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## 1 Exploring Interculturality – What is it?

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Video

<https://vimeo.com/321356247>

Scripture Passage

Prodigal Son Lk 15:11-32

Reading

### Intercultural Life as a Sign of Prophetic Hope - Part 1

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*Original in Spanish*

Dear Superiors General,

It is an honour for me to be speaking today before you, who are the representatives of so many Congregations and so many Sisters dispersed throughout the whole world. This is certainly a situation and an experience that I never imagined, and I appreciate the confidence that the UISG shown me by inviting me. I, therefore, thank the organizers for granting me this honour, and I thank God for making my adolescent dream of “reaching the ends of the world” a reality. God, sooner or later, fulfills our deepest dreams... though in His own way and in His own time!  
... Instead of reaching every corner of the earth, He brings those corners to me, through you and so many other encounters that I have lived because of the theme of intercultural life and mission, which I have been deepening in a special way for a few years now.

As a Missionary Servant of the Holy Spirit, I belong to a Congregation where multicultural and international life and mission are an essential part of our founding history and of our charism. However, my particular interest in this topic was really sparked by my personal experience of joy, frustration, pain, and learning when I was sent to launch a new missionary presence in the Fiji Islands (in the Pacific). We belonged to our Congregation’s Australian province, and I had to live—in a span of 5 years—in community with Sisters from Papua New Guinea, Germany, Indonesia, India, Benin; and I am from Argentina. Most of the time, we were only 2, and only one remained for

2 years. At the same time, we were advancing on our path in a country that, in turn, is composed of the local population and an almost numerically equal group of people who have come from India. Motivated by this experience, full of joy, discoveries, pain, misunderstandings, frustrations, and much learning, I then decided to study the topic of cultures and mission from the academic viewpoint in order to process and learn from the experience that supports me in the present situations and encourages me as I look towards the future.

Contact and exchange between cultures of the most diverse corners of the world are increasing and being imposed on us in a progressively accelerated way. Favored by our globalized era's means of communication and transportation, today, there are indeed very few groups that remain isolated from contact with others. The phenomena of migrations and massive displacements that are compulsive or provoked by violence, the climate change, political or religious persecution, poverty, xenophobia or the lack of opportunities, means that every day millions of people are moving from one side of the world to the other.

In the last 20 years, multiculturalism and interculturality have become a cross-cutting issue that is debated in fields as varied as education, health, philosophy, and the business world, among others. At the theological level, we have been concerned for many years with the "inculturation" of the faith, the Gospel, the liturgy, the missionaries, and so on. Inculturation answers the question of how to incarnate the faith, shared by the missionaries coming from the "outside" or "ad-gentes," in the local culture in such a way that the transmitted faith can become part of the local culture and be expressed through the symbolism, values, and imagination of that culture. This question responded to an ecclesial context where the mission was predominantly one-directional: from the "evangelized" countries to "non-evangelized" countries or pagans (as they were called). Today, the reality is much more complex and multidirectional, so that in missiology we have already begun to speak of the Church's "inter-gentes" mission (instead of ad-gentes) and of inter-culturation, which, without cancelling the still existing challenge of inculturation, incorporates the challenges and opportunities of the new multidirectional context in the world and the Church today.

Through the consecrated life, called to be at the margins of the Church, this reality also reaches us, makes us move, impacts us... within our communities and beyond, in the mission and the apostolates. However, I am convinced that we have a "treasure" of lived experience of which we are not even aware. Many of our Congregations were already at the forefront of multicultural life for nearly a century before the world started talking about it. For others, the experience is more recent. However, it is this capital of experience and knowledge that we are called today to share with one another and to put at the service of humanity and the Church. On the other hand, in order to capitalize on this wealth of experience, we are challenged to open up to the tools that other, more specific fields are developing on the basis of philosophical thought, communication sciences, education, sociology, etc.

This combination of life experience, theological reflection, and the indication of possible tools is what I am going to try to present today in the short time that we are going to share. Can intercultural life become one of the seeds of the prophetic hope that we, as consecrated women, want to sow in today's world? I am convinced that the answer to this question is positive and that it is urgent for each of our Congregations and the entire Church to consider it.

