

On Interculturality

Introduction

We deal with cultures in our apostolic work, striving to make the Gospel welcomed by the people we are serving (**inculturation**) and through our adaptation to the local customs, sensitivities, and way of living (**acculturation**). But challenges due to cultural differences are currently found also within our communities which are becoming less and less homogeneous as far as culture is concerned. At its origins, our Congregation was composed only by Italian members, mainly from the North of the Country. Ever since the process of **internationalization** started, we were confronted with the problem of cultural integration. For years it was thought that the Italian model was the reference to which all had to adapt like a sort of **homologation**.¹ Now we are more and more aware of the need to move forward with a different understanding in which differences are integrated in the community for mutual enrichment and respect for particularities is the rule.

There is an episode that made me reflect on the need to undergo a process of integrating of our cultural backgrounds. Some years ago, during a **Missionary Congress** held in Brescia (Italy) I was upset by the speeches of the General Superiors of two missionary institutes. The question they were supposed to answer was "What are the challenges of the mission today?". The answer of both was mainly about internal problems, how to make different ethnic groups cohabit and... who should be the superior, whether an African or an Italian. While listening, I was thinking that we are struggling only with problems within our communities, while...the world, outside, is waiting for the proclamation of the Gospel! Indeed, if we do not solve problems connected with our living together, there is the concrete risk of a dangerous introversion of our missionary congregations. We are for the unity of the world but we are still struggling to live as family.

¹ According to Gittins, in the past "The classical model for recruitment was that of assimilation... members were admitted on the general and specific understanding that they were to learn to accommodate themselves to a preexisting and well-tried way of living." Antony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally. Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015), 2.

The need of finding a positive integration of cultures goes beyond the limits of religious communities. The Church itself has started long ago her endeavor aiming at finding a positive integration of cultures at a broader level (probably this journey started with the welcoming of the Gentiles into the first Christian communities).

We have just celebrated the 100th anniversary of the **Maximum Illud** (1919) which puts an end both to the Eurocentric and colonial vision of mission and the consequent sense of superiority of one cultural setup over the others. It positively values cultural differences, promotes the separation between Church and political powers, entrusting the local church, once the missionaries have left, to the pastoral care of the local clergy (priests and bishops).² The apostolic letter encourages the sending of new missionaries as well (many congregations felt pushed to further expansion abroad).

In the current missiology reflection, a new missionary paradigm is emerging, the so called *inter-gentes*. It advocates the replacement of the *Ad gentes model*. At a cultural level, this new paradigm upholds interculturality in terms of greater respect for local cultures, overcoming the sense of superiority of the Western/Christian culture (export a cultural setup, bringing the Gospel to the pagans...³).

In my personal opinion, this new paradigm on the one hand takes a positive view on the work of the Spirit in any culture and promotes a way of doing mission which is loving, humble, and respectful. On the other hand, it bears the risk of a naïve idealization of local cultures, by overlooking the prophetic duty to challenge the negative elements inherent to any cultural setting: eg. violation of human rights, misogyny, exaggerated prestige of the traditional priest (source of clericalism), ambiguous relationship with the spiritual world... We cannot endorse proselytism (Cf. EG14), but at the same time we have the duty

² It faced the opposition of the SVDs who did not consider the Chinese ready to become candidates to episcopacy. It was Celso Costantini, the Apostolic Delegate in China, who was able to set 2 apostolic vicariates entrusted to Chinese vicars (1924) and brought to Rome the first six Chinese candidates to episcopacy (1926).

³ Cf. Antonio Pernia, *The State of Mission Today (Part Two)*. From “Missio Ad Gentes” to “Missio Inter Gentes”. Unpublished Lecture for the Mission Orientation Course Dating/Balik-Bayan, Tagaytay, June 08-09, 2018.

to respectfully proclaim the Gospel and Jesus Christ to those who have never heard about it.⁴

Interculturality in Community Life

If members of a community are not of the same nationality and culture, different levels of integration may occur. The lowest level **is the simple Internationalization**: culture differences are just tolerated without efforts to understand or even less to welcome alterity. We are still at the mere level of tolerance. A deeper level of integration is **Interculturality**,⁵ which is the interaction and exchange between different cultures which have come into contact with one another. At this level differences can be integrated for mutual enrichment.⁶

