

Interculturality in Religious Congregations

First of all, I want to thank the CRC for inviting me to this workshop. I participated in the day organized in Montreal on April 22nd and found that very stimulating and challenging. Already this morning, we have begun addressing some very important issues related to the topic. I must be honest with you: I, like many of you here I am sure, have more questions than answers when we reflect on the question of intercultural experiences within our Congregations, who are themselves inserted in intercultural realities in the societies in which they are living. What is important and meaningful is that we are willing to take time, like today, to search together for better understanding of a dimension of our formation programs which cannot be ignored.

We are fortunate to have access to excellent written material on the subject. I want to recommend the dossier prepared and published in the Fall 2014 issue of the CRC Bulletin, volume 11, number 3. In the same light, Anthony Gittins continues to be a challenging writer on the topic.

Interculturality is here to stay and is an integral part of our witnessing of the Gospel message to today's broken world. I am more and more convinced that this dimension must be addressed directly when one is faced with multicultural and cross-cultural living. Sitting at the table together and sharing on the real issues dissipates fear and mistrust and opens avenues to finding a common ground upon which to build this « better world » we all desire, be it in our communities, our society or in our war-torn world.

1. I would like to begin with my own personal reality, because it is definitely intercultural in nature and prepared me for what was to come later.

I am grateful for my personal experience, growing up with parents who themselves offered me an intercultural experience : my father, a French Canadian Roman Catholic born and raised in northern Alberta in a small farming community where speaking French was greatly valued, despite being completely immersed in an English speaking setting. And my mother, a British war bride, Jewish, who had been born and raised in very heart of London England. Do you see where I am going? I was thus initiated to various factors mentioned by many people who have written on the subject: inclusion-exclusion, assimilation vs incorporation vs incarnation (as Anthony Gittins mentioned in the CRC workshop held in 2014).

And so this is my first question to formators: what is your personal cultural-linguistic world? Monocultural or multicultural? I do think that we are marked by our own early experience. Can you name elements which help you live in an intercultural setting? Or that make it difficult for you to do so? How do you deal with cultural differences on a day by day basis? (As Gittins would say: eliminating differences, or tolerating differences or managing differences?) One learns a LOT by living situations concretely, so dare risking cross-cultural experiences are precious and the earlier you do that, the more equipped one is to confront the challenges.

For that matter, the same questions apply to our young people who enter our congregations. They too must experience as early as possible cross-cultural and multicultural situations, where time is given for delving into their own personal stories. Reflection on this topic is to be encouraged and incorporated into their initial formation programs.

2. My experience as novice director in Lima Peru for 10 years was a rude awakening. It stretched me, not only spiritually, but also provided me with new challenges in terms of my commitment to living “intentionally” in an “intercultural faith-based project”. This is Anthony Gittins’ expression and a very loaded one to say the least! I think that our Congregation probably reflects a common reality, so I would like to circulate a poster we printed in 2013. It contains the photos of our young members in initial formation. What can you observe? As you can see our vocations now come to us from Haiti, Peru, Burkina Faso, Mali and perhaps Viet Nam. I continually remind myself that we are a reflection of the societies in which we live.

All sorts of questions need to be addressed: How one views authority (and who is in authority and how they live their authority)? How to respect different tastes and distastes about food (do NOT underestimate this dimension, it is crucial and its “layers” must be peeled like an onion!)? How each one views the concept of time (do we really have the answer? I am really wondering!)? In which way we live and express our faith experience (rituals, religious practices and customs)? How we enter into and maintain our relations with one another. Help me add more to this list. These topics can be excellent themes for our community sharing.

I can recall as if it were yesterday, my first year with five novices, all Peruvian, mostly Aymara, where my efforts to enter into dialogue about everything (I am an extrovert to top it all), was met with prolonged “silence”, which I did not know what to do with.... Fortunately, CONFER (common noviciate program established by Conference of Religious in Peru) insisted that we formators were obliged to participate in the program along with the novices. Part of that involved regular gatherings of the formators, where we could share our struggles, our questions and at times (what I like to call) our “Transfiguration” moments! I can still see myself asking: perhaps communication (which I defined at the time as sitting around together talking) is NOT the only way to enter into a dialogue? Should I be “doing” something else? We debated that one a LOT... and the Peruvian formators in our midst were very helpful. 20 years later, I recognize the importance of patience, of listening even to the silence, of letting “time do its time”, of building day by day trust and confidence, of being a real, authentic and humble presence, of risking being vulnerable and at times even fragile, thus revealing my own “humanity”.

Many writers and speakers refer often to the importance of “cultivating relationships”. That to me is the key and where we must dare to go. It means at times living outside one’s own cultural environment and living in someone else’s cultural environment, thus being the « stranger » with all that entails. As Sister Pat Murray asked when she spoke to the UISG gathering in Rome in 2013: Are we willing to learn not only the spoken language of the other, but also the cultural signs, symbols (and I add: rituals) which transmit meaning and allow you to enter into a whole new world? The example she used was the shake of the head does

NOT mean the same thing in all cultures! We all have stories about our discoveries and explorations of cultures other than our own... and also of our own for that matter!