Yet, the most pressing issue, about which most Congregations are concerned, is how to live it and how to do it. I will, therefore, try to present this topic in four steps:

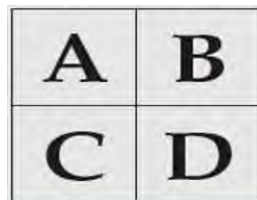
1. Clarification of the concept of interculturality and related concepts
2. How to live in an intercultural key

3. The weakness and power to become a sign
4. The urgency of an intentional choice based on prophecy and for hope

### 1. The Concept of Interculturality and Related Concepts

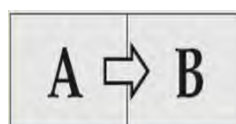
We cannot approach the concept of interculturality without clarifying other terms that are related and/or frame what interculturality means and proposes:

Multiculturalism: When we talk about a multicultural group, event or life, we are highlighting the fact that its participants or members come from different cultures; for example, a parish, a company, a city, and even a country, can be multicultural. To emphasize the fact that people also come from different nationalities, we will say that the group is multicultural and international. However, this fact, in itself, does not imply any relationship or interaction between its members. I can live my whole life in a city inhabited by neighbours of different cultural origins, but this will not necessarily lead me to want to learn their language, taste their food, understand their values, etc. Using a diagram, we could represent the situation as follows:<sup>1</sup>



Trans-cultural experience: Now, let's say that a person of culture "A" decides to move to the neighbourhood of culture "B." The person would be going into a cross-cultural experience. Note that we are talking about a "move" for a certain extent in time and not a mere tourist visit. The move, in this example, implies a degree of commitment and risk that is not assumed when we are just passing through and consider ourselves tourists, visitors, explorers or, at worst, conquerors or colonizers...

On a diagram, it would look like this:



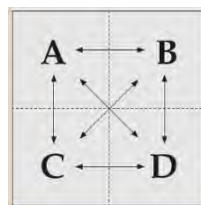
This experience of learning and adapting to another culture, different from the one in which we have been socialized, is called acculturation. Acculturation is, in itself, a challenging and enriching experience once we have overcome the stages that normally occur to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the magnitude of the cultural difference and a person's personality and/or preparation. In general, these stages go from a first idyllic love of the "different," to a deep rejection of that same "difference," until a balance is reached between the appreciation for the qualities and the recognition of the shadows of the other culture and of one's own.

When that balance is not reached, a person risks being stuck in a dream that does not correspond to reality (Sisters who "maternalize" the assumed culture and, then, act and speak of "them" as "poor little ones..." or who are unable to develop relationships with the local people, while all their friends and references continue being, despite the passing of time, those of their place of origin and they maintain excessive contact with them and/or with the news from home). Or, on the contrary, they

suffer a cultural shock that plunges them into depression, apathy, hypochondria, excessive concern for their health and/or cleanliness, excessive sleep or food, etc. These are “symptoms” of a cultural shock to which we should pay close attention when they continue in time after a transcultural transfer.

I mention these processes that occur in transculturation because they often coincide with the formation of the multicultural community. It is, therefore, very important to bear in mind that in many cases people are not only adapting to the culture of a new place and perhaps also learning a new language—which, in itself, is already highly demanding—but are also, at the same time, interacting with multiple cultures within and maybe also outside of their community. Sometimes, when forming multicultural communities, we do not take into account or adequately accompany the personal processes of transculturation and inculturation that each of the Sisters is going through, on a personal level in parallel with communitarian and pastoral challenges. In fact, truly intercultural processes can only be initiated with people who have already lived through at least 3 years of transculturation.

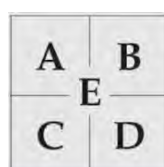
Interculturality: Let us now use the diagram of cultures A, B, C, and D to illustrate the difference between multiculturalism and interculturality.



<sup>1</sup> The diagrams and the general way of presenting them are taken from Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*, Liturgical Press, 2015, 621–746 [Kindle].

