***One Missionary Body: The Challenge of Witnessing through Intercultural Living***

**Introduction:**

“’In carrying out its mission in the Church, the Congregation unites members who live together and form one missionary body (Cons. 2).’ And so, all Redemptorists know themselves to be members of a common project shared by all in the Congregation. We encourage all to nurture this sense of belonging and thus cultivate a true community life. The community we long for is a place where all confreres, old and young, with their gifts and wounds, are included and where co-responsibility becomes a reality.” (*Message of the 25th General Chapter to the congregation, 11*)

Central to many of the discussions during the course of the 25th General Chapter was the subject of community life. There was a general recognition that community life and its centrality to our *Vita Apostolic* is experiencing many different challenges. These challenges are further highlighted as we face a future where the Congregation will undergo a radical change as the process of restructuring and reconfiguration begins to take effect. Already, in certain parts of the Congregation, and certainly within the next ten years, the composition of many of our communities will have altered dramatically. We will undoubtedly move from a situation where most of us live in mono-cultural communities to a situation where a majority of us will probably live in international or multicultural communities. As we move towards this new reality, we clearly need to prepare ourselves accordingly. Living this new reality will not come easily. A strong temptation is that we replace our current experience of mono-cultural living with that of multi-cultural living, that is multi-cultural communities that can be appropriately characterized as merely “people living together, separately, under the same roof.” We are all aware that such communities already exist. But if a Congregation like ourselves is to survive and if we are to be a meaningful presence and witness in an increasingly pluralistic world we must become increasingly and intentionally **“inter-cultural.”** For this to happen we need a real shift in our mentality from understanding ourselves as an international Congregation, which we have been for almost three centuries, to understanding ourselves as an inter-cultural Congregation.

**Language:**

Over the course of the last century our understanding and experience of community and personal identity have changed significantly. Geographical and social mobility have reshaped local and international relations. The words “international” and “multi-cultural” are now common in our vocabulary. But the term “inter-cultural” is less familiar. Our understanding of these terms is largely derived from the social sciences of cultural anthropology, sociology and psychology. These disciplines have helped us greatly. However, social science is unconcerned with religious faith, with God. So, when theology “adopts” sociological language, it also “adapts” it, with the result that the theologian and the sociologist no longer speak quite the same language. For example, sociology uses the terms multi-cultural and intercultural as more or less relating to the same reality, or else inter-cultural focuses more on the social dynamics of international relations, while multi-cultural simply identifies a social fact within neighbourhoods or voluntary associations. However, theologically, the term “inter-cultural” relates explicitly to God and/or to interpersonal relationships shaped and motivated by the faith commitment of the participants. In other works, theologically speaking, inter-cultural community members come together from diverse cultural backgrounds but they share an intentional commitment to fellowship, motivated not simply by pragmatic or commercial reasons but by a shared religious conviction and common mission. As we look to the future as a reconfigured Congregation this distinction is one that we must keep in mind. While it may be true that there are pragmatic reasons for us coming together in international communities, the primary reasons for doing so must be our faith and our mission to preach the Gospel to the poor and the most abandoned, and “become signs and witnesses before people of the power of his resurrection, proclaiming the new and eternal life” (Cons. 51). For this to be a reality we must move from being merely international communities to being intercultural communities.

Inter-cultural living then, is a faith-based and life-long process of conversion, emerging as a requirement of members of intentional, international religious communities. Healthy inter-cultural living depends very much on the level of commitment and support generated by the members. Individuals vary in adaptability and learning levels, but each one generates positive or negative energy, and a small, resistant group can generate enough negative energy to undermine the efforts of the others.

**Understanding culture:**

Our vision for a reconfigured Congregation is one where inter-cultural living will become more and more the norm, for the purpose of mission and for its witness value. Preparation for such living is essential. A starting point for such preparation would be to look once again at how we understand culture, in particular, one’s own culture.

Culture provides the context for lived faith. None of us are without culture, and faith can only be lived culturally. We do not live our faith outside a specific cultural context. Inter-cultural living is multi-cultural rather than mono-cultural, and none of us can be expected to live our faith through an entirely alien culture, or the dominant culture of the majority.

We readily assume that we understand culture, which is actually subtle and elusive. Anyone who has spent significant time living and working in a cultural context different to his culture of origin will soon realize this! Culture is constitutive of every human person raised in a social world. Yet none of us is actually “born” with a culture. Family, environment and socialization are critically important, and everyone has a particular culture or a collection of cultural traits. But since faith can only be expressed culturally it is therefore necessary that in an inter-cultural community context the community values each member’s cultural identity as a gift. It is important to recognize that each member’s “lived” faith constitutes an alternative and legitimate way of being. At the same time, of course, everyone’s different perspectives, habits and characteristics present challenges to harmonious living. The ability to live with, and not simply despite, cultural differences is the hallmark of a true inter-cultural community!

