

The Challenge of Interculturality in Today's Context

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As we look at the all-important issue of interculturality, it goes without saying that the Church was enormously affected by the Second Vatican Council. The Spirit blew, and Pope John XXIII set us on a course that gave birth to what the eminent Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner called a "world Church." For centuries, Catholic Christianity had been embedded in a European cultural matrix. But in 1962 as the bishops of the world gathered in Rome; Africans Asians, and Latin Americans prelates took their place and showed a very different face for the Church.

The Promise and Challenges in the Post-Vatican II Church

It is this cultural encounter that we are still grappling with 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 the oft-mentioned concepts *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement* provoked a crisis with which we are all familiar.

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.

In 1978 Pope Paul VI finally died and a self-assured and dramatic Polish cardinal appeared on the scene from behind the Iron Curtain: Karol Wojtyla. Pope John Paul II was European, but eastern European and schooled in the art of battling not with secularism, but with an all-powerful Communist state.

Cautious Approach

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 Tradendae*, 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 becomes part of a certain dialogue of cultures. (CatTrad 53)

The Changing Face of Catholicism

The cultural matrix of European Catholicism seems almost intrinsic to the Gospel message. Yet now, in 2017, the face of Catholicism is rapidly changing. If 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. Moreover, an Asian or an African successor seems distinctly possible.

What are the implications of interculturality 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 Yaoundé, but here where I live in Montreal.

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. We have the experience of the apostles and Paul as 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.”

“Religious Life Is a Place to Dream”

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.

Finally, 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.