While the first diagram outlined the coexistence of different cultures in clearly demarcated compartments, in this second diagram we see arrows coming out of each group or person in the direction of the other groups or people, thus illustrating the interrelation between them. At the same time, the arrows do not indicate a single direction but rather a round trip. Going to meet the other person and the other’s welcome. Moreover, the dividing lines are not continuous but punctuated, thus indicating that the boundaries between some cultures and others are no longer sharp and clear.

However, this diagram does not yet illustrate the intercultural community. Good relations, communication, and good coexistence—although very important and necessary—are not enough. The intercultural community is called to take a step beyond the tolerance of differences and to live a process of transformation or conversion that challenges it to create, as a result of this interrelation, a new culture.



In this diagram, we will call “E” the new culture that is the fruit of intercultural living. The “E” culture will be made up of a new and unique combination of some elements from each of the participating cultures, making each person feel at the same time “at home” while facing something “new.”

This combination will emerge as an always dynamic result of the process of interaction and of agreements reached between the parties. In this process, each community enriches itself with the values and lights brought by the other culture, but both also take on the challenges and face their respective shadows and blind spots (e.g., victimization, superiority or inferiority complexes, imperialist mentality, racism, historical prejudices, and so on). This model of community interaction between cultures, on a level of symmetry and equality, is diametrically opposed to the assimilationist model that prevailed (and still survives?!!) in groups where minority or presumably underdeveloped, uncivilized, cultures or “pagans” had to adapt, conform, and assume the superior or majority culture while abandoning their own. This assimilationist model is what governed most of our Congregations in the “recruitment” of vocations in the so-called “mission countries.” This assimilationist model is framed in an approach that implies integration as a hegemonic affirmation of the host country’s culture.

According to this model, it is expected that the immigrant or the trained person, in our case, behaves and assumes the culture of the receiving society or community, putting aside or nullifying his/her culture of origin.

On the contrary, instead of seeking the “assimilation” that denies and wants to erase the differences, the model presented by interculturality seeks to know, value, deepen, and integrate these differences. As a result of the interrelation and encounter between cultures, we are invited to create a new “E” culture, in which we can all give the best of ourselves, share our gifts, and let ourselves be challenged by the encounter and the relationship with the “different,” so that our obscurities may be converted in the light of the Gospel. Humanly speaking, interculturality is a counter-cultural movement in which few people would feel comfortable or for which they would have to be prepared. Our cultures “program” us in such a way that we tend to relate to “ours” to defend ourselves from “the others,” “those who are different,” and their potential threats. On the basis of the faith and the power of grace, however, inclusion in equality is the Project of the Kingdom that Jesus preached and, as such, it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

**Cultures:** The terms just presented, in turn, lead us to briefly deepen our understanding of the term “culture.” This concept of anthropological origin does not have, as such, just one definition; it has been evolving over time and can be analysed from hundreds of different perspectives. However, for our purposes, we are going to take the definition that presents “culture” as a way of life of a group of people—the behaviours, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Culture, as such, does not exist; but there are people who embody a certain culture or use certain “cultural lenses” that give meaning to their lives and allow them to communicate with each other and to organize themselves. My culture is the best way that “my” people found to survive and develop in the context and place where we live. Therefore, no culture can claim the right to become the universal “norm” of other cultures. Our challenge, in the Church, is that, for centuries, our faith has been confused with the culture that mediated its transmission (both the cultures that mediated the writing of our Sacred Texts and the Western culture that later extended the implantation of the Church).

