

INTERCULTURALITY IN RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS

Sharing my Experiences

Since our society becomes more and more multicultural, religious life in Canada is not exempt of that reality. Many youth from different countries join our congregations and we are now facing an unavoidable intercultural community. In this presentation, I will share my experiences living in multicultural communities in Africa and here, in Canada.

My Background

My name is Hasiniaina Rakotoarisoa, a Jesuit from Madagascar, living in Ottawa. I have been in Canada for few years now, and I live in a very multicultural community. The first time I came, there were twelve Jesuits in the house from seven countries (Canada, India, Sri Lanka, Guinea, Cameroun, Syria and Madagascar). Today, eleven Jesuits from Canada, United States, Syria, Egypt, and Madagascar form the community.

We are always interested in listening to one another's stories and cultures. As an example, among the things that trigger the curiosity of many are the Malagasy names, which are so visible by their length. Actually, our names are not just words but contracted sentences. My first name, for instance, is a formation of three words "*Hasina*" (holiness or sacredness or dignity), "*Ny*" (of) and "*Aina*" (life).

My Intercultural Experiences

Because of the geographical situation of Madagascar (an island), any time we cross the border (the ocean), it is considered as going abroad. My first exposure to an international community was in Nairobi, Kenya, during my study of theology. There, I met and lived with Jesuits from all over Africa. Almost all African countries are represented at Hekima College, the Jesuit School of Theology in Kenya. Beside my studies, I also learned to know my brothers, their background and cultures, our similarities and differences. Although Madagascar is not far from Africa, I noticed that there are more differences than similarities in our cultures, which show the uniqueness of each and every country. Despite the diversity of cultures, I experienced a community full of joy, peace and love.

After my three years stay in Kenya, I moved to Ottawa, Canada for further studies. It's another country, and thus another experience. Usually when visitors/foreigners come to Canada, one thing that worries them most is the weather. It is obviously cold here. For me, personally, however, the shock of culture is more on food than on the weather. When I was cold, I could stay at home or wear the appropriate clothes and put the necessary creams to go out. But when my stomach remembers the fresh food from its tropical origin, it rejects the processed and canned ones.

Nevertheless, as human beings, we possess an amazing capacity of adaptation that very few creatures may have. Even if it took me few months to adapt to Canadian food, I enjoy Canadian dishes now; even if my first winter was tough, my best sport in Ottawa is skating on the Rideau Canal. Every year, I am longing for the Canal to freeze so that I can increase my speed and improve my skills on skating, and at the end of the long run of 15 km, "beavertails" and hot chocolates are waiting to satisfy our hunger and thirst.

Once I was ordained, my first apostolate was with Kateri Native ministry, an urban ministry with the aboriginal people living in Ottawa and surrounding. This ministry is another experience of an intercultural community, because the aboriginal people of Canada have a very unique way of expressing their belief and trust in the "Great Spirit." They also have a deep understanding of oneness, togetherness and relationship. I have a lot to learn from their wisdom.

Challenges and Promises

In my opinion, the biggest challenge of an intercultural community is to have a community life full of peace and harmony, so that we may grow in love of Christ and love of one another, and thus, advance in our apostolates and mission.

Growing up as an islander, I had a restricted view or/and understanding of the world in general. I had the conviction (conscious or not) that anything different from mine is less necessary, or not good at all. And I had a tendency to look with no interest at those things that do not belong to my culture and me. This kind of an attitude does not affect only the islanders but also everyone who look down on other people's culture and background. Narrowness of mind kills community life. When I opened up to all the cultures surrounding to me, I admired their uniqueness, I found beauty everywhere and I learned a lot from them. Openness of mind helps us to see the richness of other cultures; it invites us to accept them and draws us to love them.

Understanding is also a key word in an intercultural community. The challenge is to understand who the members of my community are, what their background is and, what the things close to their hearts are. Sometimes, the temptation is to overlook or minimize those things we are not familiar with, yet they are so important to them. Once I was able to understand why my brothers behave in such way, why they always cook such meal... then I could seize the beauty of our differences.

The effort to understand, however, should be reciprocal. All members are invited to labor for openness, understanding and acceptance. Everyone is invited to make the first steps. I remember well, once I started to ask questions about the meaning of the dance one of my brother did, hundreds of questions about my culture poured out of him. Then I realized that he was also willing to know my culture as much as I wanted to understand his.

To conclude, intercultural community is a reality we are living now. All members are to make an effort to bring harmony in the house. This is an on going effort we strive to do everyday. It has to be from within; it has to be a personal conviction. One has to convince oneself that diversity is richness. I always compare the multitude of cultures in our communities with a multitude of flowers in a vast garden. The more there are different flowers, the more the garden is colorful and joyful to watch. Each flower however has to be aligned beside another one so that their beauty shines and they will be harmoniously arranged.

This is more than just conviction; it is a conversion of heart. Our biggest means to achieve this goal is prayer. We are all invited to bring the life of our community, our similarities and differences, our strength and talents and our weaknesses and pride into the hands of our Lord. We have to remember that we came together in this community because we have received the same call, and we were called by the same and one Lord. We are all invited to live this conversion throughout our religious life to be able to have a peaceful community with members from different cultures. We have to remember that our members need to find that peace in our community; they need to feel that the community is their home and they feel at home in the community. Finally, we have to be aware of the pending danger: if they do not feel at peace in our community, they will find that peace elsewhere, they will create a home elsewhere, and their heart will be away from the community.

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