Raising an Echo in the Christian Heart: Music That Names, Defines, and Unites Our Human Experience

BY RUFINO ZARAGOZA, OFM, BARBARA TRACEY, PEDRO RUBALCAVA, AND DIANA MACALINTAL

Rufino Zaragoza, OFM

The opening of Gaudium et Spes (GS) contains this thought: “Nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in the hearts” of those who follow Christ. To raise an echo in the Christian heart invites us to go deeper into our own hearts and to go out, beyond our own borders, toward the hearts of others.

There is such an urgent need in our country

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today for border crossers and bridge builders, and in a unique way we, pastoral musicians, are capable of taking on this role. For just as music names, defines, and unites our human experience, music can also bond people of diverse cultural backgrounds and languages.

In this plenum, we want to model what we wish convey: that to “raise an echo” in human hearts, we need more than one cultural lens; we need multiple voices and perspectives. If we want to “raise an echo” in the hearts of our communities, we need this kind of dialogue, encounter, and mutuality in our Liturgy planning teams, combined choirs, and diocesan events. Therefore, here we have four people from different parts of the country and various cultural backgrounds, with a tapestry of experiences in ministry and Liturgy.

A Familiar Model of Conversion

First, let’s do a reality check. Some of you are currently serving in a monolingual English parish or ministry. Your experience with other cultural or language groups beyond European Americans might be limited. The path of conversion toward intercultural communion that we will present here might be difficult to relate to if you have not yet had experiences of ministering with those from other languages or cultural backgrounds. So, here is a parallel model of transformation.

Like many of you, I started out as a pianist and then went on to play the organ. I had this experience when I was eighteen. I will never forget my first organ lesson with Dr. Desi Klempay. All we did that first afternoon was try the various stops, and he explained the different sounds to my piano-attuned-ear. I was learning the basic mechanics of the instrument, but I was just at phase one. There were several more phases to becoming an organist. We go through similar conversions in developing our intercultural competency.

We begin by learning basics about other cultures and incorporating some of their language and music into the mainstream Liturgy of our community. Then we move into deeper, more personal interaction with the people of those cultures and learn that culture goes beyond language and that hospitality is more than feeling welcomed. Finally, we hope to experience a sense of communion with those different from us, where each of us is spiritually transformed so that our differences become the way to unity in Christ.

“Diversity” can be a troublesome term because it may connote a problem that needs to be solved. We have some people who look different or speak something other than or in addition to English, and now we have a problem. But there’s another way to look at this starting point on the journey.

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First Phase: Diversity
Barbara Tracey

My parish, St. Michael, is a gothic church in the heart of Milwaukee. Built in 1893, it grew to have twelve Sunday Masses each week by the 1950s. The church building still has many of its original features from its German founders, but over the years these have been augmented by its current congregation to include items, such as a pakwan, an artifact from the country of Laos used for welcoming and blessing rituals, and a traditional Mary altar that includes images of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of Myanmar, and Notre Dame du Laos.

How Did We Get This Way?

The parish was founded by German immigrants, whose names appear on our stained glass windows, and after World War II, displaced Germans from Eastern Europe arrived as refugees. Then in the 1960s, we began having Spanish Mass, and soon after that, African American neighbors became part of the parish. When a group of them came to me in 1996 asking to start a gospel choir, I had no idea what I was getting into! But those singers and their repertoire are the backbone of what we sing in English today. Meanwhile, this was the time of “white flight” from the city, and despite all these newcomers, the parish population dwindled.

In the 1980s, Lao and Hmong soldiers and their families who had helped the United States in the Vietnam War arrived as refugees. The U.S. State Department spread them across the country, thinking they would better assimilate that way. But strong familial ties overcame geographic separation.

“It was lovely that there were multiple offerings of Liturgies/prayer services to nourish our spirits. Each one I attended was lovely and uplifting.”

A Convention Participant
distance, and Hmong from all over the country migrated to where they found a welcome place, including Milwaukee.

A Hmong catechist approached the small remnant of St. Michael elders and asked if some of the Hmong could rent space in the church to pray. Instead of letting them just be renters, the parish leaders invited them to be parishioners and pray with the entire St. Michael community. And so they did and were quickly joined by many more Hmong families. At one Easter Vigil, we baptized 115 of these new members.

Since 2012, the same immigrant pattern has been repeated by a new group who came to the parish simply because our Lao pastoral associate, a refugee herself, met a family at an Asian store and asked them who they were. She learned they were refugees from Myanmar (formerly Burma), from the Karen ethnic group that came to the United States from refugee camps in Thailand.

