

16 God, Gold, and Glory

Clash of Cultures

Eighth graders Juan and Hans both attend Trinity Lutheran School and have become good friends over the last year. Hans invited Juan to spend a night at his house so that both boys could go to an early basketball game on Saturday.

"I don't mean to be rude," Juan began cautiously, "but that stuff you had at dinner with the pork roast smelled like garbage."

"The sauerkraut!?!?" asked Hans in amazement.

"Yeah," replied Juan.

"Sauerkraut is really good," insisted Hans.

"It's gross," countered Juan.

Who is right?

The foods we learn to enjoy are part of our culture, and sometimes cultures clash. Can you name any foods from another culture that you have tried and liked? How about those foods you don't ever plan to eat again?

June 27, 1529:

I and the brother who was with me baptized in the province of Mexico upwards of 200,000 persons—so many in fact, that I cannot give an accurate estimate of the number. Often we baptized in a single day
14,000 people,
sometimes 10,000,
sometimes 8,000.

For God and Country

Cultures clashed in a dramatic way when European explorers came to the New World. Early in the 15th century, Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal began a wave of European efforts to explore the world beyond Europe. Henry may have wanted to spread the Gospel to distant lands. A popular legend in Europe told of a great Christian leader in the East named Prester (Priest) John, and it was generally believed that India and China were Christian countries that simply needed to come into contact with the church of Rome.

When Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain supported Columbus' exploration in 1492, they were looking to catch up with their rival, Portugal. In 1494, Spain and Portugal agreed to the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the newly discovered world with an imaginary north/south line that began near the Azores Islands and cut the world in half. This left Africa and Brazil (part of which is east of the line) to Portugal and the rest of North and South America to Spain. The Spanish set out to first explore, then to conquer, their slice of the New World.

Spain sent military leaders, called *conquistadors*, to the New World to follow the explorers. There were only two civilizations in the Americas adequately organized to pose a threat to the invading



Spanish. The Aztec Empire covered much of what is now Mexico. From 1519 to 1521, conquistador Hernando Cortés conquered the entire Aztec nation with only 600 men. From 1531 to 1533, conquistador Francisco Pizarro conquered the Inca people in what is now Peru with only 180 soldiers. These two great empires had been declining for some time, and they crumbled before the guns and horsemen of the Spanish army.

The rule of the Spanish over the peoples they conquered is both exciting and tragic. Ten years after Columbus first landed on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), 2,500 Spanish colonists followed to make the island their home. The Spanish king ordered the colonists to build churches and schools for the native people and to teach them about Christ. The native people seemed eager to follow Christ.

Following the explorers and conquistadors were the missionaries. Peter of Ghent (Pedro de Gante) was an early missionary to the area that is now Mexico City.

It must have been exciting to see so many people come to Christ so quickly. Yet, tragically, the Spanish oppressed the native people, treating them as slaves in the workforce needed to get gold. The conquistadors believed that the native people were animals who couldn't understand enough to have faith.

Some church leaders believed that the native people should be conquered first and later converted. Bartolomé de Las Casas was the chaplain to the Spanish conquest of Cuba in 1512-13 and an acquaintance of Columbus. Father de Las Casas became angry when he saw the native people mistreated and murdered. He preached and wrote about these terrible practices in both the New World and Spain.

The church saw the native people as childlike and in need of care.

Through much of the 16th century, the native people were baptized, married, and had regular church services in the New World, but they could not receive the Lord's Supper because it was felt that they couldn't understand it. The native people also were not able to become priests until 1794.

Culture or Christ?

Christianity has always struggled with cultural differences. Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-13. In the early church, it was felt that Greek (Gentile or non-Jewish) people who became Christians had to accept Jewish practices. Paul tells us that we are all one—both Jews and Greeks.

Think of several customs that are considered part of church life and decide if they are part of our culture or an important part of our Christian faith.

Custom

[Possible responses may resemble the following: wearing certain clothes to church on communion Sunday, choir members singing as the people assemble for worship, kneeling for the confession and absolution]

Christian Faith

[Responses may resemble the following: praying the Lord's Prayer, helping others in the name of Jesus, learning the Ten Commandments]

Culture

[Responses may resemble the following: holding a day-long funeral service for someone who died professing faith in Jesus, reading from the Bible during worship in Cantonese, wearing folk costumes in observance of a congregation's anniversary]

To Review and Remember

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. *Ephesians 4:4-6*

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Did You Know?

The first Lutherans to come to America helped to found a colony in Venezuela in South America in 1529.

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