

The Spiritual Life

The immigrant clergy and its social responsibility

Current events that have unfolded in recent months make one wonder about the immigrant faith leaders' social responsibilities. The foremost issue is Question 2

COMMENTARY

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that dismantled the three-decade-old transitional bilingual education. The immigrant voting rights campaign that would allow legal immigrants to vote for School Committee in Cambridge. Recent public assistance cuts for legal immigrants and school mergers, are among myriad issues affecting newcomers, as an influential clergy remains oblivious.

The school department and the city have deployed vigorous effort to get immigrant parents involved. Various agencies provide numerous social and advocacy services to the immigrant population in their respective language. However, their presence and participation is hardly visible in municipal meetings under the assumption that they work two jobs and can't attend meetings even on weekends as provisions are made for some linguistic groups. On the other hand, if one walks by many of the immigrant churches, be it Catholic or Protestant, on weeknights, one will attest highly musically animated services teemed by numerous parents and students of the schools. In fact, the

city rents several of its school buildings to many Protestant denominations.

Lack of theological preparation and long-term vision contribute to the clergy's complaisant attitudes vis-a-vis social participation, local, national and global activities. In the case of the Catholic Church, many clerics who spent decades as missionaries in Third World countries still minister with a patronizing, paternalistic, condescending perception. They facilitate their immigrant parishioners' lives being centered exclusively in the parish premises through their uninspiring, anti-academic homilies and their lack of involvement in inter-parish or interfaith activities. They don't encourage or don't provide means for the laity to read, vote, attend conferences or further their education. The foreign priests trained outside of this country are not prepared either to navigate the "American" system that energetic and spiritual first- and second-generation U.S.-educated immigrants are raised into.

Being involved in one's community aligns with the word of God. Catholic lay and religious leaders may refer to Catechism #1915. "As far as possible, citizens should take an active part in public life ..." (public life italicized in CCC). Both Christian groups may use Exodus 22:20, Matthew 23:23, John 10:10 to reflect on their attitudes vis-à-vis the immigrants and Jesus' teachings. Besides lay formation that the diocese started a year ago for Hispanic Catholics, there is no sign of moving most immigrant

groups toward an understanding of the Catholic faith and the mystery of God which will create an inter-generational, cross cultural, vibrant ministries and the immigrants' integration in the United States.

The clergy sexual abuse had been a catalyst for addressing changes in the Catholic Church. Months into this crisis, a forum has not yet been provided for many Catholic immigrants to express their views on this issue in their native language. In some cases, those who ask for listening sessions to be organized are being ignored by the priests and even by their own lay ministers. In other instances, animosities are created and veiled threats made.

In the past 30 years, besides a convention organized once by the archdiocese's ethnic apostolate office, immigrant faith leaders have not made concerted efforts to gather or inform the laity and address issues concerning their participation in the church and their involvement in this country's civic life. It is ironic that western intellectuals are asking for a third Vatican council whereas a significant proportion of immigrants are not provided with systemic Catholic instruction or formation either. Therefore, they have no clue of Second Vatican council teachings which would have informed them on their civic responsibilities. They are rather left in a practice of popular religiosity which is common in many Third World countries. The clergy, whom they believe are the only knowledgeable keeper of Jesus' teachings are not telling their

brethren that frequent perfunctory prayer gatherings, or in the Catholic case, popular piety, Marian and pneumatological (spirit) devotions are outmoded practices. Such worshiping cannot attract active U.S.-educated first- or second-generations of immigrants who can be significant "assets" in those ethnic parishes.

A conference similar to the one organized recently by the Episcopal Divinity School, the Cambridge Friends Church on environmental issues and attended by city officials may be a suggestion. Such gathering would be twofold. It would address the social, economic, political and authentic spiritual environment of the immigrant population as well as acting an impetus for a dialogue among lay and religious immigrant faith leaders and public officials.

It's about time that the immigrant clergy fulfill their Christian and social responsibilities. Being inattentive to this country's civic affairs jeopardizes their brethren's future and the children whom they are working diligently for would not achieve the American dream that originally prompted them to migrate in this country.

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