

# **“Interculturality in Religious Congregations: Challenges and Promise”**

Workshop for Leaders and Formation Personnel

Toronto (Mary Ward Centre) October 21, 2015

## **Panel on Formation through the Lens of Interculturality**

### **I. Introduction – My Story**

I am a member of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. We are an international religious congregation of close to 6100 members in 74 countries - 80 different nationalities. In Canada, we have 112 sisters of 20 different nationalities.

With my parents and my younger brother, I immigrated to Canada 34 years ago. My sister, who was married and already living in Canada, sponsored our coming. Without much knowledge of English, I started a new life in Edmonton. Learning a new language and facing a new culture, new weather and a new way of living was not easy. Five years later, I entered the Congregation of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. My formation in the Pre-novitiate and Novitiate was in Calgary and Edmonton. After my first profession, I went to Winnipeg. Since Canada did not fully recognize what I had studied in Korea, I studied again and I finished my B.Ed. at the University of Winnipeg. Afterwards I was sent on mission to Nunavut for eight years. Another new life had started... another new culture and a new language- Inuktitut. I did not learn much Inuktitut, only all the prayers, since all the children spoke English.

Then again I was called to go to a new mission, Madoc, Ontario, a place where I could speak English.

Then I went to England for one year of Franciscan studies for formators, of course in English but... in another culture.

Then, I arrived in Gatineau, QC.

I remember that just before I returned to Canada, I was so afraid to go to Gatineau... Yes, it was partly because of my new mission as a novice mistress... but I was more afraid to be in a French community.

I was supposed to have learned French before I started my mission as a formator, but as you know, life does not always go as we plan. And yet, here I am!!!

## II. Intercultural Community

How do we live in an intercultural community? How do we prepare our sisters and brothers to receive new members from other countries? For me, there is no one right answer. It all depends on each one's history and the circumstances in each congregation.

There is no one way to receive our sisters and brothers from other Provinces. Each one of us has to open his/her heart to receive his/her brothers and sisters. There is no formula, except love and faith. When a new member arrives in the Community, we usually ask the member to adapt to the new situation, but for me it doesn't work that way – it's not only the new member, but the whole community that has to adapt together. We have to create a new community. By welcoming others, our mission becomes a transformation. We come out from ourselves, from our shells, to welcome and to help fellow members of our Congregations to take up the mission which God has confided to us in Canada.

Sometimes when we are so used to doing things in one way, it is not easy to be disturbed. But we must leave our comfort zone and be disturbed for the sake of others, to help them to grow and adapt to our country, and to mission together in our religious community. We have to break out of our own routines to welcome new sisters and brothers.

We have to aim at intercultural living, not multicultural living.

- For those who come to Canada, there are so many things to learn about life in Canada.
- And for those who receive others from other countries, there are also many things to learn about others' culture and their background, and how to share their own Canadian culture.

For example, in our Novitiate, we had five novices from different cultural backgrounds over seven years. The first two novices were born in Canada, but their parents came from Europe – from the Czech Republic and the Netherlands. After that, we had two novices from the United States, an American-Korean and an American-Vietnamese, and another novice who came from Iraq. Our formation team was formed with three Sisters from different backgrounds – one Canadian (Québécoise), one Sister from Madagascar, and myself, Canadian-Korean.

The first thing we did was to get to know each other. Each one of us prepared information about our own country, culture, food, and our families. Each one presented this information to the group according to her own talents, using PowerPoint or showing photos. Through all this sharing, we learned and came to know about each person and became a part of each other's lives. We celebrated important feasts together, for example, we celebrated the Feast of Saint Nicholas, putting our boots near the fireplace and waiting with anticipation. We saw that the next day St. Nicholas had passed by to give us chocolate! We celebrated Chinese New Year and

received blessings from the older Sisters, and of course, we received money, too, with the blessing. This is a very special custom in much of Asia. But we also celebrated Canadian and American feasts. We enjoyed a variety of foods: Canadian, American, Vietnamese, Korean, European, Malagasy, and Iraqi food.

Our liturgy was prepared according to each one's creativity.

So in this way, we celebrated everyone's differences and came to know and appreciate one another, becoming a part of each other's life. With all of our sharing, the whole world became our home. And that is as our Mother Foundress said: "The whole world is our home."

