Opinion

News



Holy Family parishioners from Guatemala and the United States after a bilingual story-sharing potluck (Tracy Kemme)



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4,800 miles.

That's how far our Guatemalan parishioners traveled from their villages to get to Cincinnati.

Each of those miles meant stepping further away from their families and homeland, and closer to an uncertain future in a strange country.

And yet they kept walking. Desperation and love drive humans to do courageous things.

By the grace of God, they arrived to Price Hill, a neighborhood just west of downtown Cincinnati, and eventually joined Holy Family Parish.

Holy Family, where I'm the bilingual pastoral minister, has been a stronghold in the neighborhood for more than a century. Early in its history, Holy Family served German and Irish immigrants, and now, a vibrant Guatemalan community makes up a large part of the congregation.

The first of these immigrants from San Marcos, Guatemala, arrived around the turn of the millennium. Many of them are Catholics who had been very involved in faith communities back home. Here, they began meeting for prayer and worship in their tiny apartments, but something was missing. They missed the sacraments, and besides, they were growing! They began to seek a parish home in Cincinnati.

Shamefully, several parishes turned them away. One told them, "We have too many activities already." As if they were some sort of program, not human beings.

The leaders of the Guatemalan community approached Holy Family Parish next. Again, they found closed doors. The school principal at the time, a Sister of Charity, said if the pastor wouldn't welcome them in the parish, she would offer them her school auditorium. They accepted, thankful at least to have adequate space to hold their burgeoning community. For several years, they met there on Saturday evenings, hiring their own Spanish-speaking priest for Mass when they could and

simply praying together when they couldn't.

When the current pastor arrived, he was appalled. He immediately reached out to the Guatemalan community and invited them to become part of the parish. He hired a bilingual staff person and added a bilingual Mass. The community began the slow process of integration. Sadly, many longtime parishioners left when the Guatemalans came.

But many also stayed, willing to help create the new. And despite the initial rejection they faced, the Guatemalans embraced the church as their home.



A map illustrating the 4,800-mile journey parishioners traveled from their homes in Guatemala to Holy Family Parish in Cincinnati (Tracy Kemme)

It's been messy, to say the least. Even where there is willingness, there are barriers. Language is the most basic and palpable. Deeper, however, are differences in values, customs, social norms, belief systems, and even approaches to liturgy.

I came on board three years ago, and Holy Family was in the thick of working out the challenges and graces of intercultural community. My task was to help us work toward living up to our name. I took my cue from Pope Francis: If we wanted to become a true parish family, we needed to build a culture of encounter.

The experts say one of the best ways to cultivate intercultural relationships is to gather around something we can all appreciate: food! So we started hosting bilingual story-sharing meals in the parish house. Guatemalan *chuchitos* and all-American pasta salad found themselves next to one another on the potluck plates. A volunteer interpreter sat at each dinner table so English- and Spanish-speakers could mix and talk.

The only goal for the night was to get to know each other better. It was powerful. People who had been attending Mass together for a few years and had only ever been able to say "Good morning" could now share. They learned about each other's families, jobs, joys and struggles. Guatemalans could share about their home country, why they came to the United States, and what their journey was like. English-speaking parishioners shared where their ancestors had come from originally to help establish the awareness that immigration is their story, too. Over a meal, walls tumbled, and the bond of humanity shone through.

A few months later, we introduced the "*Mi casa es su casa*" initiative, asking native U.S. parishioners to invite a Guatemalan family to their home for dinner. Again, the parish provided a volunteer interpreter who would accompany the families. The spirit of the parish dinners was recreated but in an even more intimate setting. Bonds forged at the dinners have lasted. One American couple takes their Guatemala partner family on trips to the zoo and museums. One Guatemalan couple drops their kids off at their American "grandparents' " house to play. Many of the groups sit together at parish functions, and they rush to greet each other at Mass on Sundays.

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Becoming one Holy Family is a process, but we are getting there. Beyond these formal initiatives, we are building intercultural community in small ways every day. Kind gestures, smiles, learning a few words in the other language, praying for one another, taking time to educate ourselves about immigration, staying committed to

a bilingual Mass even when it is chaotic: All of these things help build the reign of God at our parish.

This summer, our parish Social Action Team wanted to do something to celebrate and reiterate our commitment to our intercultural parish community. In the spirit of the Share the Journey campaign, we launched Journey of Faith. Knowing that our Guatemalan parishioners traveled 4,800 miles in faith to get to Cincinnati, our parish family is trying to walk 4,800 miles together this summer.

With help from Guatemalan parishioners, we created a map showing the route they would have taken to migrate and calculated the total miles. We printed T-shirts and passed out pedometers. Throughout the summer months, parishioners are tracking the miles they walk and reporting them weekly to the parish. We're tallying them and moving a pushpin along the map to show our progress. The pushpin is a monarch butterfly, the international symbol of migration.

Each week, we're also sharing educational materials to accompany the journey. Some are stories from interviews with our Guatemalan parishioners about their experience as immigrants, some are facts about migration, and some are solidarity actions parishioners can do.



The whole group pauses for a photo during the Journey of Faith kickoff walk (Tracy Kemme)

We kicked off Journey of Faith on Pentecost Sunday with — what else? — food. Everyone enjoyed hamburgers from the grill and homemade tamales as Guatemalan music floated through the air. Kids played with bubbles and chalk. Then we all took a

walk through the neighborhood together to get our first miles on the board.

It was a beautiful thing, that sea of light-blue Journey of Faith T-shirts streaming over the sidewalk, led by a Guatemalan flag and a United States flag. It reminded me that even on the days when intercultural community is a challenge, it is worth it.

This week, I will travel to Guatemala for the second time to visit the villages our families come from. On Sunday, instead of worshipping with Guatemalan parishioners at our bilingual Mass in Price Hill, I'll be sharing Eucharist with their relatives and friends in Concepción Tutuapa, San Marcos, Guatemala.

I will embrace them. I'll share stories and photos of their parents, kids and grandchildren who are now my Price Hill neighbors. And I will assure them that those loved ones have family in the United States, too, at Holy Family.

[Tracy Kemme is a Sister of Charity of Cincinnati. Author of the blog Diary of a Sister-in-Training, Tracy is passionate about religious life. She currently studies theology at Xavier University and serves as bilingual pastoral minister at a local parish.]

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