



## The Challenges and Joys of a Bilingual Atrium

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*"Hear this! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep. And when the sun rose, it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it and it produced no grain. And some seed fell on rich soil and produced fruit. It came up and grew and yielded thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold." He added, "Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear." Mk 4:3-10*

Like the sower, we have a very important work: to sow the Good News. Our vocation is to bring the word of God "to the ends of the earth." We are called to evangelize people of all races, nations and languages. How shall we do this?

A particular reality lived here in the United States is the growth of the Latino population, a growth that is constantly increasing. According to the research done by Garcia and Mc Laughlin, "between 1980 and 1990 there was a 50% increase in the Hispanic population in the US." The US Census bureau projects that this population will double in the next 50 years. In our present reality at St. Anne's Catholic Church in Gilbert, Arizona, we have felt the effects and challenges of this growth, and we have been blessed. Here in the Sonoran Desert, we find our hearts aflame with a desire to work together, especially with our children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. We have built an atrium where both Spanish and English materials are available to our children.

Working together, our community has explored the blessings and challenges of a bilingual atrium for the past twenty five years. We have had up to 7500 families in our parish. We have continued to ask ourselves "How do we serve a community of children with different languages of prayer?"

First, we recognized the need to bring the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd in Spanish as well as English. Our pastor who invited CGS to the parish, Fr. Doug Lorig, had asked for all ministries in our parish to be in both languages, but it was the child shyly peering into the atrium but not entering because he could not understand the invitation in English that lit the fire. One afternoon, as a catechist was preparing the atrium for the children, a child of four came to the doorway. His mom was down the hall working with a small group of adults. It was obvious that the environment called to him and that he wanted to enter and look more closely, but nothing the catechist said was heard as an invitation and he went away sad. It was obvious that there truly was a need to engage the Spanish speaking child in his mother tongue, so he could "hear", listen and understand the announcement deeply and then live it at home, in the community of his family.

Language is a vital bridge to reach the child. The General Directory for Catechesis states "Catechesis has the duty to speak a language suited to today's children and young people" (GDC, par. 208). The direct aim is simple and clear: assist people in their awareness, in their culture, and in their language. A person needs to develop intellectually by adapting to their environment. For Maria Montessori, "adaptation" means happiness, tranquility and in certain way, internal balance that gives a child a sense of security" (Bonilla, p. 16).

It is in the nucleus of the family that a child begins to know God. The family gives him points of reference and at the same time guides him with a universal language: the language of love. With this love he sees, absorbs and develops. "The child is the master of love and possesses a sensibility known as the intellect of love" (Montessori, p. 165). If it is true that the child's early years are fundamental in the sense of forming the basis for personality, we must undoubtedly take into account the mother tongue, the language that is spoken at home and used in the Eucharistic Celebration, to help the child relate to God. This is the one that nurtures the life of faith; the one that will nurture his relationship with God.

In the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd we give the child time and space for prayer, to develop this relationship using the child's familiar language, the "mother tongue". As a consequence of this the child lives and shares their relationship with God with the family in a language that unites them. This is another reason to develop a bilingual atrium, to unite families. Pope John Paul II reminded us in Ecclesia in America: "In this sanctuary, life is born and is welcomed as a gift from God. The Word of God, faithfully read in the family, gradually builds it up as a domestic church and makes it fruitful in human and Christian virtues. Parents are the first heralds of the faith" (p. 46).

In preparing to serve bilingual communities we need to consider the following: What is the prayer language of the child? How do we prepare adults to work in a bilingual environment? How do we prepare a bilingual environment? How do we educate the Anglo and Latino families in order to work together as one community under two languages?

A bilingual environment takes a fundamental role in the prayer life of a child, like tuning to the right channel where "grace" flows, not only to the heart, but to the intellect, too.

We, as catechists in the atrium have the responsibility to help the child in receiving that flow of grace. One way that helps us know how comfortable children are at prayer time is by inviting them to close their eyes and say a prayer in silence. After they have done that ask, " In what language did you pray?" Many of them respond, "in Spanish". This tells us there is prayer life at home using a particular language. We need to honor that, so that a personal relationship with the Lord can keep growing. Many Hispanic families bring their children to the Spanish sessions because they want to honor their "prayer language".

We find our children come from many different situations. The immigrant child who does not speak English finds joy and welcome in the familiarity of his mother tongue. The child who is truly bilingual, speaking Spanish at home and English at school, can move between the languages at their own pace and rhythm. For this child there is also a need for us to be able to speak with their parents in the primary language of the family so as to collaborate with them. Even if the religious life is lived in Spanish, prayers,

Mass and other liturgical celebrations are all celebrated in Spanish, yet the child may not have been taught to read Spanish. This child needs a Spanish announcement but English materials.

There is also the English-speaking child who has a Spanish spoken religious life because Grandma is the one nurturing their religious formation. We have been blessed with discoveries of the child by having both languages available to all our children. The first time an English-speaking child delighted in the Hail Mary in Spanish we were happy, but it has become a common occurrence. Even the monolingual children have a more developed sense of community knowing that children of other languages work with in the same environment. There comes a moment in the atrium when the child asks, "Why is this other language here?" The conversation that follows is always good and helps the child to see the wider community. Both languages, and therefore both cultures come to be respected.