As cradle Catholics, they had been attending another church in Milwaukee, where no one had reached out to them. Sister Alice invited them to visit and join St. Michael’s, and now we have Karen, Chin, and Karenni families (three of the 147 ethnic groups that make up Myanmar, each using a completely different language).

Regardless of ethnicity, the fundamental human need is the same: People want a safe, warm place to live, education for themselves and their children, and a loving, worshiping community. For those first German elders who welcomed in the Hmong, their love for their parish outweighed any fear they had of those who were different. When Sr. Alice invited the Karen, she was repeating the same pattern of welcome.

**A Bigger Story**

St. Michael probably doesn’t look like your parish, but it reflects part of a bigger story of movement in the Church. Data from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) show a massive migration happening in the Church. Fifty years ago, most of the Catholics in the United States (many of whom were immigrants) resided in the Northeast and the Midwest. The seminaries, churches, and schools remain, but the people have moved.

CARA data also show that the Church is changing color (see Table 2 on the next page). Although the dominant culture was once white and European, today the majority of Catholic families with children are Hispanic, with large numbers from Mexico and Central America.

If you look carefully at your congregation, you may find people of color—there—if not today, then probably tomorrow.

**It Begins with “Hello”**

When I started working at St. Michael Parish, I told my predecessor that I was worried because I didn’t speak Spanish, Lao, or Hmong. She replied: “Language is the least of your problems,” and she was right. The relationships that I had to establish, balance, and maintain were very tricky and obscure to this white girl from the suburbs. It took me years of phone calls, conversations, and casual gatherings for people to recognize and know me. But that’s where it has to start.

Table 1 (above) shows the average numbers of registered parishioners and Mass attendees as reported by pastors. It reflects our experience in the Midwest and the Northeast, where a typical parish has lost 167 registered parishioners and twenty-two Mass attendees since 2008. But those of you working in parishes in the South and West are more likely to feel that the Church is growing, since you have likely seen a significant increase in the number of registered parishioners and Mass attendees (up ninety-three) since 2008.

Two churches have been emerging in the United States simultaneously over the past sixty-five years. One is closing parishes and feeling decline, while the other is bursting at the seams. From where I sit in the center of Milwaukee, the Church around us looks like a church in decline, but at St. Michael, we are hanging on by welcoming newcomers.
Mass at 10:30 AM that includes all our languages in song and prayer. The priest presides in English, except for a “welcome ritual” where we all say together the various ways our parishioners say “hello” or “good morning” (see below). All the Asian languages here are tonal, and my pronunciation is dicey, but even a small gesture like this is a concrete manifestation for our community that says that all are truly welcome here and have a place at the table.

When I began leading music at this Liturgy, I sometimes felt like a traffic director. I had a core group of English singers, and I would call up different groups to sing at different times: the Lao for the preparation song, the Hmong for Communion, etc. Aside from being distracting, it became clear from all this movement that we had to learn one another’s songs, and we have.

The beauty of singing with other cultures is that when a song is in your own language, you lead and sing out, and when it is in someone else’s language, you follow and rely on the strength of others. In the process, not only do you get better at singing in languages you don’t speak but you also learn to depend on one another. Pope Francis tells us: “It is an indisputable fact that no single culture can exhaust the mystery of our redemption in Christ.”

At St. Michael, we have amazing potluck meals, and twice a year, we all make egg rolls as a fundraiser—40,000 egg rolls each time. The entire parish takes part, picking and chopping cabbage, wrapping and frying the rolls, taking orders, and delivering the finished product. (We are taking orders for egg rolls.)

Brother Rufino

At St. Michael, the first phase of intercultural development was just getting to know people, the specific places they were from, listening to their stories, and including their songs and words in the Liturgy.

It is like a pianist learning the names of the organ stops and recognizing their unique sounds. But then you have to keep going further.

On my journey to becoming an organist, I had to interact with a whole new kind of literature and musical practice. My hands were no longer playing on only one keyboard but on two separate manuals, and my feet were moving at the same time. I had to incorporate a new way of being a musician into my experience of being a pianist.

In the second phase of intercultural development, we move from knowing simple basics about other people—a kind of head knowledge—to interacting with them, including them in our lives and us in theirs. This is a knowledge of the heart.

Second Phase: Inclusion
Pedro Rubalcava

Dr. Timothy Matozina, professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame, said: “The Church is holy not because all are welcome; the Church is holy because all belong.” We place a lot of emphasis on hospitality and welcome, and rightly so. However, it’s time to recognize the difference between feeling welcomed and feeling that we belong. By nature of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have a right and duty to a full, conscious, and active participation in the Liturgy. What does that look like?

