

## ***Cultures in Contact/Conflict***

It's wonderful to gather in this year that Pope Francis has dedicated to the consecrated life; so we can very much celebrate history. Four hundred years ago, on August 12, 1615, Fr. Le Caron of the Franciscan Recollects celebrated mass at the Huron village of Carhagouha, about 165 km north of here not far from Midland in the presence of Samuel de Champlain and no doubt some curious members of the indigenous Wendat people. Twenty-four years later, on August 1, 1639, the Canonesses of Saint Augustine and the Ursuline sisters including Marie de l'Incarnation arrived in Quebec to open respectively a hospital and a school for girls. Barely a century after St. Angela Merici founded the Ursuline order in Brescia, her sisters were aboard a boat for the New World. As religious, we are the successors of these and other remarkable women and men religious.

There is a certain irony having an Anglophone from Saskatchewan giving a talk on the topic of interculturality in Toronto. But here I am, a member of a Roman Catholic religious order centered here in Toronto, with a history like many others; founded in France in the nineteenth century, that flourished in English Canada and the United States, and that now attracts vocations to our communities in Mexico and Colombia.

Christianity has a history of intercultural contacts. It began with Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish rabbi from an ethnically-mixed region, the Galilee, who apparently limited his ministry to his Jewish followers:

When Jesus sent His disciples to preach the good news of the kingdom, He expressly told them, "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6).

Still, the Good News carried within it the seeds of a revolutionary new approach to religion. The closing verses of Matthew's Gospel proclaim a message of Gospel inclusion "to the ends of the earth." The followers of Jesus, initially only Jews, are increasingly exposed to Gentiles who are drawn into the Jesus movement, and for whom the usual components of Jewish identity become an obstacle to the new-found faith.

Already in the Gospels, Jesus appears in conflict with the obligations of the Jewish law. He engages in table fellowship with non-Jews "sinners". He offers healing to a Syro-Canaanite woman; cures the servant of a Roman centurion; performs an exorcism on a Gentile in the Decapolis (sending the demons comically into a herd of pigs). He performs good works on the Sabbath: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." And in the final conflict in Jerusalem, he announces the destruction of the Temple, and challenges the Jewish authorities: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The fallen stones of the

Temple will give way to a new kind of worship, in spirit and in truth. In that fateful final week of his life, his preaching against the Temple is a key element of the charges leading to his condemnation, and at the moment of his death, the destruction of the Temple is anticipated as the veil in the Holy of Holies is torn in two.

The Acts of the Apostles portrays a de-structuring of the key components of the Jewish matrix of the Jesus movement: family, Jerusalem and its Jewish Temple, the Law, the Land of Israel. Already in those early chapters, the first of the trans-cultural conflicts emerge: Greeks-speaking Jews in Jerusalem feel they are short-changed in the daily distribution of bread. Ministry to a different ethnic community requires ministers from that community: Hence the institution of Stephen and the other deacons from the Jewish diaspora. This is a lesson in cultural adaptation that the Church would need to learn again and again in its history.

Following Stephen's death in Acts 7, the followers of Jesus are driven out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria, the historic borders of the Land of Israel. There, contacts with non-Jews become more acute; Philip baptizes an Ethiopian eunuch in Samaria, and more importantly, Peter, the first of the Apostles has a vision in Joppa commanding him to eat what is forbidden under Jewish law. He immediately goes to the house of Cornelius, a Roman pagan, and baptizes him. Notice how two elements are juxtaposed: food or table fellowship and the inclusion of Gentiles in the Jesus movement. The Gentile mission begins, and Saul the Pharisee and persecutor of the nascent Jesus movement becomes Paul, its most ardent promoter: the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Under Paul's leadership, the challenges of a mixed Gentile-Jewish community become acute. Jesus was a Jew; he was circumcised; he generally followed the Jewish law. What does this mean for Gentiles who wish to become members of the Christian community? Must they be circumcised; must they follow Jewish dietary practices, must they rest on the Sabbath? In Galatia, the Christian community was divided and in crisis. As Paul tells us, the followers of James tried to impose dietary practices on Gentile Christians, and Peter himself withdrew from table fellowship with Gentiles in order to not give a bad example to Jewish Christians. Paul is enraged (as he often was). It is all laid in Galatians 2: "But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned."