So, what is culture? Some simple definitions:

* The [hu]man-made part of the environment: what social groups do to the worlds they inhabit. It is:
* Material – artifacts, buildings.
* Institutional – law an order, kinship / family, economic systems, religion.
* Symbolic – orality, perhaps writing, and words-objects-gestures that ‘say the unsayable’.
* Moral – values and virtues and their opposites.
* Culture is ‘the form of social life’ – the way a social group normally behaves, including rule-breaking behaviour.
* Culture is ‘a meaning-making system’ – supported by standards and rules, it makes intelligible communication possible.
* Culture is ‘an enduring reality’. Cultures rise and fall, flourish and die, and none is static or immortal – implications for intercultural living should be obvious. Culture is transmitted gradually over time, through the generations – it is an ongoing process rather than a simple social fact. Every culture is in a process of change.

Reality (what people consider real) is socially constructed – people are born into a community that has already interpreted the world and determined the meaning of things, events, and relationships. Socialization or enculturation extends through the first decades of life, as a person is aggregated to the pre-existing world of meaning. Once adequately socialized, it is increasingly difficult to think our own thoughts or ways are wrong. This is perhaps one of the greatest factors that needs to be taken into consideration when we talk about inter-cultural living as religious.

**Theological implications:**

Because every mature person is a person of culture, spirituality (or “lived faith”) can only flourish in a cultural context. This raises an important question – how do faith and culture exist together? In our Christian tradition, the word “spirituality” is often attributed to St. Jerome who originally coined the word “spirituality” in the fifth century. He defined it explicitly as life in the Holy Spirit given at baptism to guide our faith journey. It might be described as “a way of being in the world with God,” where every variable (“way”, “being”, “world”, “God”) is shaped by each person’s individual and unique experience. During one’s lifetime, a person may embrace a number of possible “ways” (single, married, widowed, celibate, etc.), experience different states of “being” (child, youth, old-age, sick, healthy, citizen, refugee, migrant), live in several different “worlds” (rural, urban, tropical, artic, peaceful, violent), and relate in different ways to “God” (Creator, Father, Mother, Spirit, Jesus of the manger, Jesus of the Cross, Jesus of the resurrection).

As we know, spirituality is not a set of fundamental beliefs, but shapes and is shaped by how we relate to God and creation, pray and express ourselves, respond to suffering, and make life choices. From different cultural environments and experiences, people have generated countless legitimate expressions of Christian spirituality. People in a multi-cultural community, attempting, not just to live their faith, but to do so in an explicitly inter-cultural way, will encounter many opportunities and challenges, similarities and differences, with respect to liturgy, prayer, ritual, music, silence, privacy, and so on. Each person must discover a new way of living in the midst of cultural differences, learned behaviours and personal preferences.

**Important areas for consideration in inter-cultural living:**

In what follows I highlight just four areas that are important for consideration when it comes to multi-cultural living. There are others, but these four were particularly relevant for me in striving to live in an inter-cultural way in international communities.

*Social Location:*

Social location describes our enduring world and our place in it – from an island in the Pacific Ocean to a mountain forest, from isolated settlement to crowded high-rise living, from tightknit extended family system to free-wheeling independent citizen – each of these locations play a significant role in how we experience our world. Coming from a small, rural, close-knit, farming community in the north of Ireland shaped my understanding of the world in ways that I was not conscious off until living in a large international community in a large city in the southern Philippines with 52 confreres from 10 different nations and ranging in age from 22 to 75! Adapting to such a reality was an extremely difficult process. But we did manage to achieve a level of harmonious living that enabled each confrere to find his place in the community. Central to this harmonious living was the serious consideration given to the formative power of each person’s social location, and to how much individual variety and preference is compatible with the demands of the broader community and its mission. In achieving this, dedication to the Plan of Community life was a major factor. Understanding one another’s social geography, socialization, and social mobility is a prerequisite to appropriate responses. Unfortunately, in some of our communities, members know less about their confreres, despite living with them for decades, than they do about celebrities and politicians, and their Facebook “friends”!

