 2008 report forecast that the number of Asians in New Zealand would nearly double from 350,000 in 2006 to 790,000 in 2026, while at the same time the Maori population would increase from 565,000 to 820,000. The report predicts that the New Zealand Asian population will grow to exceed the Maori population after 2026. Such forecasts highlight that the future of Catholic life in New Zealand will be increasingly multi-cultural. Since a fundamental aim of the PFGM is to promote community in the parish, we must be active in developing effective strategies for including people from other cultures. For many, this is a challenge, because the PFG's in many parishes have been either predominantly or exclusively, Pakeka or Tauwi (people of non-Maori descent).

To undertake this welcome, there has to be some appreciation of these cultures, and it is not enough to classify them as 'Asian', since there are many cultures within Asia. We often are unaware of the customs of different cultures and generally expect that "those arriving here should adapt and become like us" This is typical of a dominant culture's attitudes to others. Those arriving do have to adapt in ways that many people never appreciate. A person who does not speak English when they arrive in New Zealand has to undertake enormous adjustments that can only be understood when a New Zealand visits a foreign language where English is not spoken. They also have to accept saturated Rugby news on television and in newspapers!

In defining Pakeha culture, Paul Spoonley suggested it was "membership in the dominant group and by a particular relationship to the Maori and to the social and physical environment of New Zealand" (*Spoonley, 1994, p. 89*). Because New Zealand is a bicultural society there already exists a wide appreciation of Maori culture, and with it, the various Polynesian cultures. Various adaptations have been made to both Pakeha and Maori cultures over many years and while some tensions remain, Maori culture is accepted and appreciated despite it being a minority culture. There are many Maori traditions that are appreciated by Paheka and incorporated into the wider society.

This should be a help in welcoming other cultures, but it is not always the case. Cultural Awareness begins with appreciating why we do the things the way we do and understanding the reason for our values, beliefs and perceptions. Sometimes we do not understand our own culture until we engage with another culture which occurs far more frequently now because of the availability of travelling to different places. Until we are exposed to other cultures we naturally think that the way we do things is the best (and only way) to do them. Once we start comparing, we might still believe our way is better (or superior).

We come to healthier awareness when we can respect that different ways can be equally appropriate. This becomes vital when we interact with people from other cultures because often they will see, interpret and value things in a different ways. Words in one culture can mean something different in another culture and what is considered appropriate behavior in one culture can be inappropriate in another one.

In a culture where relationships are highly valued, meals have a social connotation, whereas in cultures where 'time is money' the conversation and length of the meal will often be very different. An adult may advise their teenage son to 'look me in the eye when I am talking with you, yet in many cultures his is regarded as disrespectful.

Cultural awareness leads us to appreciate that similarities and differences are both important, and that respect and appreciation will enrich everyone. The more we understand the reason why people do what they do, the easier it is to appreciate and respect this behavior. It is natural to be afraid of what we don't understand, but true community happens when there is a love of difference.

A man visiting a cemetery placed flowers on his mother's grave. Nearby, he observed a Chinese man placing many dishes of food on the grave of a deceased relative. The man thought this behavior was very odd and he sarcastically asked the Chinese man "When do you think your friend will come up to eat his meal?" The man replied "Maybe sir, at the same time as your friend comes up to smell your flowers"!

Eastern and Western cultures have some distinctly different practices and they readily observable. Many Asian towns and cities have huge populations, so their idea of space, privacy and their sense of being an individual are affected by that. Their clothing is affected by the weather, which in many places is very hot. Within Asian cultures there are differences, but generally, Asians are noted for their politeness and their agreeableness. To survive, they have to get along with others. They find the confrontational, direct approach of most Western people, very unusual and for that reason they can be easily overpowered when it comes to expressing their opinion.

They generally do not show negative emotions, so it is not easy for a Westerner to 'read' their moods. Punctuality is a secondary value to relationships with people. Because they have to compete with many others, orderly queuing is not always a normal practice. Authority figures are highly respected and disagreement rarely expressed. Their compliance can be interpreted by Westerners as agreement.

In order to welcome people of other cultures we need to make an effort to understand them and appreciate them. It is wise to remember Abraham Lincoln's words, "there is a man over there I don't like, I must get to know him".

When one culture regards itself as superior to another culture and is in a position to enforce its way, it often results in a situation like a rock smashing an egg. The weaker culture is damaged or sometimes, totally destroyed.

This sense of superiority ignores the sacredness of other cultures and not only fails to appreciate but also benefit, from it cultural riches. Beginning with such simple gifts such as music and food, each culture has something that can enrich others. Today we are rediscovering the sense of connectedness of all life forms that most ancient cultures celebrated in their spirituality, laws and customs. Sadly, some of these cultures were devastated by conquering cultures in earlier times.

Every culture creates boundaries that divide, classify and rank and their are established roles for those who are designated to maintain the boundaries. These might be law makers, enforcers or practitioners. They might be called the 'big-shots'. There are nearly always some individuals who cross the boundaries or challenge them. This could occur by accident, by a deliberate decision to 'invade' or as the result of becoming dissatisfied or having being marginalised.

