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PRIESTS DIVIDED ON HOW TO SERVE SPANISH-SPEAKING

By Father James Murphy, printed in the February 12, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*



Photo by John E Boll 2013

Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Sacramento

Before 1969, there were four parishes celebrating Mass in Spanish in the Diocese of Sacramento. Since then the number has grown to 22. In that time also the handful of priests interested in the Spanish speaking apostolate has grown to 28 priests who have taken courses in the Spanish language.

On paper this represents considerable progress in a short period. But is it enough? Or is it really effective? There are some involved in the Spanish-speaking apostolate who have serious doubts. "Spanish Masses don't solve the problem," says Father Keith Kenny, former pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Sacramento and now director of the welfare division of the California Catholic Conference. "It's throwing them a bone. Basically Mexican-Americans do not feel at home in local parishes – they (parishes) are culturally foreign to them," he says.

What is being faced here is a dilemma not only for the Diocese of Sacramento but for the Catholic Church in the entire nation. Few in the Spanish-speaking apostolate deny that the Church in the past did not accept Mexican-Americans as whole-heartedly as it should have. But now that the Anglo Church has finally awakened to its responsibilities and to the spiritual depth Mexican-Americans have to offer, how does an Anglo Church make up for lost time?

The most widely accepted answer in recent years has been local parish programs, especially Spanish Masses. Many of the people attending those Masses can speak at least some English but the idea has been to integrate Mexican-American Catholics into the parish system while encouraging them to preserve their cultural identity. "Integration, not assimilation" has been the popular slogan.



Father Daniel Casey

Father Daniel Casey, Director of the Spanish-speaking Apostolate and the organizer of the present parish program, has been chief proponent of the integration philosophy in the Sacramento Diocese. "I believe the majority of Mexican-Americans do not want to be isolated from the Anglo Catholics," he says. "I believe unity is practical and is what the majority of people want."

Manuel Ferrales, Director of the Diocesan Department of Mexican-American Affairs, a social agency founded by Father Casey, tends to agree. The function of his department is to sensitize all areas of the diocese, including parishes to the needs of the Spanish speaking, he says.

How effective this sensitization has been so far is what the debate is all about. Those like Father Kenny, who are opposed to the integration at the parish level, believe the ideal is simply not practical. The cultural gap between Mexican-Americans and the Anglo Church is so wide and

the prejudices against them are so deep, he says, that they do not feel at home in the present parish structure and never will. The thousands of Mexicans who are joining various Protestant groups with well-organized Spanish-speaking programs is one proof of what he is saying.

But if integration is not the answer, what is? “Separate structures for the Mexican-American Church,” says Father Kenny.

By this he means a return to a system as old as the American Church itself – national parishes with their own specially trained priests and programs along parallel but separate lines from the Anglo Church. Theologically such disunity is not the ideal, Father Kenny admits—even the older national parishes for European ethnic groups were only transitional structures leading eventually to complete integration into the mainstream of the English-speaking Church. But for Mexican-Americans permanent separation is the only practical solution, he says.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

Sanctuary of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, Sacramento

Our Lady of Guadalupe Church is an example of a national parish with a Mexican style church built 15 years ago exclusively to serve the Mexican-American population in the Sacramento area. About 2500 people attend Mass there on Sunday, according to Father Jorge Moreno, its present pastor.

When one studies the whole cultural tone of this uniquely Mexican parish one begins to understand what Father Kenny means by the cultural gap Mexican-Americans feel in Anglo parishes. It would be very difficult for any other parish in the diocese, for example, to produce the caliber of liturgical experience to be found in the monthly mariachi Mass in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. Spanish Masses in other parts of the Diocese are dead experiences by comparison. A parishioner from the South Sacramento area comparing the liturgies puts it this way: "When I leave that mariachi Mass in Guadalupe I feel I can take on anything in the world."



Father Keith Kenny

What Father Kenny is calling for is several parishes capable of this—even several dioceses. "The long-term solution is to have two or three Mexican-American dioceses in California," he says.

He cites the national Cursillo movement as an example of a movement that is going in this direction. The Spanish-speaking section of this organization is making strong demands at present to break off and form its own national secretariat.

The pain of this dilemma for the US Church was presented in a practical way last October at the Catholic Bicentennial hearings held in Sacramento by a local priest who had personal experience of the problem it can raise in a parish. Father Gene Lucas, associate pastor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, was pastor of Winters for five years and he recounted at

those hearings the pain and tension he experienced trying to include Mexican-Americans and Anglo Catholics on the same parish council there. In the end, he says, he gave up and had two parish councils.

Talking with the Herald, he raised another dimension of the problem not often recognized: "As a priest working with Spanish-speaking you live in isolation from the rest of the Diocese and the Church," he says. Many priests crack under the tension and end up with depression and other problems, he says.

That there is pain and tension both for individuals and the Spanish-speaking Church as a whole is undeniable. In 1972 at the national Encuentro meeting, an organization involving the top leaders of the US Spanish-speaking apostolate, the question came out in the open—whether to remain with the Anglo church or begin forming a separate Spanish Church in the US. The Puerto Rican group almost succeeded in swinging the meeting toward voting for separation. The meeting eventually voted to continue trying integration, but the bitterness and tension of that meeting is still talked about, and is reflected down through the levels of the Church.

That *Encuentro* did in fact reject the separation concept is significant, however. The policy of integration at local parishes has remained since then the most widely accepted approach. Any serious move at this point to set up a separate Church for Spanish-speaking in the United States would take a reversal of existing trends.

Archivist's Comment in 2014

The whole world has greatly changed since 1976. In California, Hispanics have become the majority population in the state and Bishop Jaime Soto is from a Hispanic family.

Many parishes in the diocese now celebrate Mass in various languages: English, Spanish, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Korean, Tongan, Chinese, Tagalog, Laotian, and Aramaic to name some. In the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, Sunday liturgy is celebrated in over 50 languages.

It was a wise decision in 1972 when the Spanish-speaking leaders at the National Encuentro decided to accept and live with the tensions of language and culture in order to walk the uneven path toward equality and unity rather than suspicion and separation, keeping the diverse Catholic communities united.

Fifty years from today, the Catholic church will look, feel and be very different from our present experience but I hope there will still be one Catholic community of faith united in respect, reverence and love for one another as the community follows Jesus the Good Shepherd who leads all people to the Father who loves and embraces the whole human race.