Last summer I had what I consider to be one of my most challenging “speaking engagements,” addressing a parish in a small Australian city. The subject: the church of the stranger. After the event, some of the parishioners shared what they surmise as one of the factors that influence the problematic ways in which the Australian government was handling its immigration problems at that time, namely the Australian concept of “stranger danger.”

Come to think of it, most of us are wired with this concept. As a child our parents tell us to “never talk to strangers.” We are made to fear and avoid the unknown, the strange, the unfamiliar. Today, however, this fear takes a toll not just on individuals but on communities and societies as a whole as it assumes a political face with crippling economic and religio-cultural effects. Xenophobia or the fear of the stranger is driving communities and countries to restrict border access, thereby limiting opportunities particularly for the millions of migrants seeking to escape from the political and (mostly) economic woes of their home countries. For the ones who are already inside the borders, xenophobia rears its ugly head not just through the continuing restriction of economic opportunities but also through the lack of or limited space for the observance and flourishing of their religio-cultural beliefs and practices. At its best, immigrants’ “strange” ways are tolerated. At its worst, they are denigrated, discriminated, or outrightly not accepted.

For many host societies, like the United States, the circumstances surrounding contemporary migration make living with the stranger more problematic. Today, migrants are not just significantly reshaping the human geography but are also redefining the character and identity of many churches, even in medium-sized communities and in seemingly unexpected places. I for one was pleasantly surprised to see how multicultural that parish in Australia was, just as I was amazed by the close to twenty international flags (to represent their international members) that adorn a small church in Iowa.

Gemma T. Cruz is assistant professor of theology at Saint Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa. Her recent publications include “Faith on the Edge: Religion and Women in the Context of Migration” in the September 2006 issue of the UK-based journal Feminist Theology.
I visited a few years ago. To me, more than ever, this reality compels the church to be a church of the stranger.

**The Church of the Stranger: A New Face of “Becoming Human Together”?**

One of the more striking definitions of “church” that I have come across is that of “becoming human together.” In view of the contemporary challenge that migrants are posing to churches in the United States and all over the world, I reckon that the church of the stranger is a contemporary face of “becoming human together.” But what is a church of the stranger? What constitutes a church of the stranger? To me, this church is, first and foremost, a catholic church, and catholicity is most expressed in the welcome for and hospitality to the stranger. Hospitality to the stranger is inherent to the being and witness of the church just as hospitality has been characteristic of the way God and Jesus have been described in the Bible. Moreover, Jesus’ proclamation of the reign of God is inclusive. His fellowship at the table with those vilified and ostracized symbolizes this inclusive hospitality of God.

In a church of the stranger, everyone with human need finds a sanctuary for refuge and a table around which people of diverse and even opposing positions can converse and break bread together. A church of the stranger is supposed to be a church without borders. It loses its *raison d’être*, particularly its catholicity, when it closes itself to the stranger or when it becomes “indifferent” to the “different” and does not strive for an inclusive community, which is a sign and foretaste of God’s reign.

A church of the stranger thrives on difference, diversity, and plurality. It envisions not so much a “melting pot” but a mosaic society. It builds harmonious relationships with people regardless of their gender, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. To this end, the church of the stranger is also a movement, a creative movement, so to speak, at the margins. In some ways it also brings us back to some forgotten or less-emphasized aspects of the Christian tradition.

When one looks closely at migrant churches, for example, one of their more common characteristics is hosting shared meals after the Eucharist. Meals in the Christian tradition are not just about food, generosity, and graciousness, but also about friendship rooted in a profound respect and care for one another. In fact, shared meals or fellowships usually served as the context of most hospitable encounters in the Christian tradition. Jesus connected with those most in need by sitting at table with them. He built and fortified his community of disciples up to the very end by eating together with them. Moreover, shared meals also count as one of the hallmarks of the household churches of the early Christian communities (see Acts 2:46). The church of the stranger can recover this tradition to become a privileged expression of true community.

The church of the stranger is also a pilgrim church. As Silvano Tomasi writes:

Migration is a symbol that reveals the underlying reality of the church as a pilgrim people . . . almost a sacrament, for it is like a mirror in which the People of God views its own reality not only as a problem but also as grace that . . . transforms the church when its members embrace [migrant’s] poverty as wayfarers in a passing world (41).

“Migration,” Tomasi goes on to say, “is graced even in difficult circumstances . . . part of the ongoing mystery of redemption, contributing to solving the great problems of the human family. [Migrants] are, thus, also part of God’s plan for the growth of the
human family in greater cultural unity and universal fraternity” (41).

Consequently, the church of the stranger is also an intercultural church. It respects and is open to all cultures. It welcomes fellow believers from/with other cultures regardless of class. Moreover, its members struggle to be church by “becoming strangers together.” It is a church that does not simply focus on the multiplication or amalgamation of cultures but especially on the dynamic interaction between and among cultures. It is a church that views other cultures as gifts that enrich the catholicity and pilgrimage of the church individually and collectively.

Welcoming the Stranger

This is not the first time that the church is experiencing multiculturality or facing the challenge of learning how to be a church of the stranger. The early Christian churches across the Roman Empire, especially those with a significant number of Gentiles who converted to Christianity, were familiar with this experience. Jesus himself, as the stranger par excellence, paves the way for forging a church of the stranger. As the stranger par excellence, he profoundly identifies, shares, and struggles with strangers’ primary condition of alienation and discrimination. There was no room for his parents at the inn, so Mary had to give birth to him in a manger. His family fled to a foreign land (Egypt) to escape Herod. Like many migrant parents, who constitute a significant number of the “strangers” in American churches, necessity forced Jesus’ parents to “migrate” (to Egypt) for their child’s sake. Moreover, while he went around preaching and teaching, Jesus sought the hospitality of friends and strangers. He also experienced not being welcomed (Luke 9:52-54). Last but not the least, as the master/teacher, who practiced the “hospitality that causes scandal” by associating with and eating with the least, the last, and the lost of Jewish society, Jesus is the “perfect (fellow) stranger.” He not only knew what it means to be an outcast; he also connected with the “estranged” people in his time. Thus, it could be said that Jesus not only forged the path for struggle for the “estranged” of this world; he also laid the foundations for a church of the stranger.

Indeed, in this day and age the situation of the stranger in our churches is once again calling us to accountability for our responsibility toward the voiceless and powerless in our communities. Jesus’ words, “I was a stranger and you welcomed me,” serve as an eloquent reminder of this Christian duty that is also at the heart of our Christian identity.

References