Let us consider a possible **definition of culture**: *Culture is [...] a process that is actively or persuasively at work, particularly in the unconscious of groups and individuals. It is a pattern of shared assumptions or values, expressed in its constituent parts, namely symbols, myths and rituals, that have been invented, discovered or developed by a group as it struggles to cope with problems of external adaptation and internal cohesion. Its primary function is to provide felt meaning or a sense of order in the process of living because what we most fear as humans is the world of chaos or disorder.*⁷

This definition shows why our cultural background is so important. Culture is a system that makes us feel at ease, safe. It is our comfort zone. The movement of getting out of it generates uneasiness. Getting in touch with another culture is like leaving what has made us feel safe until today, something that has protected and made us live. It's like jumping off a plane: "Will I survive this new cultural setting? Will I find the same protection I get when at home?" We are not racist

⁴ On the prophetic task of countering and denouncing the negative side of cultures integrated with a respectful way of evangelizing and dialog, see Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2012), 40-55.

⁵ On the theme of Interculturality see Antony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally. Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015).

⁶ Cf. Marselinus Rante Taruk, *Towards an Intercultural Formation for Mission. Reflection on the Formation Journey of the Xaverian Missionaries while Responding to the Challenge of Internationality of the Institute*. Tesi di Licenza in Teologia Spirituale (Roma: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2017), 40-1.

⁷ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *From Chaos to Mission: Refounding Religious Life Formation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996, 38), cited by Marselinus Rante Taruk, *Towards an Intercultural Formation for Mission*, op. cit., 39.

by choice, but for fear of losing what has protected us so far.⁸ It is for this simple reason that basically, we are all **ethnocentric**, whether we acknowledge it or not. At the same time, entering the other's world is difficult and is not natural for anyone and we become, therefore, victims of **cultural prejudices** (often unconscious) against the other.⁹

We must be **aware of differences** due to our different cultural backgrounds. "Love to the neighbor" has different expressions for an Indian and for a German. Generally, Filipinos say "yes" to mean yes however seldom they say no; remaining silent is the usual way to convey a no. Eating with your hands in Indonesia is very refined, but is considered unpolite in Italy. Asking someone to do something without saying "please" seems common in some cultural environments, while sounds rude somewhere else. For these reasons, a **culture shock** in facing another culture is unavoidable and must be put into account by any missionary. Adjustment to a new cultural setup is a process which can be represented by a parable: honey moon, initial adjustment (after disappointment/crisis), acceptance and integration.¹⁰

Dynamics: at this point, let us ask ourselves some simple questions which possibly help us to become more aware of our cultural differences: 1) What is the positive value of your (Burundese, Brazilian...) culture that you really cannot find in the Filipino milieu? (dancing during celebrations, embracing people while greeting them... only shaking hands...); 2) what is the new value that you have found in the Filipino culture that is not present in your (Congolese, Mexican...) own culture? (smiling, welcoming attitude that make you feel at home, not just a guest...) 3) What do you appreciate in the cultural background of your (Indonesian, Cameroonian...) brothers that is not so highlighted in your own culture? (Congolese people and Africans in general, are very good at learning languages...)

⁸ On the role of fear in influencing our decisions, during the trial of Nuremberg, the Nazis leader Hermann Göering explained how even in democracy the leader can make use of fear for drag people wherever they want, including to war: "[...] the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country."

⁹ Cf. Marselinus Rate Taruk, *Towards an Intercultural Formation for Mission*, op. cit., 67.

¹⁰ Rosa Libron, *Reverse Culture Shock*, lecture for the Mission Orientation Course "Dating/Balik-Bayan" 2018, Tagaytay, June 08-09, 2018.