There are 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in every culture. This applies to church culture as much as to civil culture. The 'insiders' include the authority figures and big shots who determine the culture. No changes are made without their consent. They are always a minority of the total number of insiders, though sometimes the include members who are genuinely concerned for the welfare of outsiders. This group might be called the 'insider participants'. The other insiders are the less important, despite forming the majority of the culture. They have little or no voice and include children, some of the impaired, those marginalised by language or gender. In some cultures the may be given an occasional voice (e.g. a vote), but often they feel their voice is a 'lone wolf'.

Within the church there are those who claim that if the leader is elected without any consultation with the wider church by a small defined group of aged men (College of Cardinals), then they have no voice. The same applies to the appointment of local Bishops. While the vast majority of church members are insiders, they are non-participant insiders. "The Churches," wrote Thomas Merton, "have created a separate world within the world, a world claiming to be "sacred", while surreptitiously gaining and retaining for themselves every possible worldly advantage and privilege."

Cultures also have outsiders. These people are tolerated by the culture but do not fully belong. They include the unimportant (socially and medically), servants, and strangers. They are participants in the culture but outside it. Another group of outsiders are non-participants. These include prisoners, tourists, visitors and opportunists (some traders). They are tolerated but often regarded as nuisances.

Our challenge as Christians, and specifically as PFG members is to recognise the outsiders among us and respond to their needs. The hallmark of Jesus' ministry was his passion for including outsiders. Jesus did not remain comfortably within the 'big-shot' group. He challenged insider participants to encounter and welcome the marginalised outsiders. In Mark 1:40-44 we hear how great was Jesus' compassion, that he would reach out and embrace a leper, and so become a leper himself. He constantly was 'a friend of tax-collectors and sinners'.

If a person holds a 'big shot' role within an organization (sub-culture) it might never occur to them that others feel marginalised or excluded from having any influence. For that reason it is important to identify the insiders and outsiders in: the wider church, our parish and even our PFG? If we find ourselves being critical of neglect from the church or the parish, we should look closer to home and ask are we doing the same within our own PFG?

If a PFG member has not attended any activities nor been in contact with other members for some months they are already becoming marginalized. They have lost some of the 'story'. The longer this goes on, the more real it is. Some decide never to reactivate their interest, and sadly this is allowed to happen. A group coordinator may say "I emailed them but they did not reply". Such a response is not only inadequate and non-pastoral, it contributes to the ongoing exclusion of the person. A phone call, and better still, a personal visit, will allow a conversation to take place whereby a story can be told and heard. Of course the responsibility for this initiative in a mature community (an established PFG) should not remain an expectation only of the group coordinator.

At the parish level, the PFGM faces a wider challenge. Consider the changes that are occurring, sometimes dramatically and quickly in some parishes. A parish could change like this over 20-25 years.

1990: The parish is 90% Pakeha (Tauriwi) and 10% Polynesian. Tauriwi are 90% British/Celtic and 10% European

2000: The parish is 95% Tauriwi and 5% Polynesian. Tauriwi are 60% British/Celtic; 10% European, 15% Middle Eastern and 15% Asian

2012. The parish is 95% Pakeha, and 5% Polynesian, Tauriwi are 40% British; 5% European. 20% Middle Eastern and 35% Asian

The 40% British/Celtic are Irish, English and Scottish

The 5% European are Dutch, German and Italian

The 20% Middle-Eastern are Sudanese, Kenyan, Iraqi, Palestinian and Sth African

The 30% Asian are Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Indian, Burmese, Lebanese

This begins to demonstrate that there are many cultures to be considered. Each of them has variations. When we think about what things need to be taken into account there is:

Worship (use of different languages, music, dance etc)

How can they be made to feel welcome? (Who do we ask)

Leadership (What cultural attitudes do they have?)

Male & female roles (What do we need to know?)

Meetings (Are they comfortable meeting in homes?)

Urban or rural background (How does this affect their attitudes?)

One to one conversation (What helps?)

Do they want to belong? Can we include them in groups (e.g. PFG's)? When we understand the challenges, including isolation and loneliness, of adopting a new culture, our PFG's have something to offer parishes now and in the immediate future. Because traditional Pakeha participation is ageing and decreasing, Tauwiwi participation of Asian and African culture will increasingly dominate participation in Sunday worship. Many of these culture are more devotional than we have become accustomed to, and this must be respected.

It is common for people to gather in a common suburb or town with those of the same culture and language group. This is perfectly understandable. For this reason, certain cultural groups will have a noticeable presence at Sunday worship. Some, such as the Filipinos, will want to contribute their musical abilities which can enrich the liturgy. It is a challenge for them to integrate with other Tauwiwi cultures.

The gospel call includes 'welcoming the stranger', and already in some parishes, it is the 'old timers' who feel like strangers. Dialogue with those who elders or leaders of particular cultural groups can lead to discovering ways of how families of new cultures can become involved in PFG's.

Although there are many multi-cultural parishes in Australia and some in Auckland, that have had PFG's for some years, there is no one formula for including people. In some parishes there is a high level of involvement and in others, very low involvement, even when parishioners are from the same cultural group. In some parishes people have been invited to form a PFG of their own cultural group and this has had mixed-success.

It is a challenge for us in the coming years and hopefully we can encourage each other with our efforts and learn from one another. The starting place is to listen and dialogue with representatives of these cultures in each of our parishes.

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