Paul's Gentile mission is predicated on the centrality of faith. In the Christian community, ethnic distinctions make no sense. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28) It is another lesson that we Church needed to re-learn through the centuries.

By the second century, Gentile Christians far outnumbered Jewish Christians; the New Testament was written and circulating in Greek, and the Jewish-centered Jesus movement was

now a religion in its own right, Christianity. A little over a century of persecution would give way to state recognition under Constantine and eventually State sponsorship with all that entailed.

Under Paul's leadership, Christianity was sufficiently freed from its Jewish roots to become adaptable to different cultural settings in the Ancient Near East. The adaptation or inculturation we are most familiar with was of course European. From the time of Constantine all the way to the Age of Discovery, European Christianity was more or less synonymous with European culture. Think about art and architecture, music and literature. There were other cultural expressions of the Christianity that continued in the Christian East, but the faith that shaped the New World and the Asian and African continents was colonial European Catholicism.

Our history as a Church has not been at all times positive. Christian missionaries accompanied colonial powers in their conquests of the New World, Africa and Asia, and transplanted a euro-centric Christianity across the globe. While there was scant attention to a process of inculturation, there were some notable exceptions: Matteo Ricci in China, Marie de l'Incarnation here in Quebec, Bartholomeo de la Casas in New Spain. Each sought to inculturate the faith by translating the scriptures, producing dictionaries and writing hymns in indigenous languages.

At its best, evangelizers sought to identify elements in the new culture capable of bridging the gap between Christianity and the spiritual traditions being encountered. At its worst, colonial powers in collusion with Church authorities sought to eradicate indigenous culture and language. In Canada, we are all too familiar with the sad history of our residential schools.

For the religious communities that established themselves in missionary settings, the question of native vocations presented itself: How could one be authentically Franciscan, or Ursuline, or Oblate without going back to the cultural sources of the tradition? This is an assimilationist model; a religious house recreates an oasis, a carbon copy of the original setting with the minimum adaptation necessary for the community to function in its new setting. One might be in Africa or Asia, but if one closes one's eyes, and listens to the chant, or the conversation around the table, one is back in Paris, or Montreal, or Toronto.

When the first generation of my religious community, the Basilian fathers, came from the Ardèche in France to Toronto in 1850, they were astounded by the wide streets and cold winters, but bemoaned the lack of wine at table in what was at the time a very Protestant city. Some cultural adaptations were more difficult than others.

The twentieth century saw steady growth of religious orders and their institutions in North America. It was a century marked by world war and genocide, most notable of the Jewish people in the Shoah. And then came the Second Vatican Council. The Spirit blew, and Pope John gave us a four-year Council that gave the birth to what Karl Rahner called a world Church. As I said before, Catholic Christianity had been for centuries embedded in European culture and civilisation. But in 1962 as the bishops of the world gathered, Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans took their place and showed a very different face for the Church.

It is this cultural encounter that we are still grappling with in the Church today. We are still very much living in the post-Vatican II Church.

The bishops who participated in the Council returned to their dioceses in the first world, and began to take much more seriously their responsibilities as bishops of the whole Church. They encouraged our religious communities to reach out to the Global South, to Africa, Asia and Latin America. The translation of the liturgy into modern languages was a kind of inculturation in itself. It was a heady time, but one that proved very difficult for religious communities. The dual challenges of *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* provoked a crisis that many of you are familiar with. Through the 1960's and 70's thousands withdrew from religious life. The search for the original spirit and charism of the founders of religious communities seemed fraught with peril. The promise and excitement of the immediate post-conciliar period gave way to a loss of confidence. By the end of the 1970's Pope Paul finally died and a very confident and dramatic Polish cardinal appeared on the scene from behind the Iron Curtain; Pope John Paul II. He was European, but eastern European and schooled in the art of battling not with secularism, but with an all-powerful Communist state.