3. It is urgent that we say YES to intentional commitment to intercultural living, for the future of our congregations demands that of us.
 - We need to continue creating spaces where the new members from different cultures meet and live together. Allow them to “lose time” together in an informal as well as formal setting.
 - We must be willing to evaluate our own respective cultures and name the values and the non-values, and so accept to “evangelize our cultures”. It is an important exercise to undertake together and demands humility, honesty and trust in the “other” who in turn must have the courage to undertake a similar process vis-à-vis her or his culture.
 - I often wondered what is “cultural” and what is more a question of personality, when moments of tension arose in our lived experiences in terms of interrelational difficulties? We need to sort that one out!
 - Experiences of intercultural leadership in our congregations provides us with the opportunity of living an experience wherein to trust and have confidence in the “other” is essential. We have been graced with the presence of Sister Kesta Occident, a Haitian, has our general animator for the past 10 years, who often invites us to question and reflect upon elements in our lived experience as an “international” congregation. We also have Sister Agnès Louis, also a Haitian, as director of our International Noviciate in Lima Peru (the only noviciate in our congregation for the time being). This very concrete reality brings home many of the points I have already mentioned.
 - I cannot help but mention another important element: maintaining one’s sense of humor (especially being able to laugh at yourself) and taking time to have fun and relaxing together are precious tools. We often do not take the time to live this, for our work- oriented mindset leaves little room for this dimension.
4. We must also take time to observe Jesus (how he lived the intercultural dimension in his life, as told so beautifully in the Gospels). It is all about relationships and his way of entering into relationship with the “other”. The quality of the encounters lived speak eloquently of respect and equality. We are called to be His followers. Jesus lived in a pluralistic society during his time. Can you give me examples of this? He crossed boundaries and went beyond his own culture.

To dare to do likewise today would be prophetic. Pope Francis in his apostolic exhortation, “the Joy of the Gospel” wrote:

In the Christian customs of an evangelized people, the Holy Spirit adorns the Church, showing her new aspects of revelation and giving her a new face. Through **inculturation**, the Church “introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community”, for “every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived”. (Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, 116)

Some people say that we are called to be “*specialists of communion in our fragility*”. It is true that religious congregations have become a sort of “live laboratory” of people of many cultures living under the same roof! Do we realize what a wonderful opportunity that is? Together we can build a new culture and thus say to the world: YES it IS possible for us to live together in harmony, respecting our diversity, valuing justice and equality for all, each free to be fully themselves. Our individual cultures are not static entities “written in cement”, but rather dynamic realities evolving and changing as we speak. To truly believe this changes everything! It is a mind set and a way of being to be cultivated and to be nurtured.

A simple question that can become a useful yardstick: What will be “Good News” to those around us as we enter into relationship with them (and them with us)?

5. Here in Canada, we are all immigrants, except for the First Nations peoples who were here before us. (But that is another issue full of cultural connotations, which we must one day also seriously take into consideration.) Each one of us has a story to tell and to assume as descendants of immigrants, regardless of how many generations we are talking about.

I am always curious about how we process this. At the onset, we came mostly from Europe (white Caucasian). How did we live together then? Nowadays, we come mostly from the Southern hemisphere; Africa, South America and Asia... How are we now living this multicultural reality? What is behind this malaise being expressed more and more in our societies?

Let's go a little further on this: How many of us now live in multicultural settings? How many have welcomed in your own families persons from other cultures? How is that being lived by your family? Have you ever taken the time to share that (amongst the family) in a frank and honest manner? This will already indicate how we are viewing and living interculturality.

We also have a collective story to tell as religious congregations. How many of us began our religious experience in a primarily monocultural reality? We have created through the years, a “religious culture”, with norms and customs well entrenched. The new members were invited to « enter into » this culture. Times have changed and this is no longer the case. In our desire to pass on to the next generation of religious, we must continually ask ourselves: what is absolutely essential and that has to be passed on as the foundation of consecrated life and what are elements which are more « cultural » and could be adjusted or even left behind?

6. I cannot help but return to Anthony Gittins talk to the CRC in 2014. He stipulates (and I quote): “that **intercultural living should be the aim of people living in intentional, international religious-faith communities.**” It is NOT easy, normal or even possible for everyone. It is a faith-based project.

It requires:

- Intentionality (a common project, not just projects of works).
- Tolerance of ambiguity, immaturity, mistakes.
- A forum for venting frustrations.

- Appropriate correction, genuine listening and flexibility.
 - Commitment to ongoing dialogue and development.
 - Attention to overload, stress, differences, misunderstanding.
 - Encouragement, compassion and genuine concern.
 - Clarification of vision, goals, strategies and commitments (it is an ongoing process).
7. Our religious congregations were founded by strong, faith filled men and women who had a vision which often incorporated an element of interculturality. We need to bring those intuitions back to the forefront of our animations.

In closing, I would like to quote our founder, Blessed Basile Moreau, who wrote:
“Let us not limit our interest to the narrow confines of a particular house, a province, or our own country. This would be egoism and self-seeking. Rather, let us be one with all our houses and regard none as a stranger to the one in which we live.” (Circular Letter no 174, 1864)

May we continue to search and question together on this very important topic of interculturality in our religious congregations. God is waiting for us at the crossroads!

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Sisters of Holy Cross