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***Acculturation/Integration, Key to the Development of Young Immigrants  
in the Church of the United States***

Immigration is an inherent part of the fabric making up the United States and is one of the phenomena that has fundamentally shaped this great country that has open the doors to us and for which we are very grateful. It is also a reality, though, that the different cultures and ethnicities that make their homes in the United States remain unique and distinct from one another. In this article, I wish to express the clash of cultures that young immigrants (men and women between 13 and 18 years old), especially from the first and second generation, face when they are brought to this country as children and are trying to grow up in a bilingual and bicultural environment. I have included experiences collected of five immigrant families, my personal experience as a first-generation immigrant, and my pastoral experience, working with Hispanic families for more than 13 years. I will examine how this situation affects adolescents in different areas of their development including their education, psychological and emotional maturity, their identity, and the way they function in society. I will explore and propose ways in which the Church can be an important bridge and resource for young people and their families in this process of acculturation and integration within a community of love and acceptance, according to the Gospel of Jesus.

***I. Effects on Psychological and Emotional Growth***

At the adolescent stage of their lives, young people have acquired a cognitive, emotional, and intellectual self-actualization sufficient for them to realize that they will soon transition into adulthood. At this period of their lives, questions begin to arise, such as: “Am I prepared for the rest of my life? What will I do with my future? What is my purpose in life? Can I meet my parents' expectations? Do I really want to become an adult?” These and other questions tend to cause young people concern and anxiety. The ambivalence of letting go and preparing for another stage is evident (Kelcourse, pp. 231-233).

For parents, it is no different; they experience and suffer these changes, and anxieties, along with their children. Some parents interviewed expressed that it may also be that the rules for children, and the way they are educated, are not consistent and/or adequate to address their current maturity levels, the changes they are going through, or the situations they face in a bicultural reality. It can also be the case that immigrant parents are unaware of all the challenges their children are facing because of their own ignorance of systems in the United States, poor understanding of English, and a lack of time created by long work hours to simply provide necessities for their households. The lack of communication from parents to their children about acculturation and adaptation adds stress to the children's lives by not providing them with tools to allow them to incorporate effectively into a bicultural and sometimes multicultural society. These deleterious effects continue to be compounded as the child ages.

***II. Effects on Cultural Identity and Social Adaptation***

Immigrant families, especially young people who are exposed to other cultures in their daily lives at church, school, work, etc., face the challenge of developing their identity, sense of

belonging, and acceptance in the bicultural environment in which they are developing. This process is known as acculturation. Acculturation or integration is a psychological-social phenomenon, which involves two simultaneous processes of wanting to adapt to the culture of the country of residence (USA) and preserving their culture of the country of origin (Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers, pp. 98-100). In the process of adaptation, the young person must be able to understand differences in each culture to which they are exposed and choose for himself or herself the traits from each that he or she considers valuable, preserving them and developing them within himself or herself through a process of integration. Often, this process results in changes in the way an adolescent thinks about themselves, their attitudes about themselves and external factors, and the values they choose for themselves. The best-case scenario is that the young person adapts to survive in the society in which they are living, without letting go of their culture of origin. Young people who fail to carry out this integration process; for which the intervention, communication, and help of parents and pastoral workers prepares them; may end up assimilating into the culture of the country in which they reside while losing their roots and the history of their country of origin. This situation may raise future questions and create uncertainty about their identity and sense of belonging, which can cause anxiety and stress, affecting their long-term wellbeing, as well as causing divisions between them and their family of origin, from whom they feel culturally different.

### *III. Faith As the Bridge of Integration Between Cultures.*

Kelcourse notes that, "for adolescents, the qualities attributed to God derive from how they understand themselves in relation to their loved ones in their lives. The religious beliefs of a family member or friend with whom they feel truly loved and understood can be the source of their faith" (p. 238). This statement allows me to confirm what I have observed in practice with young people. It is important for adolescents to have an identity and to know their origins, roots, and culture. This gives them security, acceptance, and a sense of belonging, while understanding the customs of their culture of origin.

