

A Look at the Intercultural Reality of Jesuit Communities in Quebec

At the last General Assembly, Father Anthony Gittins, CSSP, invited us to embark on a process of conversion based on a reality that our religious communities are currently living through, that of intercultural relations. As a result of his presentation, we have become more aware that diversity is an asset to our congregations, but only insofar as it leads us to a genuine reciprocity.

Intercultural living is certainly one of the dimensions that religious communities have to live with today, in synergy with a world in which international relations have become "signs of the times." In this context, interculturality is one of the dimensions participating in the prophetic nature of consecrated life. How to create relations in which the other is recognized in all of his or her dignity in a world that may create people who are excluded? Leaving one's father, mother and family to join with others to form another family centred around a common project is certainly a challenge to live with on a daily basis. Even greater is the challenge that arises when these brothers and sisters who are given to us come from another culture!

Is Internationality a Guarantor of Intercultural Living?

Several congregations have had an international character ever since their founding. But how is this internationality lived? Is the internationality of a congregation the guarantor of genuine interculturality? The Society of Jesus to which I belong has had an international character ever since its inception. The first companions gathered around Ignatius were aware that, as "the product of such different regions and cultures," they had to consolidate what God had gathered together into a single body. Now present in 124 countries, the Society of Jesus continues to grow, especially in South Asia and Africa.

Although the international character of the Society of Jesus is not necessarily visible in every one of the communities or Provinces, the fact remains that Jesuits from a variety of cultures are called upon, either by their studies or by their work, to live in communities that are not necessarily of their own culture. The Province of French Canada and Haiti thus includes Canadian Jesuits and Haitian Jesuits, as well as others. Nearly half of Haitian Jesuits are currently studying outside of Haiti, including here in Quebec City and in Toronto. Moreover, Canadian Jesuits are in the process of uniting into a single Jesuit Province. We are already seeing, in addition to the challenge of language, different cultural approaches that we have to face.

Prevalence of the Cross-Cultural Model

It seems to me that it would be wishful thinking to say that our communities, made up of Quebecers, Haitians and Jesuits of other nationalities, are living in a state of perfect intercultural living. If I look at how the situation is lived here in Quebec, it strikes me as being rather a transcultural or cross-cultural model. Whenever possible, everyone maintains their own lifestyle within a fairly permissive group in which everyone takes advantage of the situation without necessarily always committing themselves fully to it.

Before being a religious of the same congregation, we are first Quebecers, Africans and Haitians, and this relationship of national identity is a first challenge. Rather than becoming more fully aware of what unites us, we risk locking ourselves into a cultural and national identity where the other is "other" before being brother.

Diversity of Relations and Their Tensions

One day, a young Haitian Jesuit told me: "For Haitians, the collective dimension is more important than the individual dimension." It is true that solidarity is easily established between Haitians, so that even people who do not know one another quickly become close. Hence, young Haitian Jesuits quickly develop between themselves a very strong spirit of fellowship among peers. However, this solidarity may also have negative effects when, within a larger community, a small group of Haitian Jesuits form a nucleus that sticks together or, as when confronted with the face of authority, a companion might be inclined to cover his guilty compatriot.

The relationship of the individual with the group or community may also be subject to tension depending on whether one comes from a society that is more affected by a traditional culture or by a modern—or even post-modern—society. Does the individual develop his identity as a subject of his own existence or

in reference to his family and the larger group? It seems to me pretty obvious that family ties in Haiti are much stronger than in North America since the family, in Haiti, often remains the primary factor of belonging.

The relationship to religion is also a factor that can lead to misunderstanding. It's one of the points we noted in our relationship between Francophone and Anglophone Jesuits in Canada. For me, accustomed to living in a secularized society, my religious reference points are different than those of my Haitian or English-Canadian Jesuit companions and I see also that my status as a priest or a religious doesn't have the same importance as in a society like Haiti's, in which priests, religious men and women are held in higher social esteem.

Finally, another challenge is making our own vision and our own values into universal criteria. There are certainly elements that reach the heart of every person, regardless of culture, but there are also elements that seem to us to be essential and which we do not question.

I like to repeat a true story told by Father René Fumoleau, Oblate missionary among the Dene people in northwestern Canada, who was preaching on the parable of the house built on rock. Since he did not know the Dene language, he was using a translator. After Mass, he remarked to his translator that the translator had spoken much longer than the preacher had. "Well, Father, you said that the sensible man built his house on rock and the foolish man built his on sand. Well, I repeated that, and then I said, "That is for the white people. For us, the sensible man is the one who pitches his tent in the sand because you can put the stakes in deeper than on rock. Plus, if he pitches his tent on rock, that's where the rain and the wind will be able to get a better hold on the tent to blow it down." So, what seems obvious in one culture is not necessarily so in another.

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