A Spirituality for Living Interculturally

For successfully living interculturally in our community we need the **clear intention** to take it as important dimension of our lives and mission.¹¹ This calls us to be ready to change and to accept alterity in an effort of an asceticism aiming at building fraternity. Living interculturally requires, therefore, a **deep spirituality**.¹² Indeed, we cannot only rely on our human characteristics and strengths. We need a vision that goes beyond the contingent and open up to the dream of God and Conforti on universal brotherhood. Moreover, we need the resolution to deny ourselves, and to carry the cross of intercultural interactions, every day. We need the **grace of the Spirit** to be able to transform us, living together as strangers, into a community of brothers. The Spirit is the only one who turns our diversities into mutual enrichment, just as He binds in unity the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity.

This is connected very much with the current understanding of spirituality of the Church. The Church is in fact upholding the **spirituality of communion** (NMI 42), which represents a step ahead compared to the past approach to contemplation, which was almost exclusively considered an individualistic endeavor. This inspires our common life and our way of doing mission.¹³ Living together was never an easy task, so also at the time of Jesus. Let us think about Peter, a worker who was paying taxes, and Matthew who used to collect them for the Romans, living together in the same community of disciples. Paul faces the same difficulties in his communities. Nevertheless, the first Christians were able, despite many shortcomings, of course, to experience communion, becoming one heart and one soul, living according to the gift of the Spirit (Cf. Act 4:32).

There is a strict **connection between mission and the quality of our community life**, including our ability to live interculturally. Fr. Piero Trabucco, the former General Superior of the *Consolata Fathers*, points out that: “[living

¹¹ Cf. Antony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, op. cit., 4, 24.

¹² Cf. Antony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, op. cit., 4. and Marcelinus Rante Taruk, *Towards an Intercultural Formation for Mission*, op. cit., 47; 54-55.

¹³ Quoting Fr. Giacomo Spagnolo, founder of the *Xaverian Missionary Sisters*, sr. Antonella del Grosso says: Fr. Giacomo “concludes his letter by recalling that true apostolate has its origin in the bosom of the Trinity, where it draws its spirit, its life, its strength. Trinitarian communion is also the source of communion among us, and it is the effective condition (Constitutions of The Missionaries of Mary n. 8) for the purpose of our mission: "Father, may they be one, so that the world may believe that you sent me... This is the testament of Jesus, the testament that Mons. Conforti left to his children, take it also as my legacy” (Letter of Fr. G. Spagnolo n. 13, 1962), Antonella Del Grosso, *Una Eredità Spirituale*, at <<https://dg.saveriani.org/it/eventi/speciali/2021-anno-giubilare/item/una-eredita-spirituale>>.

interculturality] is indeed a difficult process [...] Nevertheless it helps our growth at least in two dimensions which for us are paramount: **the prophetic and missionary dimensions**. A serene intercultural relationship leads to the denunciation of whatever divides society and peoples in the name of race, nationality, or culture. It proclaims a new way “where there are no longer strangers nor guests,” but only brothers united by the same Spirit and servants of the only one God who, despite the diversity of the peoples’ gift, cultures, and sensitivities, is Father of all.”¹⁴ Living interculturality is therefore a challenge but it is also the opportunity to bear witness to the Gospel in the contemporary world.

Finally, we must be aware that the **Gospel** not only calls for **respecting** cultures, but also **challenges** them in their anti-evangelical aspects. This is the prophetic dimension of evangelization which goes together with the disposition to dialogue with every person.¹⁵ A priest, friend of mine, told me that he felt diminished when a seminarian asked him to pick him up at a mall after shopping. The spontaneous reaction was: “how come this guy, who is ‘only a seminarian,’ asks me to serve him?” His cultural understanding of being priest, with all its privileges, came to surface... The Gospel caused him to change and made him understand that he had to overcome this feeling. When Jesus came to the earth he adjusted to the life in this world (acculturation), but he also brought with him the culture of heaven (prophecy), a culture that was not leaving things as they were, but had a transformative power. The document of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community* n. 52, recites: “Fraternal and united communities are increasingly called to be an important and eloquent element of the **Gospel counter-culture**, salt of the earth and light of the world.”¹⁶ The Gospel is calling all of us to conversion.

¹⁴ Cf. Piero Trabucco, “Interculturality in the Life of Institute and of our Communities,” in *Acts of the IMC Convention on Interculturality*, Jan 14, 2018, 91.