Hispanic immigrants, particularly adults, tend to self-segregate, don't seek to have a relationship with their host culture, and seek to relate mainly with other Hispanic families. Although having close relationships with mainly other Hispanic persons is not intrinsically harmful, it can create separations from people who are of different cultures and ethnicities, which can ultimately have a "ghetto-izing" effect. There can be a tendency to judge the host culture against the norms and mores of their ethnic culture, resulting in divisions, isolation, and prejudices that, imperceptibly, we transmit to our children, causing confusion and insecurity in their lives.

Faith is often one of the most deeply-rooted characteristics of Hispanic persons, which is expressed in a unique way according to our cultural traditions rich in faith. It is important that Hispanic adults take the time to share this heritage with young people, while at the same time passing on their faith to them. Family life is another important characteristic of Hispanic culture, making it essential that acceptance of the culture of a family's host culture begin at home. Parents must seek and have an openness to the culture of this country, especially in our parishes, showing their children, by example, the great benefits and privilege of being bicultural and bilingual!

### *IV. Some Ideas of Cultural Integration in Youth and Family Ministry.*

It is not news to anyone in the American Church that there is a need to work more closely with young Christians in this country to better meet their spiritual and community needs. This need is

even more great when working with a young immigrant population. We have heard it in the Process of the V National Hispanic/Latino Ministry Encounter and on many other occasions within our diocese and outside of it.

It has been said that one of the great challenges of our Church today is the inculturation of the Gospel. Pope St. John Paul II said, "a faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out and faithfully lived" (Letter establishing the Pontifical Council for Culture). According to this saintly quote, inculturation is a salvific process, and it should be remembered that the first inculturation in Christianity occurred in the incarnation of Jesus, in which God himself, out of love for us, became man. Though God chose to become incarnate in a specific culture, that of the Jews, he died for the salvation of ALL peoples, territories, and cultures. For this reason, we must understand and comprehend inculturation as a task of the entire Church; It is a whole process and action on our part and a call to be attentive to its integration in the different forms of evangelization. To carry on the Gospel of the Incarnate God to all peoples of the world!

Here I have only showed some of the damage done to Hispanic youth by ignorance on the part of the church on the issue of inculturation, which is not limited to young people but will affect immigrants of all ages. To address this issue, the following tenets are proposed:

- A. Improve awareness of, dialogue about, and education on this issue for all pastoral agents and staff of parishes to cultivate a welcoming, integrated, and loving culture that Jesus himself taught us by his example.
- B. Include inculturation in catechetical education from an early age not only for Hispanic children and youth, but for all children, youth, and adults.
- C. Recognizing that parents are the first educators of their children, it is an important task to sensitize and educate parents on acculturation, particularly educating them about the important role they play in the development of their children as multicultural citizens and Christians.
- D. Develop relationships with Catholic schools to encourage the incorporation of this topic into their religious and civics curriculum. Providing annual or semi-annual meetings with high-school aged youth and their parents to discuss this topic, provide them with tools to create a dialogue between the youth and their parents, and share with them the importance and benefits of being bicultural and bilingual in the church and in society as a whole, as a key to succeed and to become the best version that God wants for each one of them.

**Conclusion:** It is essential that the topic of acculturation and cultural integration is given more importance in the American Church to build dynamic and functional multicultural faith communities that honor and celebrate individual differences of parishioners, while building a cohesive and enriched parish community that respects the dignity of human being by recognizing the natural human need to search for truth; to know oneself; and to know one's origins, culture, and ethnicity. In order to create a culture that celebrates cultural and ethnic identity while being fully integrated, churches must provide awareness about this topic to pastoral associates and lay persons, and provide them tools to effectively promote acculturation, acceptance, and

camaraderie, and to avoid unnecessary and painful anxiety and social isolation as young immigrants mature. Let's give it a try and we will see the great difference!

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