

From Invitation to Radical Inclusion

At this year's CRC General Assembly an attempt was made to describe, justify and promote the topic "Intercultural Living," and to urge the members to embrace its potential and then to urge their respective communities to work to make it a reality.

Faith, the Driving Force

Everyone present was either a member of an international faith community, or a minister in multicultural situations; but beyond both the international and the multicultural reality lies the ideal of "intercultural living." If *international* simply describes a situation in which people of different nations are involved, while *multicultural* adds and emphasizes a cultural rather than a national component, *intercultural* adds a specifically new component: faith. Faith may not be a factor in international or intercultural relations but is the explicit driving force and motivation of intercultural living.

Many religious orders and congregations are international and multicultural in fact, and yet many members often find that they are trying to coexist *despite* their differences rather than *with* them. Intercultural living becomes possible only when diverse people have a common and explicit faith reason (rather than simply practical or pragmatic reasons) for attempting to discover how personal transformation can lead both to mutual enrichment and the transformation of a whole community.

Relations between employees of multinational corporations may be perfectly civil and professional, without anyone needing to make a radical effort to learn from each other's culture or seriously to modify their own cultural behavior. Likewise, a person may live as a very proper and law-abiding citizen in a neighborhood or city where they come to daily contact with people of many cultures yet without ever becoming firm friends with any, or learning another language. But members of an international religious community share a common faith and a common vision and are committed to a common ministry inspired by their Christian faith. In this case, the prospect of intercultural living is one that, in recent decades particularly, has become an increasingly evident imperative in a globalized world.

In days gone by, religious communities might welcome new members, even from cultures different to their own predominant culture. This was done according to the assimilation model; people were effectively invited to join a pre-existing, well-established and proved community by learning its history, structures and practices, and becoming assimilated into it. The current membership might be most welcoming and hospitable, showing the newcomers how things were done and would be done, but the personal wishes and cultural traditions of the incoming person were of little or no account. If a person was deemed to be sufficiently able to assimilate to the community, all would be well.

From Assimilation to Inculturation

But in recent decades, and for several reasons, the "assimilation" model has proved to be "unfit for service" to church and believers.

In the first place, candidates from the dominant European and North American nations declined in numbers almost to extinction, while those from beyond increased almost exponentially.

Second, we became much more aware of the relationship between faith and culture: culture shapes the contours of faith, and without a cultural "language" to do so, faith cannot express itself in action. Therefore, people must be allowed and encouraged to live their faith through their own culture, and to force them into an alien cultural matrix is to constrain or do violence to the appropriate expression of their faith.

Third, Vatican II and the subsequent papal documents of Paul VI and John Paul II particularly, cried out for the development of authentic indigenous theologies and inculturated faith.

The upshot of these developments was a rather abrupt shift in the contours of international religious communities, so that as they became increasingly multicultural, so the numerical superiority of the

dominant culture was greatly reduced. New members from beyond Europe and North America were also *cross-cultural* – either by leaving their own original cultures to minister across cultural boundaries, or by becoming assimilated into the dominant culture. At the same time, some members of the dominant cultures remained monocultural, while others, having ministered in the cultures from which new members were coming in increasing numbers, were themselves cross-cultural.

The Emerging Challenge

Consequently, in recent decades, culture itself has become an increasing challenge to international religious communities. Either their members effectively live in enclaves of members of their own culture, or they attempt some token modification of their habits – eating, dress, prayer, and so on – but without anyone feeling entirely at ease with, or committed to the resulting *modus vivendi*. The emerging challenge now faces everyone equally: to move away from the assimilationist model, and to commit to a new way of living, in which everyone, not simply those from minority cultures, accepts to work together to establish a *new kind of community*.

Intercultural living is expressed by people of different cultures coming together to build a new community, a new home in which everyone can find a place and yet no one is privileged above anyone else. Each person, in effect, leaves their primary or original home in order to come together and build a new home from the fabric of each person's life and culture. If four cultures are represented, then the members of an intercultural community will actually create a fifth culture, rather as a man and woman become husband and wife, then mother and father to several children, and together they build a home as an ongoing, organic process in which each person is being changed by the passage of time and the developing lives of everyone else.

Intercultural living is a dream that can be realized, with concerted effort to learn necessary skills and to be converted by God's grace. From *assimilation*, the community will be able to move to *mutual welcome* and ultimately to *radical inclusion*.

The CRC General Assembly presentations attempted to chart the passage through these stages by offering a map of the territory to be covered. The actual journey, and the choice of particular itineraries, will be a matter for the discernment of individual communities.

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