The Power of Ritual: San Fernando Cathedral

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It is a great pleasure to be with you, and to share the experience of a grass-roots priest. I've served many different types of communities, sometimes bilingual communities, and now San Antonio, Texas, which has three languages, Polish, German, and Spanish. I very quickly became the most popular Polish-speaking priest in the community, for they can say whatever they want to, and I cannot ask questions.

Let us look at the background of ritual. I grew up on the Mexican side of San Antonio, speaking Spanish. I did not know that there was any other language in this country besides Spanish; I grew up in a very Mexican neighborhood, eating Mexican food, as my father owned a grocery store. When I went to the first grade I found out something quite shocking: I wondered who all of the foreigners in the classroom were, foreigners speaking English. Well, I flunked the first grade. I hated school, but I had a very strict mother or I would have been a school dropout. Then my dad would have said, "If you want to work, then work." But thanks to my mother, and a great teacher I had sometime in grade school, a German-American who took an interest in me, I got excited about learning.

Originally I wanted to be a scientist, and my first degrees were in chemistry and math. Then I noticed that I wanted to be a priest. When I studied for the priesthood I found that all my studies were different from the religion that I had grown up in, the religion that I loved. The religion I grew up in embodied my whole being; the whole neighborhood was centered around the parish church. I always tell people that there was a little bit of a "circus" in our parish church, in the best sense of the word. Everything took place there. It was a great place, a place you wanted to go. We didn't need rules to tell us we had to go to church, we wanted to go. I had a great religious experience as kid. In the seminary I learned all the negative words that you can imagine—that we were superstitious, somewhat pagan, uninformed, underdeveloped—and that's not right.

I was ordained in a time when there were many movements, and one of these was the Chicano movement that claimed the fundamental right for Mexican-Americans to be ourselves, especially in the Southwest. We started to think that many of our people had never crossed into the United States, but that the United States had crossed to us; fifty per cent of Mexico had become part of the United States. Many people had never migrated; they were foreigners in their own home country. In fact, the Treaty of Hidalgo had guaranteed that Texas would be in perpetuity a bilingual state. The treaty was never respected. The whole Southwest was in many ways a land of colonized people. We claimed the right to be a political movement, an educational movement. Students struggled for the right to be, the right to study who and where we were. We never studied our history in school; neither church history nor our civic history was ever presented. We never knew our heroes, our background—and what is a people without a background? Our education became very important. We wanted to be part of the whole.

As a priest I got asked many questions. I remember a man who asked beautifully that the local church pursue the heritage, the language, the traditions, the customs of the people it was serving. He said that the church was not a foreigner, that there was a theology of the civil movements. And we said: "What does that have to do with the church?" Was this from a sense of shame? Was it an apology? No! Ours were beautiful, profound, deep experiences of God.
So we started exploring our faith tradition. The Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio, Texas, started exploring our missionary history, how we became Christians—and that means Catholics, because Catholicism was the only religion in Latin America. We started to see how our origins were totally different from the origins of the religions of the United States, from Reformation and Counter-Reformation religions, and how our medieval religion mingled beautifully with the indigenous religions. We started to trace our origins, how our faith had been born. We found this fascinating, more and more exciting. We found how our traditions were deeply biblically-based, because the printing press wasn't running yet, and people didn't have bibles, but the missionaries were very biblically based. But we also learned that even though they fought many of our traditions, they learned to combine them to make expressions of God that were very profound; even though they were labeled as pagan, heathen, backwards, they were profound expressions of God, the Deity, spirituality.

We started to retrieve our Spanish traditions, and also our Native American traditions, in Mestizo Christianity. This is a beautiful blend of the medieval Christianity of Spain, which is very different from the Christianity of Western Europe. Don't forget that Spain was a country where three great religions—Islam, Judaism, Christianity—co-existed for eight hundred years, enriching one another. Don't forget that when you go to a Latin-American wedding you have a fully Hispanic bridal series, you have an exchange of the coins and the pineapple, the lasso, the ring. That came from the Spanish tradition. In Spain we are very ecumenical. When we pray to God, we pray to Allah; we express "I hope" by *ojala*, "May Allah’s will be done." We started to promote all this, we started to do workshops, and people started to learn about *pasados*, *apastonelas*, all that kind of thing. I've been working at that for a good while, trying to recreate this traditional religion, give it new meaning, talk about how to promote it.

When our Bishop Flores came to San Antonio he needed a new rector for the cathedral, for San Fernando Cathedral. He called me and said, "Look, you can talk about this stuff, about how it's important, how artful it is, to give people a deeper sense of identity, of existence. This is a place where you can be yourself, and practice your religion." So I became rector of San Fernando Cathedral. That was about 1983. I couldn't believe the challenge. I knew the cathedral well—as a boy I used to play around there. People knew me before I knew them. I remember the cathedral in its heyday, when it was the most popular church in town. Some of the people, the parishioners there, liked to say, "Our family founded this church, and therefore we were here when this was New Spain, we were still here when it became Mexico, and we were here when it became the Republic of Texas, we were here when it became the United States, we were here when it became the Confederacy of the South, and we’re still here now. We don't know what country will come through next, but we'll still be here." That's the parish I went to.

The parish had very deep roots, but was also a parish that immigrants were attracted to. But it was a parish where the air conditioning wasn't working in the heat of San Antonio, where the kneelers were totally worn out, with no parking whatsoever in this downtown place. It seemed to be dying; few people were coming to church.

