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Brooklyn bishop calls church to unite in faith with immigrants

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Catholic parishes are called to build communion with immigrants and newcomers so people unite in faith rather than solely because of their cultural backgrounds, said the bishop of Brooklyn, N.Y., who has worked for 38 years to improve immigrant relations.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio, former executive director of Migration and Refugee Services for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told a conference Monday on the integration of immigrants into the Catholic church that in U.S. parishes, immigrants and longtime members can learn from each other if they are open to doing so.

"Migration really is not a problem to be solved, but rather something we must naturally grow into understanding ourselves better," DiMarzio said.

He said the "idea of welcome is what's important."

"Our church has been one that has, with struggle, unified many cultures," he said. "We've seen this unity based on faith with many different struggles over the years, but the immigration perhaps presented the church with an opportunity to build communion between culturally diverse peoples, both natives and newcomers.

"It was not easy. And it's not complete. But we've learned a lot over these two centuries that we have been an immigrant church in the United States," said DiMarzio, who once served on the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, now known as the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Travelers.

The bishop acknowledged that the integration of diverse cultures "is not just a matter of assimilation into the dominant U.S. culture, or even our Catholic culture, but poses challenges to long-existing communities." He suggested that parishes "draw from the gifts and the strengths and the contribution all the cultures bring us."

Today, the U.S. church is called to continue its tradition of welcoming new people despite the numerous conflicts portrayed in the broader society, DiMarzio said.

"Institutions do not integrate immigrants," he explained. "They can facilitate it, but immigrants integrate, not institutions. And Catholic institutions cannot effectively contribute to immigrant immigration if they lose sight of the agency of the immigrants themselves and do not model themselves on openness and inclusion."

DiMarzio cited examples in his diocese, often referred to as the "Diocese of Immigrants," where parishes have melded two, three, four, even five different cultures into one community through prayer, Mass in different languages and cultural events.

Nearly 100 attendees of the conference organized by the New York-based Center for Migration Studies at Casa Italiana at Holy Rosary Parish heard DiMarzio describe his family's challenges as members of an Irish parish in

his native Newark, N.J. He said his grandparents, natives of Italy, did not attend Mass at the parish because they did not feel welcome.

The bishop also recalled the day as a child when a priest stopped to talk as he worked in the yard with his grandfather. After hearing the priest and his grandfather talk in Italian, DiMarzio said he felt confident that he could indeed become a priest. Until that point, he explained, he felt that that was not possible.

It is important for parishes to welcome immigrants so that the newcomers do not feel that they must give up their cultural identity in order to fit in, he said.

DiMarzio urged parishes and dioceses to develop pastoral education programs, charitable and employment services and other ministries to help people become one with the church community.

"If (immigrants) feel welcome, if they feel strong, we will accomplish our task," he said.

The bishop also took time in his presentation to discuss the reasons immigrants make their way to the U.S.

"Immigrants come to this country to work. That's clearly the case. That's why we don't understand the (issue of) the undocumented. That's why they come here. They come to work, not to go on welfare, not to be a burden, but to work. Once we can understand that as a nation, I think it will be much easier and much quicker to integrate them and give you legal status," he said.

All immigrants deserve respect, dignity and the opportunity to contribute to society, DiMarzio added.

"As we look to our country today, the issue of immigration is not a new one, but it seems like every generation facing it forgets the lessons of the past. We need to relearn them and not forget what we've learned and what we've struggled to."

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