

Native Hawaiians and Liturgical Inculturation

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The Diocese of Honolulu is located in the North Central Pacific Ocean. Hawai'i has a population of about 1.5 Million, of which between 250,000-300,000 are Catholic. The mother church of our diocese is Our Lady of Peace Cathedral Basilica, which was built by King Kamehameha III as part of his petition for peace from the French.

The Catholic missionaries arrived in 1826. By the time these missionaries arrived in Hawaii, the Kingdom was already staunchly Congregationalist Protestant. At first, the Hawaiians who converted to Catholicism were persecuted, then eventually the missionaries were expelled from the Kingdom. After the expulsion of one of the priests, the ship was lost at sea and the priest died. Since the Catholic clergy were from France, France took this as an act of war and seized the island of O'ahu. King Kamehameha III had to flee to the island of Maui where he sought peace with the French.

The terms put forth by the French were, (1) The King of Hawaii had to declare religious freedom. Kamehameha III had a constitution written which declared religious freedom. (2) He had to build a Cathedral. The present-day Cathedral Basilica of Our Lady Queen of Peace is the cathedral built by King Kamehameha III. (3) The king had to give the French a sum of money to ensure that the first two would be enacted.

The Cathedral Basilica was completed by 1843, and today is the oldest constantly used Cathedral in the United States. It was the place where St. Damien of Molokai was ordained a priest, and where his relic and that of Saint Marianne Cope of Molokai are kept to be venerated.

The Diocese is headed by Bishop Larry Silva.

The Diocese of Honolulu follows the same Lenten traditions as other Catholic Churches around the world, such as fasting and abstinence on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday and abstaining from meat on the Fridays of Lent. Most parishes also have Stations of the Cross on Fridays, and special programs during the Lenten Season. Lent is also the season for repentance, and in every church in each vicariate of the diocese, communal reconciliation is celebrated with individual confession.

At St. Rita, Nānākuli, the largest Native Hawaiian parish in the Hawai'i, we usually have a Lenten speaker series as well as opportunities to care for our less fortunate brothers and sisters through our food pantry which is open three times a week all year, and at our dinners in which our less fortunate brothers and sisters are fed.

The notion of family is very important to us, and so before Mass on Holy Thursday, parishioners speak to the gathered assembly to express their gratitude and the importance that St. Rita 'Ohana (family) means to them.

This stress on 'Ohana is evident at all our parish liturgies. Among the Hawaiians of old, hospitality was not just a sign of civilized behavior, but it was the law. When the Malihini (stranger) comes into your area, it was expected that all work ceased in order to feed the malihini. If it was late, the malihini had the best places in the house to sleep. Today, hospitality is a very important element in our liturgical celebrations. Parishioners sew lei to give to the malihini who visits us. When one makes a lei, they put their mana or life force into the lei. So

when the lei is given, so also does the one who sewed the lei give him/herself to the malihini. These malihinis are taken to the best seats in the church and during Hawaiian language Masses, the parishioners help the malihini know where we are in the liturgy and are made to feel welcome.

During all of our Masses, the Hawaiian culture is prevalent. On the weekend of the first Sunday of the month, the Mass is celebrated bilingually in the Hawaiian and English languages. We begin with a Hawaiian chant that asks God to grant us the hidden knowledge from above, that knowledge that is hidden in the Word and the song.

As the Sacred Mass continues, lei is presented to the Book of the Gospels in procession to symbolize that the Lord is present to us in the Word and in the teaching in our celebration. Later, a very large lei is placed on the altar after the consecration. The lei signifies many things. In the Hawaiian language, when referring to the Hawaiian people, they are called “nā pua o Hawaiʻi,” or “the flowers of Hawaiʻi”. The stain glass windows in our church depict flowers, which symbolize the people of Hawaiʻi. So, when we place the large lei on the altar, it symbolizes us, the Body of Christ. The scent of the flowers symbolizes our prayers, sweetly and gently being carried to the altar of the Lord. When we place the lei on the book of the Gospels, not only do we honor the Christ, but it symbolizes us kneeling before him as he imparts his wisdom onto us.

One of the most prized possessions of a Hawaiian family is the Kapa Kuiki, the Hawaiian Quilt. Unlike other quilts, when this covers the bed, one is not supposed to sit or even touch the bed. Before the bed is slept in, the quilt is carefully folded and put aside, not to be used for sleeping. We have taken this symbolism and put it in our church. The quilt covers the altar when the altar is not in use to symbolize that even though the altar is not being used, it is still sacred and one does not touch it or place objects on top of it. At the presentation of the gifts, our Eucharistic Ministers carefully remove the quilt and hang it on a dowel behind the altar.

The print on the kapa kuiki is that of the breadfruit, or ulu in Hawaiian. In our ancient mythology, the god Kū governed a section of the island of Hawaiʻi. There was a terrible drought and the people began to cry out to Kū for his assistance. His wife, Hina, said to Kū, “Do you not hear the cries of the suffering of your people?” to which Kū said he had. He devised a plan where he dug a great hole and was going to screw his whole body into the hole head first. He instructed his wife to fill in the hole when his entire body was screwed into the earth. She objected saying that it would kill him. He responded for her to do as he said. He also told her that a tree would grow and bear fruit which would look like his head. The people were to take the fruit, roast it and eat it and it would save their lives.

Reluctantly, Hina followed the instructions of her husband and the tree grew and bore fruit. The people roasted the fruit and cried as they ate it for their god sacrificed his life to save their lives. As they ate, Kū returned to them by rising out of the ocean.

We have taken this symbol and it is the pattern on our quilt, except the ulu print is in the shape of the Cross to symbolize that Christ is the one who had sacrificed his life for ours, and it is from this altar that we receive the Body and Blood of Christ from whom we receive everlasting life.

Hula often accompanies songs in our parish. Hula to the Hawaiians is sacred and when we sing a dance the hula, it is not just our voices that proclaim the prayer, but our whole being becomes a prayer to God.

In America, there is a stress to be a rugged individualist, to pull up oneself by one's own boot straps. This is the antithesis of what being a Hawaiian is. We are a communal people, we are interconnected and we know whatever decision we make affects many others. We do tasks together, usually beginning with ho`oponopono (making things right, just, serene). This is a way to make sure that all offences and hurts are dealt with, so everyone can be on the same page. We do this before large celebrations, usually in the `ohana as all are needed to put the celebration together, to make sure that the celebration goes smoothly and to take everything down and put things back into their place. If there is a problem in the family, all members come together to solve the problem because we all are part of the community. If there is one problem, the community strength is compromised and has to be addressed. This tends to be how Hawaiians view reconciliation, that one has to make things right, just and serene for the betterment of the entire community, the Body of Christ.

After the Communion Rite, we distribute communion to our Extraordinary Ministers of Communion, who will then take the precious body of Christ to the homebound and hospitalized. The tī leaf is used to wrap the body of Christ. After the communion has been distributed to the Extraordinary Ministers, the whole congregation prays over these ministers because these ministers represent the community of believers at St. Rita.

In the ancient days of Hawaii, it was observed that if lei or food was wrapped in tī leaves, that these things lasted longer. It was also believed that tī leaves drew out fever from a sick person, so the tī plant was attributed with healing properties. In most Hawaiian homes, tī plants were planted in the yard in order to ward off evil spirits. So, we have adapted these symbols in a Christian context and tī leaves are used to take communion to the homebound, hospitalized, the sick, the infirmed and the injured.

Even though we do not have distinct Lenten practices and traditions, Native Hawaiian Catholics have brought some aspects of our culture into our everyday worship and faith lives.