So I went there, and I started asking people, "What are the religions practices that people are practicing here?" And they started to tell me, "What is important, Father, is that we really experience God, and togetherness, and a connection to those who came before us, so that we know that we're not alone." So we started to water the plant that had been there, that was kind of dying. We breathed new life and identity into those people, and empowered a people that
remained a people in the midst of anything that threatened to destroy their identity. Don't forget that San Antonio was a very racist city, like many other cities in this country. I can still remember signs, ugly little signs that said: "Niggers, Messians, and Dogs Not Allowed." I can remember that, and it's painful. So be clear: It was a very segregated society, where the Mexicans were being put down.

Texas had a policy of "pass without learning" in most of the schools. They would pass Mexican kids from one grade to the other with no concern about their learning. Therefore they would graduate from high school with no more than a second-grade reading level, and would become cheap labor. When slavery came to an end people found that hired cheap labor was more profitable than slavery because they didn't own the laborers. So Texas was an internal colony in the United States.

But San Fernando had its dignity. It was a church where people were someone. It was very similar to the Black churches in this country, where people could be themselves. San Fernando at one time had been one of those places, but it was dying. So I came in, and started to recreate the rituals. How would people like to do it? I didn't tell them how to do it, I stimulated their ritual imagination.

So we started creating rituals. We started with a whole year based on popular rituals. I can say that we had four things: popular rituals; art, where we invited artists to come and paint different scenes the way they would see them today; traditional music that people remembered and wanted to maintain; and new music. This was a combination of the traditional and the new, of continuity and transformation. And we had very good biblical preaching. I find it very important to correlate the good biblical preaching with different aspects of people.

Believe me, the response was phenomenal. Pretty soon the church started to be filled. We started televising the local Mass, which became so popular that it was picked up by the networks.—So we're coming to your area!—At one time we had a bigger Sunday audience than the pope. People thought of it as a very festive service, very Latino, with a lot of singing, and decorations, and special events, special celebrations. For example, on the feast of the Presentation of the child Jesus, February 2, we invited all the families with babies one year and younger to the television Mass, and we had a prayer offering to God the gift God had lost. It was really moving, really beautiful. At another time a famous singer died, and we had a special memorial television Mass for Celina. The Mass celebrated the events of the community, whether sorrow, joy, or success.

One of the things that we started was around the events of Holy Week. We were doing this just around our neighborhood when I realized that earlier those processions had been done right in central San Antonio. Those streets are part of our history. The street with the park is named Della Rosa. The street in front of the cathedral is called La Soledad, Our Lady of Solitude. But they wouldn't let us take over the city "because it was a religious event." I said, "No, look, this is not a religious event, it's just a cultural event. You won't find this in any official ritual book in Roman Catholicism, and so it's not an official ritual of Catholicism." And they said, "Oh, O.K." I said, "It's an event for tourism." And they said, "Oh, that's great."

The first time we did it we were scared of how people would react. Six thousand people turned out. Last year over thirty thousand people came at ten on Good Friday morning, of all denominations and all backgrounds. In fact one of the leading Baptist churches, Emmanuel
Baptist Church, canceled their Good Friday service and joined us in the procession. After we finished our official liturgical service, they had their service right there also. It was a beautiful unity in the cross.

The most moving event we had during my tenue there was at the beginning of the First Gulf War, when these two or three guys came to me and said, "Father, we're going to the Gulf War, give us a blessing." I said I'd be happy to give them a blessing, even though I did not approve of the war; I'd give them a blessing. And I said, "Let me give the blessing on Sunday, on television, when the three of you will pray for everyone who's going to the Gulf War." They got permission, then called back later and asked, "Can a few of our friends come with us?" By that evening the whole battalion was coming! We called the press, and we asked the people if we could have the service outside because the whole battalion was coming. Well, they came in their fatigues, and they all came, Jews and Catholics and non-believers, blacks, whites, browns, everyone came, and at the end everyone prayed over the men that God would protect them and guide them. It was a very moving moment. We even had mariachi bands in the plaza. At the end the buses came and took them to the airport. In that way the church celebrated things in the community.

We weren't afraid to challenge people. For example, in the Latino community one of two big problems is the high school dropout rate, which is very scary to us. The other is that we don't vote. That's part of our social responsibility. Yes, we feel grateful to God, but praise and privilege have responsibilities.

I got two letters that I'll never forget. One was from an English-speaking lady who watched Irish television. She wrote, "I'm an elderly Irish person, and if heaven is going to be anything like your liturgies, then I can't wait to get there." The other one was from a fellow who said he was an atheist. "I was flipping channels one Sunday morning and ran into the program. And I found it so human, so unplastic, so real, that I fell in love with it, and I watch it every Sunday. Here's $1000 to keep it going, from a self-proclaimed atheist."

Most of this came from the heart. Latino worship is from the deep heart: it's festive, communicative, incarnational. So that's the way we got the cathedral going; it was all through ritual, dance, music, art, good preaching, and trusting the people. We said "How would you like to do it?" They tried some things that I didn't care too much about, but they worked out. We did well.

Then the Lilly Foundation got very interested in what we were doing, and commissioned a study. They were able to bring in scholars of different disciplines, anthropologists, religious scholars, artists, news directors, business people, so that they could experience one of the great religious celebrations, the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe or Holy Week. We paid their way, gave them a stipend; they didn't have to pay for anything. They lived with the people; then afterwards we did a debriefing with them, and it helped us reflect on what they were seeing, feeling, experiencing. We had several of those, and then we put together a theological study of our parish. It was a theological reflection on how a dying parish was transformed into a vital community.

So that's the story of San Fernando Cathedral.
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