¹⁵ On mission as Prophecy, see Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue. Reflections on Christian Mission Today* (Manila: Logos Publications, 2012), 40-55. Anthony Gittins writes: *...the conventions of any and every culture are not above reproach and appropriate criticism, and no culture models the Gospel imperatives and the call to discipleship in a totally adequate, much less in a perfect, way. Therefore, every culture and its constitutive members must first bend the knee before the revelation of Jesus Christ, and every Christian disciple must become countercultural at some points, in order to conform to the Gospel and to the particular call of religious life.* Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, op. cit., 95-6.

¹⁶ And it continues at the same number: “Thus, for example, if in western society where individualism is rampant, a religious community is called to be a prophetic sign of the possibility of achieving in Christ fraternity and solidarity, in cultures where authoritarianism or communitarianism is rampant it is called

Taking inspiration from the community of Philippi

Let us take inspiration from the Bible to learn how to make our interculturality possible. The concern of Paul is the unity of the community (Cf. 1:27). The *Christological hymn* of chapter 2 talks on the *kenosis* of Jesus. The interesting thing is to see how this famous hymn is introduced: Paul calls the Philippians to act according to **Jesus's kenosis** (in humility and obedience), because this is the way for building **unity within the community**. Becoming nothing out of love, like Jesus on the cross, is the main tool for building communion among us.

*Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, **maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.***

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;

do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

*but **emptied Himself**, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.*

*Being found in appearance as a man, He **humbled** Himself by becoming **obedient** to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:1-8)*

To encounter the other, I need to **expand the limits of my soul**, extend it, pull it, and this hurt. To have within myself the world of the other I have to make an effort that extends the limits of my comfort zone (culture). Jesus sends the disciples asking not to bring anything with them, in a cultural sense, means to being able to leave behind also our culture, in order to build fraternity (Cf. Lk 10:1-12). This is **our kenosis** and **our cultural asceticism**, one of the “**dark nights**” of the missionary. It is a dynamic that we need to renew in every meeting, every day. Once again, interculturality works only if the community is a community of faith, with a strong spirituality.

to be a sign of respect for and promotion of the human person, and also an exercise of authority in agreement with the will of God”.

Growing in interculturality becomes an enriching path, but only under the condition of denying ourselves to give room to the other. This is the attitude of Paul: “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). The Christological hymn of Philippians is telling us that communion is possible only if we personally and together give room to the presence of Jesus in our lives, and this requires the **death of our egos**: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.” (Phil. 1:21) It is gain, because of gift of unity. Culturally speaking, the meeting point of cultures is the culture of Jesus himself, the culture of him present in us and among us.

The Holy Trinity as our Model

In living interculturally, we have a model, which is the **Holy Trinity**. Trinity is not only unity, but it is also distinction and, I would say, true diversity. The three are consubstantial, but perhaps it is necessary to think that the Father is not the Son and vice versa. Their unity is due to consubstantiality, the sharing of the same being God (Cf. the Creed), but also to the fact that they resolutely **want love each other and** lay down their lives for each other. This love makes them one. St. Augustine in “De Trinitate” states:

*This is the meaning of the sentence: that they [men] may be one as We are one; just as the Father and the Son are one only thing not only for the equality of substance, **but also for the will**, so those who have the Son as Mediator between themselves and God, are one only thing not only because they are of the same nature but also for the commonality of the same love.¹⁷*

The same idea appears in St. Thomas Aquinas.

[In God] there is a twofold unity, that of the divine nature and that of Love, which is the Holy Spirit. We have to reproduce this unity which exists in God. Therefore, it is not enough for us all to have, by grace, the same divine life which makes us partakers in the divine nature. We must also be united by love with God and on another, in the personal Love which is the Holy Spirit.¹⁸

These two great saints and theologians are telling us that the Trinity is not only an inextricable mystery, but rather a model for our living together. The mystery of the Trinity tells us that we need to make a **clear resolution to love one another**. Communion is never the mere product of a spontaneous harmony, but

¹⁷ Augustin of Hippo, *De Trinitate* 9.9.

¹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *In Johannem* 17, 26.

rather the result of a demanding commandment: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn. 13:34).