The Goal of Multicultural Liturgy

The path from understanding another with the head to understanding them with the heart is really about coming to experience how we are joined to the action of Christ in the Liturgy. Recognizing our differences is natural. Struggling with
communicating when we speak different languages and have different world views is a challenge. Yet we need to be clear what our goal is:

[T]he goal of multicultural Liturgy is not to celebrate cultural diversity. As with all Christian liturgical celebration, the goal of these celebrations is to celebrate what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and what God continues to do for all humanity through, with, and in the Son who suffered, died, and rose again for our salvation. . . . [I]t is crucial that all involved in preparing a multicultural Liturgy understand that the overarching goal of planning such celebrations is assisting a diverse assembly to find its unity in Christ rather than merely showcasing cultural differences.  

This is definitely a process of maturing not only in understanding but also in faith, and what we do when we gather for the community’s prayer has much to do with our attitudes and dispositions. If the Liturgy is in fact “the privileged place for the encounter of Christians with God and the one whom he has sent, Jesus Christ,” do we come prepared to encounter that Risen Christ?

Seeing Christ through Another’s Eyes

Several years ago, I served as a pastoral associate in the Diocese of San Diego at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, which was about seventy percent Filipino. Among them were a couple of Vietnamese families, from whom came a vocation to the priesthood. Father Christopher Nguyen, sj, celebrated his first Mass at our parish and asked if the choir would sing something in Vietnamese. Brother Rufino Zaragoza, ofm, connected me to the song “Tâm Tình Hiên Dâng,” for which he had recently published an English version called “A Gift of Love.” We learned and sang that song, and Fr. Christopher’s mother and grandmother, who did not speak English, were deeply touched at hearing this song for the first time in twenty-five years since leaving Vietnam.

In 1994, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued an instruction titled *Inculturation and the Roman Liturgy* (IRL). The instruction reaffirmed that “[m]usic and singing, which express the soul of people, have pride of place in the Liturgy” (IRL, 40). In the same paragraph, the document quoted the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), which said: “In some parts of the world, especially mission lands, there are people who have their own musical traditions, and these play a great part in their religious and social life. Due importance is to be attached to their music and a suitable place given to it . . .” (SC, 119).

In our effort to include the music of other cultures, we also need to be careful that we don’t misinterpret how a particular culture expresses its faith in song. In trying to develop a multicultural spirituality, we can easily make assumptions from within our own experience as to what is genuine and acceptable for another culture.

Take, for example, singing accompanied by hand-clapping, rhythmic swaying, and dance by the participants. The previously mentioned instruction says that these “can have a place in the liturgical actions of these peoples on condition that they are always the expression of true communal prayer of adoration, praise, offering, and supplication, and not simply a performance” (IRL, 42). The only way to learn what is true and genuine prayer for a particular community is to enter into a relationship with that community and listen for what moves their heart.

Finding Common Ground

Last month I had dinner with a lovely couple to talk about the Liturgy and music for their wedding. Cecilia is second-generation Vietnamese, and Armando is second-generation Mexican. We spoke about how to engage in participation Vietnamese-only- and Spanish-only-speaking friends and relatives. They told me about a Vietnamese tea ceremony that happens.
prior to the wedding, where the families get to know one another. This ceremony also included a goat! When Armando talked to his parents and relatives about participating in this ceremony, they got excited when he mentioned the goat because it reminded them of *birria*, a Mexican dish from Jalisco made with goat. In the end, Armando and Cecilia decided not to have the tea ceremony, but Armando’s relatives were still looking forward to having the goat!

When we prepare multicultural Liturgies, sometimes what we think is the common denominator—music or language—is not. We need to enter into a relationship with one another and fall in love if the symbolism and meaning of the “goats” in our lives are to come to light. In the end, we may discover that the goat isn’t that important after all. “In empowering the various cultural groups of a parish to share the particular way their people have interpreted the mystery of Christ in communal prayer we all gain insights into the extraordinarily profound way God calls us all to conversion and discipleship.”

Our homework on the road from inclusion to communion is to see with a broader vision and to pray with others at Eucharist more than once in a while. Can we see the Risen Christ through another’s eyes and thus expand our vision of Church?

**Brother Rufino**

When we fall in love, like Armando and Cecilia and their families did, we move from a mental concept of what makes us different to an opening of our hearts that leads to inclusion and belonging. As musicians, we go from learning repertoire from another culture to engaging with the people of that culture. But even there, we
need to go further.

I thought that because I could play a few basic preludes and fugues on the organ or use some of the language and skills of organists that must make me an organist, too. Then I heard great organists play, and I understood that I had to have the soul of an organist.

