The U.S. Census Bureau is releasing a steady stream of information concerning the results of Census 2000. This most recent comprehensive survey provides a “family portrait” of who we are as Americans. These numbers will be the subject for analysis, discussion, and debate for years to come. But one thing is beyond dispute: American society is now more racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse than ever before in living memory. To take but one example: those Americans who indicated that they were “white alone” (I hasten to note that this category is not mine, but that of the Census Bureau)—that is, who stated they belonged to just one racial group designated as “white”—number only 62.6 percent of the population. Given the commonly admitted undercounting of certain groups, including Latinos and African Americans, it is reasonable to assume that at least four out of every ten Americans are, in the convoluted language of U.S. bureaucracy, “Latino or non-white.”

Not only is American society becoming more multiracial and multicultural, it is also more religiously diverse. The Census Bureau is prohibited from asking respondents about their religious affiliation. However, a recent (May 2001) report on National Public Radio notes that there are now more Muslims than Jews living in the United States. Indeed, the Muslim population is more numerous than the Episcopalian—a denomination which has had significant influence in American life. This same source further reports that Hindus and Buddhists also are an ever-more significant presence in our social life. It is thus increasingly difficult, and even false, to assert without qualification that the United States is a “white Christian nation.”

Moreover, it is likely that these demographic shifts will only accelerate and become more pronounced as this new century—indeed, this decade—progresses. Currently people of color, women, and immigrants comprise 53 percent of the workforce; many believe that by 2006, 85 percent of those newly entering the workforce will be women, people of color, and immigrants. Hence the landscape of American society is being, and already has been, decisively altered. Our schools, workplaces, parishes, religious congregations, and dioceses are more racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse than many might ever have imagined or dreamed possible—or desirable.

This momentous, even unprecedented, demographic shift is one of the chief “signs
of the times” which demands deep reflection. It has major implications for social ethics and pastoral planning. This is all the more the case because as a nation we have little historical experience from which to gain the wisdom needed to negotiate this shift successfully. Our previous approach to the issue of diversity was expressed in the metaphor of “the melting pot.” That is, the goal given to previous social groups upon coming to the United States was to become as indistinguishable as possible from the “White Anglo-Saxon Protestant” dominant group. The solution to cultural diversity was a process of cultural assimilation. To a great extent, this homogenizing approach has been a success for Catholics whose ancestors hailed from Europe. However, the “melting pot” strategy now fails us. Its limitations become ever more apparent as we confront the fact that many social groups have not been, cannot be, and/or have no desire to be, culturally assimilated. We thus have little concrete experience for how to be a “stew,” or “salad,” or “quilt,” or “gumbo”—to name just a few of the metaphors being used to describe our new situation.

Furthermore, the demographic shifts of the present and near future force us to face the unfinished business of our nation’s past and current struggles for racial justice and equality. The ghosts of our legacy of racial inequality continue to haunt us. The April 2001 racial violence and protests in Cincinnati, the racial inequities in the criminal justice system, the continuing controversies over affirmative action, the popularity of “English only” initiatives, the presence of “gated communities,” the hate crimes perpetrated against those deemed different and dangerous provide ample evidence that managing our demographic transition and forging a new American identity will be neither easy nor smooth. We undertake this task burdened by a legacy of racial injustice, social intolerance, and cultural privilege.

What wisdom, then, can the Catholic faith and ethical tradition provide for living in the midst of such a deep cultural transition? How can we become communities that prize, rather than lament, our new family portraits? What resources do we have for forging what Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the beloved community,” that is, an inclusive community where difference is not a source of fear but a cause for celebration? In the brief space of this column, I cannot solve the numerous concrete pastoral problems posed by the demographic shift. These concerns include the practicalities of multicultural worship, vocation recruitment, seminary education, and evangelization. Rather, I will situate these practical concerns in a broader horizon or perspective. This fundamental faith vision is characterized by catholicity, conversion and humility, a concern for truth, and a respect for power.