The preparation of the adults is crucial to serving children in a bilingual atrium. It is important to have formation of the catechists in the language that they will be proclaiming and presenting in otherwise beautiful nuances can be missed, things incorrectly translated, and questions can be left unanswered. Finding a formation leader can be a challenge but the benefits far outweigh any difficulty. The first Spanish formation in this country was in our parish. At the time we went to the finance committee and told them that we would invite people from other communities which could help defray the cost, however there was a possibility that no one would come. Would the community of St. Anne's be responsible for the course if no one else came? With the support of the finance committee the parish sponsored the course. Maria Christlieb came and not only gave us formation in Spanish for Level 1 and Level 2 but invited us into what is now the major missionary work of our community, the work we share with the indigenous Totonaco People of Puebla, Mexico (See the CGS 1999 Journal).

Cultural differences need to be considered to set the pace and rhythm of any course. These differences are readily seen at our center. We hold courses in Spanish and English concurrently. The English course seeks to have a syllabus, it is very regulated and controlled, it starts and ends on time. Lunchtime is free for each participant to go off on their own if they like or seek others to share the allotted time with. The Spanish course is more interconnected. They begin when everyone is there, they all have lunch together, everyday is a potluck of whatever each has brought, and they end when they are finished for the day. You may wonder why we don't have lunch together. Lunchtime for the Spanish course is different every day and this can at times make the English participants anxious. We are slowly starting to recognize that both can be right, simply different. We are most often unaware that we are using a particular paradigm, and that there are other, possibly more fitting ways, of doing things. There needs to be an appropriate match between the community, the people being served and the approach or method being used.

We have a varied group of catechists, some speak only Spanish, some only English and some are bilingual and have had formation in both languages. They are priceless gifts!

Preparing the environment can also be a challenge. The level one atrium does not have much written material so the language needs are simple. Level two has an extensive amount of written material. How are the materials prepared? It is important that the materials not be translated from English but copied from the source. The scripture booklet texts should come from the Spanish translation of the Lectionary or Bible.

The liturgical prayers should come from the Spanish Missal used in the community. How these materials are prepared and placed on the shelves is also an important question. We think it is important that both languages are always present to all the children. At first there was some resistance, but this works for our community. Yet both adults and the children in an environment need to come to a loving understanding of what "bilingual" means for their particular community.

Sacramental preparation can be very challenging for two language groups but an amazing thing happened when we began to prepare our children in the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. The way of the Catechesis is so different from the traditional approach of either culture that it actually made it easier for our community to prepare all the children in the same way. The white garment is a beautiful sign of this unity! Before the dress of the children varied widely, especially the girls' dresses. Now all our children come to Communion dressed in a garment they love and that shows the community that we are truly united in the Body of Christ. Yes, there was great resistance at first but both groups saw the joy the children had in the gift of their white garment and were then happy to follow their children!

We need to address the needs and work through the challenges. One of the best ways of doing this is through prayer. Praying together has been what has held us together. One night, gathered for Eucharistic adoration we sang for almost two hours back and forth between the two languages until at the end we were all singing in both languages of the wonders God had done. It was our own little taste of Pentecost.

Of course, the larger community also needs to come together in prayer. In Advent we celebrate the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We have a great procession where we walk together and even if we cannot speak to each other there is a community bond in this procession. We close the celebration with the Rosary alternating Spanish and English. This is followed by a potluck dinner. Although small groups form speaking just one language there are many smiles and attempts to converse.

On Good Friday it is the children who unite us as we remember the suffering and death of Jesus. We have a special communal prayer in the morning that we do in both languages. We remember His complete and total love for all people of all time. We come together with our children; we speak different languages yet on this day of days how could we stand apart? We stand together with His mother at the foot of the cross. As we remember His death, we also remember His victory over darkness. We begin and end in silence so that we may quiet our hearts and minds and open ourselves to His loving spirit no longer separated by language for we all speak the language of silence.

"The son of God, by taking upon himself our human nature, became incarnate within a particular people, even though his Spirit and his love are meant for each and every people and culture, in order to bring them all into unity after the example of the perfect unity existing in the Triune God. For this to happen, it is necessary to enculturate preaching in such a way that the Gospel is proclaimed in the language and in the culture of its hearers. In America, the mestiza face of the Virgin of Guadalupe was, from the start, a symbol of the inculturation of the Gospel, of which she has been the lodestar and the guide. Through her powerful intercession, the Gospel will penetrate the hearts of the men and women of America and permeate their cultures, transforming them from within" (John Paul II, p. 70).

As Maria Montessori wrote in *The Absorbent mind*, "Whatever be our political or religious [and let us add cultural] affiliations, we are all near to the child and we all love him. It is from this love that comes the child's power for unity. Adults have strong, and often fierce, convictions which separate them into groups...But there is one point--the child--on which all have the same feelings. Few people realize how great is the child's importance owing to this" (p. 268). It is this love that can unite a community when beginning a bilingual or even multilingual environment.

We have come to this work with a special mission, with no recipe, but with the most perfect ingredients of the Bible, the Liturgy and the culture in order to nurture ourselves and the families of God. There is much to do in this journey with a bilingual atrium. The best place to start is in prayer with the entire community and a commitment to serve all the children of that community. Ask for help and support within the community of the parish and the community of the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd. Seek out those who are bilingual and will work in unity, knock on many doors inviting all to come! And as always remain in the True Vine and you will bear much fruit! God bless you!!!