*Body tolerance:*

Body tolerance describes the culturally diverse ways people treat and display their bodies and interact with others. This is very interesting! It contrasts different people’s comfort levels. Culturally diverse people in an intentional community must become mutually sensitive to what is appropriate dress or demeanour, interaction and affection. Touching a person’s head, displaying the soles of one’s feet can be sources of great tension in an international community striving to be intercultural! Strange as it may seem, this idea of body tolerance is also an important consideration when it comes to the celebration of liturgy and prayer. Coming from a cold, northern climate (Ireland) where liturgy is celebrated in a fairly short space of time behind closed doors, (more often than not with little singing!) joining in the celebration of a liturgy in a tropical climate, often celebrated outdoors under the sun for an extended period of time and where body movement plays an important role was very often an endurance test for me, and my “Irish” liturgical celebrations were occasions of frustration for those I lived with! In matters of common prayer, liturgy, music or silence, movement and stillness, different comfort levels and tolerance, will constitute significant points of concern within an intercultural community.

*Health and sickness:*

Health and sickness are culturally coded. Many people from a contemporary northern hemisphere with highly developed health systems, like myself, rarely see a dead body, and serious sickness is understood to be a matter for hospital isolation for a medical or surgical solution before a rapid return to the community. But in many parts of the world, death and dying are constant visitors, sickness is attended domestically and medical/surgical solutions are rare. Rather than sickness isolating a patient from the family, it integrates them, and when death nears, family solidarity is critical, whatever the expense and distance involved. But many members of conventional religious communities have had to make a real break with their families, have had no further involvement with sick or dying relatives, and were prevented by distance, finances or rules from attending funerals or assisting with family needs. This can result in an experience of great hurt on the part of many confreres. Intercultural living demands a radical rethinking of what is appropriate or demanded in justice, relative to each member personally and to their respective families.

*Time and Space:*

Attitudes to time and space are so culturally variable that any group of diverse people will need to address them explicitly. We have all heard pejorative references – by people enslaved by clock or watch – to Filipino time of Mexican time, but clock-watching can also produce hypertension, frustration and intolerance. Think again of those open-ended timeless Sunday liturgies of African communities, compared to the clock-ruled, time-starved, and rushed liturgies in other places. In many cultures, time is a gift, to be used freely without reference to chronology, while in others it is a scarce resource, treated as a commodity and with the very same vocabulary as we use for commercial transactions: we say that time can be saved or spent, gained or lost, and even wasted. When daily life is structured by the clock, there is little time left over for spontaneity, creativity or simple availability. Intercultural living calls us to address the use (and abuse) of time. And as with time, so with space: attitudes to space – personal space, open-space, private space, common space, sacred space – are not simply whimsical but culturally shaped. In the formation community in Davao City, Philippines, this was often an issue. In an intercultural community, space must be carefully negotiated, and not without some discomfort or pain, and certainly requiring compromise.

**Clarifying the Challenge**

Ethnocentrism is a fact of life – we cannot deny it – it is part of us: we see and interpret through culturally-conditioned eyes. It is immoral only when we inflict our own perspective on others as the only true perspective. We are all ethnocentric, but with maturity and training we can identify this and act accordingly. An ethnocentric bias judges other peoples and worlds to be inferior reflections of one’s own. The ‘other’ then becomes the problem – to be avoided, demeaned, attacked or even converted. Intercultural living challenges our ethnocentrism – which should gradually erode through our exposure to other ways of living. The challenge is to create a new culture by integrating the constituent cultures of each member (and here I refer to the culture of a person’s country of origin but also the culture of the Redemptorist Unit of origin), so that there is no longer and ‘us’/’them’ opposition. But in practice this is often undermined – how?

God’s idea of community – from the mythical Genesis story to the historical community of the first disciples, and down to our own day – is one of radical inclusion and radical equality, made explicit by Jesus. But while God wants to unite, every culture is limited by a perverse tendency to stratify, separate, diminish and exclude; no human society is in fact radically inclusive or egalitarian. Every attempt to form an inclusive community of ‘we’ – in Eden and in the numerous subsequent Utopian communities – very soon results in alienation or the creation of hierarchy, or drives a wedge between people: every original inclusive community of WE becomes polarized into US and THEM. This was the situation Jesus encountered. The Letter to the Ephesians describes humanity’s self-inflicted wound and the Jesus solution. The author describes the polarized world of Jews (us) and Gentiles (them), and God’s plan to reconcile humanity to itself and to God as an ALL-INCLUSIVE ‘WE’.