A true organist does not just play from the score. An organist knows how to shape the sound of the instrument to the sound of the assembly, the energy of the ritual, the acoustics and atmosphere of the day. Creative introductions, improvisations between verses, rousing codas: all express a musicality beyond mere mechanics. To be an organist, I still needed years of immersion in the literature in order to develop not only my skills but also my spirit.

From diversity, to inclusion, to communion—the reciprocity of intercultural exchange and development comes from a spiritual transformation that is a gift from God and leads to a mystical understanding of our place in the larger flow of God’s creation, just as a true organist understands her artistry as a gift from the Divine and that she is merely a vessel for Divine Beauty.

Third Phase: Communion
Diana Macalintal

Among those present for this plenum presentation in Grand Rapids, only a few stood when asked who was born outside of the United States. According to U.S. Census Bureau projections, those standing are 13.5 percent of the U.S. population. A few more people stood when asked who communicates at home in another language other than English? They are among twenty percent of the U.S. population. After English and Spanish, the next most-used language at home is Chinese.

Almost half the people in the room stood when asked who was born before 1960. They make up what are called the “pre-Vatican II” and “Vatican II” generations. In 1987, those two generations were seventy-eight percent of the Catholic population. By 2011, that number dropped to forty-three percent. But there’s good news!

More than half the room stood to be identified as the “Post-Vatican II” generation (born between 1961 and 1978) and the “Millennial” and “post Millennial” generations (born after 1979). These generations are the largest group of the Catholic population today. We are a young Church!

**Differences Matter Until They Don’t**

We can get caught up in externals like ethnicity, language, or age, and sometimes we make these a person’s identity: that Asian liturgist, the black ballerina, a female president, that Spanish lector, this youth cantor. These externals are certainly badges of honor that elicit pride, yet they are also brand marks that label us as different, sending a subtle message that we are to be known for our difference and not our ability. I pray for the day when we are known simply as brothers and sisters, and externals no longer are the first adjectives that define us. Until then, we need to pay great attention to the externals because when we bring our differences together, we reflect a clearer image of God.

One place where God’s image is clearly seen in my diocese is at the parish of Most Holy Trinity in a poorer and very diverse area of San Jose in California. The parishioners are Vietnamese, Filipino, Mexican, Samoan, Tongan, Guamanian, Pacific Islander, and everyone in between. It’s a thriving community, where 7,000 people come to Mass every Sunday to celebrate in four different languages.

Malia Mika is a parish leader and the tribal leader of the Samoans in our diocese. With her blessing, I share her story with you.

Decades ago, Malia lived in Samoa. One year, she visited her brother, who sang in the choir at Most Holy Trinity. At that time, there was much conflict between the various ethnic groups living in the parish.

During her visit, a community member, for petty reasons, murdered Malia’s brother in front of the church. Her life changed that day, not only because her brother died but because his blood, spilled on that ground, now committed Malia to that foreign place. For her and the Samoan people, wherever Samoan blood is mixed with the earth, there too will the Samoans give their very lives.

Malia stayed in San Jose and in that parish. Since then, she has dedicated her life to making that community a home for those seeking a safe place to belong.

**Brokenness Is the Path to Communion**

Samoans have a formal ritual, called Ifoga, for healing grave injustices. The person, family, or community that has harmed another rises early in the morning. They bring with them their most precious possession, the “fine mat,” a hand-woven blanket made from reeds. The fine mat represents the very life and identity of the Samoan people.

The ones who have caused the injustice kneel on the ground in front of the home of those they have wronged and cover themselves with the fine mat. They remain there for hours, maybe days, without food or drink, regardless of the weather. They wait until the ones they have wronged come outside and offer their forgiveness by removing the fine mat. The two parties embrace, and all enter the home to share their joy of reconciliation.

At significant Masses, Samoan Catholics
celebrate this Ifoga ritual at the penitential rite. In October 2012, I asked Malia if the Samoan community would lead our diocese in the Ifoga ritual as we opened the Year of Faith. The Samoans agreed, and at a diocesan Mass, representatives from our entire diocese knelt under the Samoans’ fine mat as their choir led us in singing a penitential acclamation. Then our Bishop removed the mat and embraced each person as we sang, “Glory to God in the highest . . . .” Most in our diocese had never seen this ritual before. It was certainly an unusual sight to see in our cathedral. But that discomfort and liminality opened up a profound insight into penitence, forgiveness, and God’s mercy.

