

Study: Catholic parishes are increasingly multicultural

Katherine Burgess Religion News Service | Nov. 18, 2013

At Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Durham, N.C., prayers are offered in six different languages at holiday Masses. Most parishioners are Hispanic. Others come from India, the Philippines and different parts of Africa.

"We are all brothers and sisters in Christ," said Katushka Olave, Spanish pastoral care associate at the Roman Catholic parish. "There is no reason for separation, no reason for there to be differences between us."

Immaculate Conception is among more than a third of U.S. Catholic parishes that are multicultural, according to a recent study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

An estimated 6,700 parishes met at least one of three multicultural criteria: Mass is celebrated in a language other than English or Latin; non-Hispanic whites make up a minority of members; and/or any two parishioners are likely to be of a different race at least one-third of the time.

The study found an increase of 1.3 percentage points in Hispanic parishioners from 2005 to 2010, accounting for 40 percent of all growth in U.S. Catholic churches. Non-Hispanic white parishioners declined by 1.5 percent points during that time, while Asian, Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander parishioners grew by half a percentage point.

Sulpician Fr. Anthony Pogorelc, fellow at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America, said the increase in multiculturalism could change the Catholic church's emphasis on social justice issues and community building. Hispanics are often less wealthy and care about the poor, for example. Korean churches often share a meal after celebrating Mass.

The report estimated that 58 percent of Catholic adults are non-Hispanic whites, while 34 percent are Hispanic, 3 percent are black and 3 percent are Asian.

Mary Gautier, senior research associate at CARA, said this increasing diversity in the church reflects the increasing diversity in the U.S. population as a whole.

"We've always been an immigrant church and we've always been a church of great diversity and we've always been pretty good at living together and exploring commonalities and celebrating our Catholic heritage in a variety of cultural expressions," Gautier said.

But while some churches have diversity, they can lack interaction among different ethnic groups, Pogorelc said, creating a balkanized congregation with separate Masses and separate youth groups.

"One of the things that really needs to be considered pastorally is if we're truly multicultural, how does the church build bridges among these groups?" Pogorelc said. "Catholic means universal. We're a universal church, we're not just one ethnicity, we're throughout the world, we speak all languages."

CARA analyzed lists of parishes cited in the Official Catholic Directory and also conducted surveys of parish staff, volunteers and parishioners for its report. The report was commissioned by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Cultural Diversity.

Pogorelc said even though the church has become more diverse, it still must strive to bring different cultures together.

"This is an American challenge as well as a Catholic challenge -- to really try to bring people together," Pogorelc said. "It's easy to deal with people who are like you rather than to have to stretch and deal with someone who is different than you, but if we are truly Catholic, that's what we do."

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