*But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He is the peace between us, and He has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility between us (2:13-14).*

This is a wonderful articulation of Jesus’ radical plan for humanity. Pauline writings also declare three times that there is henceforth to be no moral distinction or political division erected on the obvious differences between men and women, Jew and Greek, slave and free (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11; I Cor 12:13). This is the very vision that must be the foundation and justification for every attempt to build intercultural communities. Jesus chose to become a person of the margins, a sociological and biblical ‘stranger’ rather than a person of power and influence. Influential people occupy central positions where power and authority lie. But Jesus chose the most effective way to encounter the people marginalized by circumstance and by society – society’s ‘them’ and ‘other’. Since the primary purpose of intercultural communities is greater commitment to the mission of Jesus, every member is called to kenotic living – self-emptying service of, and among, the least or the other. Given the strong cultural pressures we face today (and as religious we are no exception) to achievement, advancement and social recognition, intercultural living stands as a bold invitation to a faith-based countercultural lifestyle.

Good-will alone, however, is not enough. As we know, some would-be disciples of Jesus have been stumbling blocks rather than honest witnesses; good-will must be complemented and shaped by ongoing conversion.

An ‘intercultural project’ is not just a rational game-plan but a faith-driven and life-long undertaking. Faith may or may not motivate multinational companies or groups of volunteers, but it is the foundation of the life-project of every Christian disciple. As such, without mature faith-sharing, appropriate correction, reconciliation and mutual encouragement, the project will inevitably fail, as Pope Francis made explicit when talking to the Curia in 2014. We all know the corrosive effects of gossip and slander, or the basic lack of encouragement from peers and leaders.

And yet: even personal faith is insufficient unless supported by the actual fruit of people’s good intentions: the ongoing commitment to acquiring appropriate skills and virtue. Not that everyone must become super-efficient, but everyone must persevere in the effort – in learning the art of intercultural living, perseverance may be a better witness than expertise.

**The Prospects:**

Intercultural living is not the mobilization of an international work-force but a faith-based commitment to the vision of Jesus. It is an opportunity and a grace. Not everyone need be young and active – the moral support of those who are less active is of incalculable value; but a polarized group is self-defeating. Intercultural living is not a ‘natural’ arrangement, though it is possible in a *supernatural* context. Diplomacy, compromise, and a common vision must inspire a common effort and provide appropriate means to sustain it. This is where the Plan of Community Life, called for by the 25th General Chapter for every community, plays a vital role. Even for members of established international communities such as the community of St. Alphonsus in Rome, it is something new: most of us remain rather mono-cultural even in multi-cultural or international environments. Intercultural living is necessary but costly for viable international religious life today and into the future, but obligatory if dry bones are to live. If successful, it will revolutionize our lives and the Christian mission. Not everyone will accept the challenge to mission in intercultural communities, though it is open to everyone.

As membership of our Congregation continues to decline and age in the northern hemisphere, communities that do survive with integrity in the coming decades will do so through their international, culturally diverse, membership. They will be characterized by ‘fusion’ of the integration of culturally diverse personnel. The opposite of fusion is ‘fission’: the fragmentation of international congregations so that they become no more than loose aggregations of culturally diverse groups. They would remain international entities, but at the cost of their intercultural witness to the Gospel. This happens through individualism, tribalism, factionalism, provincialism, or the loss of the founding charism. The future of international religious life – and collaborative ministries – depends significantly on the ability of each community (local and institutionally) to think and act interculturally. Failure to do so in a global church will lead to terminal decline. It is precisely for this reason that our Congregation has set itself on the path of restructuring and reconfiguration.

**Conclusion: From Invitation to radical witness:**

Intercultural living is a much more persuasive force than talk about loving one’s neighbour. But new wine cannot be put into old wineskins, and we cannot build such communities by recycling old material or uncritically employing obsolete ideas. In the past, the model used by ourselves and most other religious Congregations was ‘come join us and share our ways and religious tradition.’ This cost us very little – life could go on while potential newcomers were being formed, assessed, and then accepted or not. Candidates who differed from the norm were either marginalized or rejected by a leadership that held the initiative in all matters.