Of course, it was not always easy to understand one another because of difference in culture and difference in background.

### **An Experience of Deeper Understanding**

Once I planned with our three novices to go to the United States, as we are an inter-province novitiate. We were planning to attend a Franciscan formation session. The Iraqi novice came to me and she excused herself from going to the USA as she said she did not know much English. I encouraged her to attend with us because I knew her English was good enough to follow the session. So she came. After the session, we visited and stayed with our Sisters in New York. The Sisters arranged for us to go to the 9/11 site and memorial. The memorial connected us with the memory of the innocent people who had been killed. In silence, we were able to pray and we found it very moving. We were also touched by the OFM Chaplain who had been killed and we prayed for him. When we came back to Canada, we shared our experiences. The Iraqi novice shared with me that it was a very touching experience to remember all those innocent people who had died, but for her it was not an easy experience to be in the United States. She also thought, "How many innocent people in Iraq have been killed by American soldiers?" And she thought how all these people had not been recognized with memorials. She felt it was not fair. Those who lost loved ones could not just consider them "collateral damage" as military reports did. Between us there was silence. I didn't know what to say. I simply said, "Sorry!" I had never thought of how she would feel going to the United States, and I hadn't thought about how her experiences in Iraq would impact her trip there. This was my moment of understanding and conversion.

**III. For those who are arriving in a new country or community and for those who are receiving, we should keep in mind three P-words for both sides:**

**1. Prayer**

**2. Patience**

- To be patient with myself
- To be patient with others
- To be patient with the circumstances

**3. Perseverance**

**A. Prayer, Patience, and Perseverance for those who are arriving in Canada**

**1. Prayer:**

We are all here together because of God's calling. We should never forget why we are here in this mission; it is because God has united us, calling us to live together and to follow him. As Pope Francis said, "The consecrated life is a call to incarnate the Good News, to follow Christ, the crucified and risen one, to take on Jesus's way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to our brothers and sisters." In prayer, God gives us strength. In prayer we bring reconciliation among our brothers and sisters. In prayer, with Him, we build our community together and this is why our prayer life is very important. It is our foundation. Christ is the centre of our community life.

**2. Patience** – In patience there are three different parts.

**1) The first is to be patient with oneself**

We must be patient with ourselves. When we come to a new place, with enthusiasm we want to do so many things, but we cannot, and there are many things that we have to learn about and adjust to first.

Our sisters and brothers arriving in Canada have often already accomplished so much at home or in other missions, but when they come to Canada, they are limited by language and cultural differences and can easily become discouraged.

We should encourage those arriving to be patient with themselves because it takes time to learn new things. At first they might feel alone, shy, and uncomfortable in their new surroundings. But with time everything will become easier.

## **2) To be patient with others**

They will see different ways of reacting to others and different ways of doing things. Misunderstanding could happen because of not knowing different cultures. For example, when one of our young sisters came to Canada, it was so difficult for her to see an elderly sister doing cleaning, washing her clothes and hanging them outside. She tried to help her as she did in her country - that is one of the ways of respecting elders in her country. The elderly Canadian sister became frustrated and upset with this younger sister. She could not understand why she was always disturbing her, and the newcomer could not understand why this elderly sister was so angry with her and always avoided her.

## **3) To be patient with the circumstances**

They will see that many things are not what they are used to in their own country – they have to learn what it means to be in Canada, accepting Canadian culture – and then try to understand others in the light of their cultural insight.

Why do they do things like this in Canada?

Why do they do things this way in the community?

Questions will arise since our circumstances are certainly not the same, and the way things operate is not the same. For example, the work that we do in Canada is different from other countries because we do not have large institutions. We have to go out and look for our own jobs, so our work-life becomes more individualistic. There are not many young members, so the life style can be so different.

One Sister who had arrived told me, “I don’t want to see any more snow. I am tired of looking at snow!” Even though she was so excited and happy to see snow when she had first arrived.

St. Vincent de Paul reminds us “Don’t go faster than Providence.”

## **3. Perseverance**

All the differences those arriving have to face might become overwhelming and lead to discouragement. For instance, in their country they might have accomplished many things, but here they may not know the language or know the system. The limitations might lead to an experience of nothingness. Then the question comes, “What am I doing here?” At such a time, they need to continue and persevere.