In Our Concrete Life

Often it happens that we justified ourselves, to protect our selfishness or to cover up our psychological inconsistencies, by **appealing to cultural reasons**. Anthony Gittins calls it “playing the ‘*culture card*.’”¹⁹ I blame the superior arguing that he does not understand me because he is European and I am Congolese or Indonesian. I do not talk with the brothers of that nationality, because I already know how they act and think... They are all the same. Often behind this justification lays the defense of my privileges or the fear to change. I do not want to convert and therefore I defend myself by bringing forward my culture as a **shield** (accusing the other of being ethnocentric and of not making the effort to adapt to my culture...). By doing that, I instrumentalize and then I belittle my own culture for a very miserable purpose. Moreover, without the disposition to change and learn (*docibilitas*), there is no possibility for personal growth.²⁰

In struggling to accept the other, we must bear in mind the great design of “that all may be one”, the dream of Jesus (Jn 17:21), the **universal brotherhood**, making the world a single family. We work to build the Mystical Body of Christ in which everyone is inserted. So, we need to love everyone, even those who are disagreeable to me, because sooner or later (even if only after death, in heaven), we will have to live together. It is better to fix our relationships as soon as possible.

In living interculturally, there should be the room for making **cultural values of each one blossom**. It is not only a matter of surviving in a peaceful way without hurting each other (this is the harmony of the cemeteries), but the result of true communion should be valuing and developing of the diversities. Each person, should see that the values (not what is wrong) of his culture are in some way integrated in the life of the community for mutual enrichment. The

¹⁹ *Playing the “culture card” may just be an example of perverseness, inflexibility, or prejudice that prevents someone from trying to change and adapt.* Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, op. cit., 95.

²⁰ Cf. Giovanni Cucci, *Il Nuovo Documento sulla Formazione Sacerdotale (Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Sacerdotalis, Dicembre 2016)*, Conference at the VII Meeting of the Rectors of the Theologies, Roma, 8-13 October 2018, 22.

result of our communion should be that everyone, despite his passport, feels at home.²¹

We have to learn the **community discernment**. We have been trained in the individual discernment, but now is the time for getting into a new perspective which involves communion. This is the understanding of the Church today. To do this, we need to free ourselves from our attachments (even our good ideas) in the dynamic of love that opens us up to the mind of Christ. We must be ready to express ourselves freely, but we must be open at the same time to lose our thoughts to welcome the way of thinking of Christ among us: “we [not I...] have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

The religious congregations and orders have become internationalized because of the lack of vocations in the West. This is a **providential grace** because through it, we are a prophetic sign of the world of the future that will be more and more multi-ethnic. It is up to us to take advantage of our multiculturalism for bear witness to the Gospel.

Some tools to grow in our intercultural fraternity

At the end of this journey, let us just list some tools that possibly help us in grow our intercultural communion:

Training for internationalization. A concrete experience of living together.

Be happy to be in an intercultural environment.

Agree on the **language** to use.

Apologize when we are wrong and be **ready to forgive** (forgiving 70x7 times)

Ask the reason why one behave that way, open to really understand.

Listening.

Openness to be corrected and **to correct** (with courage and love): fraternal correction.

Do not be discouraged by **failures**.

Hypomone, know how to endure, tolerance.

Accept the fact of being in a **process of growth** that will never end.

Community discernment.

²¹ Cf. Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, op. cit., 21-3.

Conclusion

I like to conclude by quoting the Xaverian Father Fabrizio Tosolini, who gives an interesting insight on interculturality which becomes possible only if our hearts are aiming at the life in heaven and to a deep communion with God.

In Philippians he [Paul] speaks of our heavenly citizenship (Phil 3:20; 1:27) as the source of our hope and striving towards Christ.

A city in heaven is equally distant – and close – to every city on earth. At the same time it is different from every city and present in every city. As citizens of that city we are at home everywhere, we are foreigners everywhere, even at home.²²

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²² Fabrizio Tosolini, *Roots of Universality and Interculturality of the Church in St. Paul. The Letter to the Galatians*, unpublished lecture to the Wesleyan Graduate School of Theology, Taipei, Nov 8, 2018.