Since Vatican II and the increase of religious from the global church, this model has given way to a more inclusive approach by some long-established congregations. Now the message is clearer – ‘**come join our community and help us diversify internally and internationally**.’ This is a significant advance, indicating a desire not only to speak and teach but to listen and learn. But the inclusion of the ‘other’ simply does not go far enough. Unless customary behaviour is changed, a marginal outsider just becomes a marginal insider. Many cultural ‘others’ still feel ineffective and invisible in the communities to which they belong. Without a careful power-analysis and self-analysis of the established community structures there will be no radical inclusion. Such analysis would show whether the traditional decision-makers and privileged personnel have remained as before, or whether incoming members are treated as equals. (I venture to suggest that this is a major challenge to Units of the Congregation that seek assistance from other Units with greater personnel. Are the confreres from these Units truly appreciated as equals or are they seen as “an extra pair of hands” to do as they are told?) Intercultural communities must reject ‘assimilation’ and token ‘inclusion’, and develop an attitude of ‘radical welcome.’ Then the message is **’bring your cultural and religious values, your voice and autonomous self, and help us together to build a new community**.’ This facilitates the authentic incarnation of each member, which means that everyone will be affected by the cultural diversity, and called to an on-going conversion to God, to each other, and to the cultural values which shape each life. No longer will people be able to hide behind their own cultural conventions and play the ‘culture card’. Rather, each will need to examine cultural habits, bad and good, and learn to compromise some comfort for the sake of the ‘new’ community. The cost will be spread vertically and laterally and not only borne by new or incoming members. But an authentic faith-based undertaking will survive.

Three principles might help us move forward:

1. We are called to build a home: a home away from home it will be, since ‘we have here no abiding city,’ but not a proliferation of mere ‘houses’ where different individuals subsist under the same roof, that is, ‘living together separately,’ – this is not intercultural living.
2. Integrated communities evolve gradually, organically, and not without pain. Therefore, we must truly value difference, because God created difference and saw that it was good. The ‘cultural flaw’ uses difference to justify discrimination and disrespect. That is sinful.
3. We must rethink the way we think. It is sometimes said that ‘you repent, not by feeling bad but by thinking (and acting) ‘differently.’ This is the cost of conversion, and it is much more difficult to think differently than to feel bad and do nothing.

**Some helpful activities in developing intercultural communities:**

The following are some possible cultural awareness activities that can help your community prepare to encounter and to live cultural differences thoughtfully and respectfully. They may seem rather simplistic (childish?) but they can be learning experiences.

**Activity 1: Examine the Room:**

With a partner, take a close look at the room where you are gathered. Notice where people are sitting. What spaces are left empty? How close are people to each other? Who sits next to whom? What things did people bring with them? Who is wearing what?

Write down all the things you observe on the left side of a piece of paper. On the right side of the paper, write down your interpretations of these observations. (Examples: *Alberto brought paper with him today so he could take notes. Pedro wore jeans*,*so it must be cold outside.*)

Compare and reflect as a group on your observations and interpretations. Point out that the left column includes straightforward facts while the statements in the right column are assumptions and are much more subjective in nature. How many of your interpretations were incorrect?

**Takeaway:**Even when we are comfortable with our surroundings, our interpretations can still be subject to error. In a different culture, it is even easier to make mistakes and incorrect assumptions.

**Activity 2: The Universal Circle:**

Gather everyone in a circle. Go around the circle and have each person say something about their home or church background that starts with “When I was growing up…”

**Examples:***When I was growing up…*

*…my parents taught me to respect my elders.*  
*…if I got in a fight with my sibling, my parents taught us to talk out the problem.*  
*…I learned at church that God would punish me for my sins.*  
*…I had to be quiet during church services.*

Ask participants to take a step toward the center of the circle each time a statement applies to them. If everyone or almost everyone steps toward the center of the circle after a statement, the statement might be universal. That means it may not be specific to a certain culture. If only a few people step forward, the statement may apply only to a particular culture. A facilitator should record whether each statement is cultural or universal.

Afterward, discuss what makes some statements universal and others cultural. Talk about what cultures may be represented in your community based on the exercise. For example, you may have some group confreres from a Catholic school background and some from a public school background.

Explore how the different cultures to which the confreres in your community belong could influence how you will experience the current reality of the community. Keep the cultural differences within your community in mind as you explore the culture you aspire to. This will enrich your discussions and improve your awareness of your own cultural biases.

**Takeaway:**Some experiences, beliefs, and values tend to be shared by many people across cultural boundaries, while others are very specific to an individual culture. Knowing the difference between these two categories can help you develop a new culture that is inclusive and respectful.

**Activity 3: Cultural difference questions:**

Here are some questions to think about as you explore intercultural living!

* How do people greet each other in your culture?
* Are there any gestures that are considered offensive in your culture?
* What type of clothing do people wear in your culture? Do we need to be careful about what we wear in the community?
* How does “time” work in your culture? What does it mean to be “late” or “early”?
* Are there any cultural practices to know about when entering someone’s home?
* What cultural practices are involved with food?
* What do families look like? What about gender roles?
* How does the culture react to tattoos? Jewelery?
* Is it a good idea to wear clothing that features U.S. or British or political symbols and wording?
* Are there any other aspects of your culture worth knowing? What sets it apart from other cultures you’re familiar with?

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