

One Faith, Many Cultures

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The Catholic Church today is a church of many faces and many languages. It is a Church of many cultures and varied life experiences. The Church is a church of the wealthy and a church of the marginalized. If it can harness the energy of its diversity in both its educational programs and communal worship, it will serve as a beacon of hope and an agent of transformation.

Catechesis is most effective when it touches the lives of learners in such a way that it leads to personal transformation. This can only take place when both the material and environment reflect and welcome students of all cultures. New advances in the field of education can provide us with new ways of approaching catechesis and prayer that celebrate diversity and chart new ways of coming together as God's people.

Integration of Ethnic Content

A model of multicultural education adapted from the work of Dr. James Banks, a world-renowned leader in the field, can offer unique insights to professionals engaged in religious education. Banks identifies four levels in his model. An explanation of each level is given below.

Contributions Level From the perspective of the religious educator, the first level, contributions, is when a conscious effort is made to show the universal nature of the Church by introducing the contributions of peoples and traditions of other cultures.

Additive Level The second level, the additive level, occurs when an entire unit is added to highlight another culture or a culture's gifts to the Church.

Transformational Level The third level, the transformational level, is when the content itself is transformed to incorporate the points of view and faith traditions of the universal Church.

Social Justice Although Bank's model talks about the fourth level as that of social change, the more accurate terminology in catechesis would be social justice. This level is achieved when students are exposed to the realities of members of the universal Church and see for themselves the disparities that exist and realize that unacceptable situations exist. If faith is to be a lived experience, then their actions will reflect this awareness.

To achieve a deeper integration of faith with their lived experiences, students must be aware of and recognize cultural traditions. Encourage sharing and exploring students' cultures to achieve a multicultural approach to religious education.

Using the Levels

Contributions Level—This level introduces a belief or tradition that is important to Catholics of another cultural tradition. As an example, you may use the devotion the people of Mexico practice to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Why is this important to them and how does it expand our understanding of the universality of the Church? Include contributions from other cultural traditions represented in the class or parish.

Additive Level—During Hispanic Heritage or Black History Month, add on a unit that looks at the faith traditions of people who come from Hispanic or African/African-American cultures. Research popular piety and worship styles. Invite Hispanic or African/American speakers to talk about their faith and worship traditions. Visit a church where the language and/or music reflect these cultural traditions. Explore the Catholic churches in your area that reflect diverse cultural traditions.

Transformative Level—At this level the lessons themselves are transformed to incorporate diverse cultural traditions, expressions of faith, and spirituality throughout the year. Cultural prayer forms and music are incorporated into the daily or weekly religion class. A lesson on the Mass would look at the essential elements of the Mass, but also how culture influences the celebration of the Eucharist. Emphasis on the universal Church would include a look at the lived realities of Catholics throughout the world—the rich, the poor, the marginalized, the persecuted.

Social Justice Level—Once the curriculum is transformed, students see for themselves the integral connection between faith and action and they recognize their connection with all of God's family. This leads naturally to the desire to engage in social justice activities that flow from a personal relationship with God. Love of God's family is expressed through concrete actions.

Implementing a multicultural education approach to religious education begins with taking the first steps from wherever you are. Some practical first steps might include inviting students and parents or other parishioners to share a prayer or ritual that is meaningful to them and flows from both their faith and cultural traditions. You might ask them to talk about their faith life and what the tradition means to them. Another easy way to begin to expand students' worldviews is to introduce them to songs and stories from around the world that flow from the Catholic tradition. Including the lives of Asian, African, Latin American, European and American saints in lessons, highlights both the universality of the Church and its relevance to all cultures. Participating in prayer and liturgy from diverse cultures opens new pathways to understanding all God's people.

Tapping into the cultural heritage of students in catechesis and incorporating elements that continually expand their understanding of the universality of the Church will provide new threads of multi-colored hues and strengths with which to weave a tapestry that reflects the wonder of our relationship with God, each other, and all of Creation.