When I came to Canada from Korea, one person told me to wait three years and then decide what to do, but before that, I should not make any decision about going back to Korea. This is how long the adjustment to a new country can take. I used to complain to God, “Why have You brought me here? If I were in Korea, I would already be a Sister; I could do so much more work for You.” Many trials come at the beginning of our mission in a new place, but that does not mean that we are in the wrong place.

## **B. Prayer, Patience, and Perseverance for those who are receiving sisters and brothers**

### **1. Prayer**

The newcomers must feel desired, wanted, accepted and loved as they are, and not as we want them to be. This quality of receiving rests upon prayer and the conversion of heart.

In our Constitutions we say, “Prayer, which is of itself evangelizing, stimulates and strengthens our missionary thrust. It welcomes and makes its own the cultural riches of peoples, as it brings before God their hopes and their praise”. (FMM constitutions 12)

### **2. Patience**

#### **1) The first is to be patient with oneself**

For those of us who are receiving sisters or brothers on Mission, we too must remember to be patient with ourselves. At times, it might feel very stressful to accept other cultures which we have never experienced, and sometimes we might think, “Why can I not accept others?” We are adjusting too.

For example, often people ask me where I come from, and then immediately, before I can answer, they ask, “Are you Chinese?” When I say I am Korean, sometimes they will say, “Oh, Japanese, Korean and Chinese are all the same to me.” I respond, “Yes, just as Americans and Canadians are the same.” And then their eyes open wide, and right away, they say, “No, no! We are so different.” It is the same with us: we, too, are different. So we should not judge; we have to understand the other culture before making assumptions.

## **2) To be patient with others**

Be patient with others, with new sisters and brothers. Try to accept their differences and try to understand. As in the Prayer of St. Francis, seek more to understand than to be understood. And try to understand their culture and where they are coming from; put yourself in their shoes. Try to imagine how you would feel if you did not understand the language spoken by most of the sisters you live with.

The way of doing things and the way of speaking are so different in each culture, so we need to be patient with newcomers and let them be themselves. They will learn slowly in their own time. In the beginning, they will speak slowly and be hard to understand. That's when we need to be patient and encouraging.

Remember, these are not teenagers. Often they have already lived full lives in their countries, taken responsibilities. In Canada, they start over. But just because they don't know the language, it doesn't mean they do not know anything. We have to give them the opportunity to try things in Canada for the first time, and encourage them when they can't do it perfectly, or in the way they did something back home. Those receiving sisters and brothers should be patient with their mistakes, praise their efforts and achievements.

## **3) To be patient with the circumstances**

While completing various projects within the community or the Province, we need patience to allow the new member of the community to integrate. Previously, when there were only Canadians, naturally things were done differently, but as new members arrive from different countries, we see the shape of the Province beginning to change. For instance, in the cafeteria, there is not only *tourtière* and potatoes, but now we serve noodles and rice as well! Even when there are positive changes, though, it still takes time to adjust to a new way of doing things.

## **3. Perseverance**

For those of us receiving newcomers to the Community, we too must persevere – even though we might be afraid that we are losing our identity as our own Canadian Province. We should think of it this way: we are not losing our identity, but building a new identity. It is our turn to receive our brothers and sisters from other countries with the same graciousness and hospitality that Canadians were received in mission lands in the past. But even so, we know it takes time to grow and build something new.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

It is well worth our while to deepen our lives through Prayer, Patience, and Perseverance. By welcoming brothers and sisters into our Provinces, we are creating the Kingdom of God among us, with joy and hope.

I am happy to be an FMM in Canada. I have come a long way. As an immigrant with a vocation, I was received in Canada by our Sisters who have loved me as I am and have shown confidence in me. Now I am happy to receive other sisters from different countries.

We have different cultures and different languages, but we have a common language – the language of Love.

It is in faith that intercultural community is built: God appeals to our freedom to make an active contribution. It is in faith that we receive the sisters and brothers He gives us, accepting our differences through an attitude of listening, of trust, of forgiveness and of respect for each one's mystery and path. We support one another on our journey towards the Lord.

Marianna Jung, FMM