The relatively positive approach to inculturation that we find in the documents of the Second Vatican Council gave way to a more cautious approach to the reform. In *Catechesi Tradendí*, the 1979 post-synodal exhortation, Pope John Paul wrote:

On the one hand the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted ... nor, without serious loss, from the cultures in which it has already been expressed down the centuries: it does not spring spontaneously from any cultural soil; it has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue which inevitably become part of a certain dialogue of cultures. (*CatTrad* 53).

The cultural matrix of European Catholicism seems almost intrinsic to the Gospel message. But in 2015, the face of Catholicism is rapidly changing. In one excludes "Latinos", within ten years less than 20% of Catholics in the world will be of European origin. That means 80% of Catholics world-side will be Latino, or African or Asian. Given these numbers, the election of Jorge

Maria Bergoglio as Pope Francis is not so surprising. And even if this pontificate is short as Pope Francis recently suggested, an Asian or an African successor seems ever more likely.

What are the implications for religious communities as we go forward?

1. Contact with the other. For the many communities who engaged in ministry in the developing world, the contact occurred *there* in the place of mission. In contrast, for the next few years, the intercultural contact will occur *here*. We may welcome candidates from very different cultural settings who may wish to have at least part of the formation experience here in Canada. There may be new Canadians whose origins are from elsewhere and who wish to enter religious life here in Canada. There will certainly be members of our communities who have spent decades in ministry elsewhere who choose to return to our communities in Canada. So the place of the intercultural encounter will not be Haiti or Bogota or Yaoundi, but here in Toronto.
2. Our communities as safe places to encounter the other. Who is at home? Who is a guest? The place of encounter must be a place of welcome for all. The space cannot be “owned” by any one person or group. No person or group can be privileged in the encounter. The living accommodations, the common space, the food, the environment need to reflect the diversity of experiences of the persons who share the space. This presumes that those who have been here *longer* need to make the additional effort to accommodate those whose experience in Canada is more recent.
3. Our faith as a key to experiencing the other. We have the experience of Jesus as he reached out to those on the social and ethnic periphery. His intentionality needs to be the inspiration and guide for our intentionality. We have the experience of the apostles and Paul and they guided Christianity out of a purely Jewish matrix and allowed for its inculturation in the Greek-speaking Roman Empire. We have centuries of Christian inculturation in Europe. The challenge for our religious communities and for the Church is a new inculturation in the context of an intercultural encounter, or as Pope John Paul put it, “a dialogue of cultures”.

For some Jewish Christians in the first century, the idea of a faith in Jesus divorced from its Jewish matrix was inconceivable. Similarly, in our century it may be difficult for us to imagine our faith distinct from the cultural matrix of European Christianity. An authentic intercultural encounter requires a critical examination of our cultural pre-suppositions and an increased flexibility in creating a place of welcome and encounter.

In closing, I would like to share one biblical text on the intercultural challenge. In the Old Testament, there is a wonderful example of a woman from Moab, widowed like her mother-in-law, an immigrant, a refugee, one who chooses a new life and a new culture. Her name was Ruth.

Naomi, and Israelite, and her two daughters-in-law (Moabites) have all become widowed in Moab, modern-day Jordan. They have been rejected by their in-laws, because they were all childless, and now face starvation. It's the story of millions of economic migrants today. The narrative is built on the Hebrew verb *shuv*, to turn, or return, to go back or in religious terms, to convert. Naomi rises in Moab to "return" to Bethlehem, "the house of bread". Her daughters-in-law rise to "return" with her, though they are Moabites and really can't return to a place they have never been. Naomi pleads them, "return" to your homes in Moab; Orpah the elder daughter-in-law finally agrees, but Ruth will not hear of it. She will return to Bethlehem; she will convert to belief in the God of Israel and join herself to the people of Israel. And so we get one of the most beautiful and poetic verses in the entire Hebrew bible: Her words to Naomi:

For wherever you go, I go, and wherever you lodge, I lodge. Your people, my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do to me and even more if anything but death separates me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17)

Ultimately, religious life is a place to dream. Inspiration and hope are not the products of careful committee work and planning sessions. They come about from a heart that is open to all kinds of new possibilities. They come from a sense of inner freedom that Pope Francis has so wonderfully demonstrated. As he has said again and again, in order to flourish, religious life requires witnesses to joy. For young and old, this is the challenge before us today.

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