For me, the ritual revealed my own blindness. That night, Malia told me that our invitation to share this ritual at a diocesan Mass in the cathedral was a blessing for the Samoans and a kind of homecoming for them. Up until then, many of them had never felt welcomed at the cathedral. That night was the first time many of them had been there. All along, I had thought it was our cathedral, but not until that night did it start to become their cathedral, too.

To be called to joy and hope, to be a servant Church, is to live what it means to be the Body of Christ, made up of many members, each one different, each one necessary, each one belonging.

In our sacramental understanding of the paradox of the Body of Christ, brokenness is the path to communion, for it is our differences that allow us to engage with one another and unite as one body. In other words, matter matters.

But when we ignore our differences and are no longer attentive to the real tensions that difference raises at these liminal border places, we run the risk of falling into what theologian Michelle Saracino calls a “Narcissus effect.” We lose sight of where our story ends and another person’s story begins.

If I assimilate your story into mine, I can imagine, wrongly, that your story—your experiences, beliefs, needs, identity—is the same as mine. I can cling to my story because it must be true for you, too. There’s no need to make room in my heart for your story. There’s no need for me to change. Perhaps this is the wisdom in the second line of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes: “Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo” in the hearts of the followers of Christ. When we recognize where our story ends and another person’s story begins, we realize that we may be similar, but we are not the same, as an echo is not the same as the song. True communion happens only when there is diversity, where each person’s unique song is treasured.

This approach is not the same as hospitality. Sometimes, when we try to be hospitable, our gestures actually communicate that we are the insider welcoming the outsider into our place. For example, “Please join us in singing” may be heard as “We, the musical insiders, are now going to sing. Please join us.” Of course that’s not what we intend, but over time it communicates “us” versus “them.” Rather, we could say “Let us sing together,” which says that this is all our work to do in our common home.

The Journey on the Path Home

God does not save a person individually; God saves a people so that together we find a home in God. In this “homecoming,” the song does not belong to me or the choir; it belongs to God. The work of singing is not mine alone; it is the work of the Trinity, a work in which all are called to participate. This Mass, this parish, this cathedral, this organization we call NPM belongs not to one group. The work of our Church belongs to God so that all God’s people “might acknowledge [God] and serve [God] in holiness.”

How do we echo in our hearts the genuinely human stories of our sisters and brothers with whom we each have a place in God’s home? Let us look to the Scriptures, when our ancestors in faith encountered a stranger and, in the sharing of their own brokenness and in the breaking of the bread, they found their way home.

Here are seven “Travel Pro” tips from
Border Crossers
Brother Rufino

In 2013, Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI said, in his message for World Communications Day: “Given the reality of cultural diversity, people need not only to accept the existence of the culture of others but also to aspire to be enriched by it and to offer to it whatever they possess that is good, true, and beautiful.”

Acceptance of others is only the first step; learning their songs is another. But if we want to build bridges, we must allow ourselves to be changed by those who walk this journey with us, and, in turn, we must give to them the very best and most genuine parts of ourselves.

Before we can be bridge builders, we must first become, like Jesus, border crossers. Jesus led his disciples into pagan territory and there encountered the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20). Jesus went to the Greek region of Tyre and was changed by a Syrophoenician woman who shared with him her brokenness (Mark 7:25–30).

Look for the border places in your life, and there, with open ears and an open heart, enter a conversation with someone new. Learn more about this gradual progression of intercultural development by downloading the handout of resources we recommend (http://bit.ly/npm2015breakout-a). Attend a workshop about a culture you know nothing about and learn how to say hello in their language.

Wherever you are on this road—from diversity, to inclusion, to communion—the invitation is always to keep going and to take just one small step forward, together.

the Road to Emmaus:

1. When you meet a stranger on your journey, share your story.
2. And share your feelings; pay attention to their feelings, too.
3. Invite the stranger to share his or her story and to reflect back your story through his or her eyes; do the same for that person; be open to hearing your story in a new light.
4. Especially when darkness is closing in, commit to staying together; don’t walk away.
5. Once you get to where you’re going or you get what you need, don’t abandon the relationship; no one likes to feel used or left out.
6. Eat and sing together; pray and give thanks together.
7. Don’t be surprised to find yourself somewhere you thought you’d never be with a heart burning with unexpected joy.

On this journey from diversity to inclusion to true communion, we will make mistakes. But we will make them together, and with God’s mercy, we will be patient and kind and forgiving. And we will laugh and cry and share food, song, and tears. For here, in God’s house, at this homecoming, our differences matter because our differences make us whole and holy, made in the true image of God.

Notes

1. Pope Francis, apostolic exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (November 24, 2013), 118.
5. Liturgy in a Culturally Diverse Community, 10.
10. Gaudium et Spes, 32.