Catholicity

In the corporate world, cultural diversity is “managed” by training employees in sensitivity and respect for those who are “different.” The goal is toleration, so that differences do not compromise an organization’s productivity, public image, or legal liability. Faith, however, takes a different approach. We begin from the premise that the range of color and culture in the human family is a holy gift of God and reflects the design of the Creator. Precisely because we are “catholic”—universally inclusive—the variety of peoples, languages, cultures, and colors among us must not be tolerated as an unavoidable fact, but cherished as a divine gift. In the light of faith, the current demographic shift is a passage toward becoming a more authentic and truer reflection of the human family in whom God delights. Any other approach is tantamount
to rejecting the way in which God chooses to manifest the Divine Image in human-kind.

Conversion and Humility

Accepting this faith vision entails a call to conversion. Ethnocentrism—the belief that one's own culture is central to reality and has a privileged possession of truth and presumption of rightness—seems endemic to the human condition. Once again, faith takes a different perspective. In the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, evangelical conversion demands an on-going “break”: “We have to break with our mental categories, with the way we relate to others, with our way of identifying with the Lord, with our cultural milieu, with our social class” (Gutiérrez, 1973, 118, italics added). True conversion requires a never-ending struggle against whatever attitudes and vices are contrary to God's creative wisdom manifested by the diversity of the human family. This means that the demographic shift, when viewed in the horizon of faith, summons us to a stance of cultural humility. This humility entails a paradox; we must both celebrate and relativize our cultural heritages. We prize the unique manifestation of God mediated through our own cultural histories, artifacts, and perspectives; we realize that our particular culture’s insight into and appropriation of the Divine are partial and limited; we then can gratefully respect and appreciate another people’s expression of the infinite reality that is God.

A Concern for Truth

A recognition of the valuable but limited insight of every culture into the reality of God means that faith communities are also called to be communities of conscience, that is, places where the truth is spoken about the ways in which particular cultures have both formed and malformed our public lives. As mentioned earlier, the successful resolution of our demographic transition is hindered by an oppressive burden of injustice. Actions and omissions of the past have built an enduring edifice of unequal social relationships between the peoples and cultures of U.S. society. Unless we honestly engage the past, we cannot heal the present and create a new future. As James Cone, a preeminent black theologian, so rightly notes, “Amnesia is an enemy of justice” (xi). Faith communities, then, are called to witness to the truth, celebrating the understated contributions made to faith and society on the part of many and confessing the unacknowledged harms done as well. Naming and confessing personal collusion, ancestral culpability, and institutional complicity will be, without doubt, disorienting, confusing, and challenging for many. Faith communities, by providing the strength and courage for facing difficult truths, can be important midwives as America gives birth to a new and more authentic national identity.

A Respect for Power

A final observation is that we cannot afford to be naive about the power relationships present in and challenged by the demographic shift. Indeed, Sunday worship all too often reflects, rehearses and reinforces the skewed power disparities of race, class, and ethnicity present in the wider society. For example, “power” is demonstrated and ritualized in worship through what is sung and in whose language, through who is active and who is acted upon at liturgy, and in the composition of the assembly (that is, who is present and who is absent).

On the other hand, Sunday eucharistic worship also has a prophetic edge. The Eucharist challenges and transforms our understanding of power. We gather in
memory of Jesus: a powerful person who taught with authority, forgave sinners, rebuked demons, and transcended cultural barriers. However, his power was not an exercise of coercive dominance; rather, his was a power shown in vulnerability and compassion, a power revealed in presence and accompaniment, a power expressed in silent suffering and tenacious fidelity at the cross. Hence, the Christian community can provide a vital service during this time of demographic transition by being a witness of alternative forms of power other than the coercion present in current social relationships.

Conclusion

The present and future demographic shift, while not without peril and challenge, is also an occasion of grace and opportunity. As we strive to honor and listen to the increasing variety of cultures and languages present in the United States, in our workplaces, and in our parishes, beneath the distressing cacophony of Babel’s tower we may well discover the harmonious melody of God’s spirit. Indeed, “what we might then begin to hear, above our own chatter, are possibilities we have never dared to dream” (Tracy, 79).

References