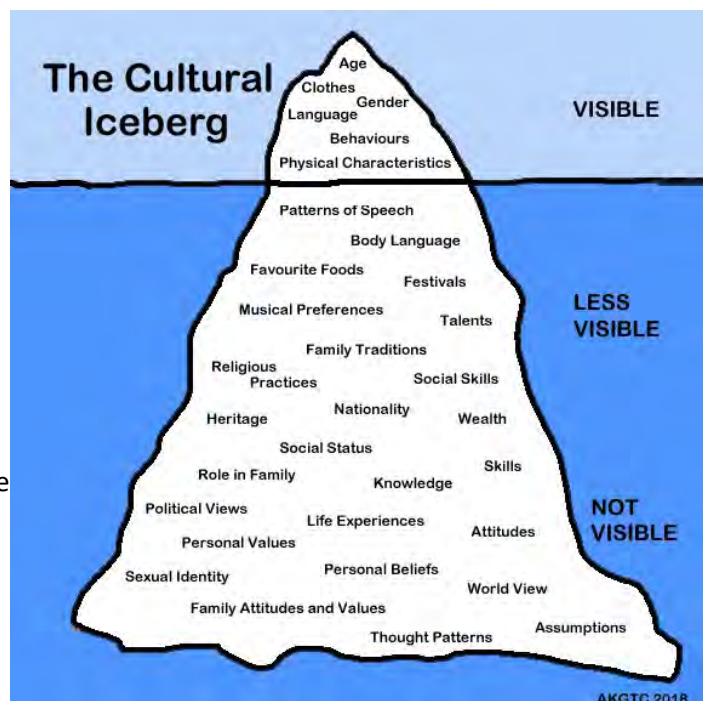
Let us look at some characteristics of culture: culture is learned and transmitted through

socialization in the primary and secondary groups in which we have grown up (the family, the clan, the neighbourhood, the school, the city or the countryside, social class, religion, profession, and the different groups of identification and belonging in which we have been formed). Culture is stable and dynamic, it changes very slowly, but it is so much a part of ourselves that we do not know it until we “leave” it.

Only in contact with the “other,” with what is “different” do we begin to know our own culture and that of others... this knowledge is, then, given by comparison with the “others,” those who are “outside” our group. This division between “us” (women, Catholics, religious, professionals, Latin Americans, Argentines, southern, northern, etc.) and “them” (those who are not like “us”) protects us and gives us a sense of identity and belonging, but it also isolates us, challenges us, and fills us with fear in the face of the “unknown.”

There are no higher or more developed cultures and less developed or inferior cultures, but different cultures. And each culture believes that it is the best because it is the best form that has allowed its group to adapt to the context in which it developed.

Getting to know a culture is very difficult. To illustrate this difficulty, it is compared to an iceberg of which we can only see the protruding surface, i.e. 10%, while 90% is below water. In the same way, the material elements of each culture (like clothes and typical foods, traditional artifacts, dances, etc.) constitute only the 10% that we can see, feel, hear, smell and name with ease. In the remaining 90%, which corresponds to the immaterial elements, we can distinguish in turn 3 levels: the first, partially visible, level to which we can access when we seek it intentionally (what is behind the language, communication styles, leadership, conflict resolution, etc.); the second level (one of the central values) is much more difficult to reach and examine; and the third level (that of the basic suppositions) is so deep and unconscious that we cannot really get to know it: this is what we take as “normal,” “given.”



From this brief terminological framework, I will strive to make it clear to us that living interculturally is a vocation and a counter-cultural option, and that, as such, it appeals to the faith and to the life of grace. Humanly, we all tend to seek and interact with those with whom we feel identified and, therefore, understood, included, accepted. Conversely, what is “different” tends to scare us, challenge us, and make us distrustful. This distrust, especially for cultures that suffered the experience of the colonization or the invasion of their nations, is not unjustified or minor; on the contrary, it is a collective wound that lasts for generations and must be healed personally before engaging in a project of intercultural life and mission. Intercultural life is not automatically the result of the mere coexistence of people of different cultures; on the contrary, it must be intentionally constructed and assumed as a process of personal and community conversion. Unlike transnational companies that seek to use interculturality as a tool for improving their sales, we are invited to transform it into a way of life that makes us more faithful in following Jesus and building the Kingdom.

## Possible activity

Take some time to reflect on your own personal elements about culture:



## Cultural Interview Questions...

1. What is your definition of “culture?”
2. How do you define “family?”
3. Who holds the most “status” in your family? Why?
4. How do you define success?
5. Do you consider your parents to be successful?
6. How important is education in your family?
7. Is punctuality important to you? Why or why not?
8. What is the most important meal of the day?
9. Do you eat foods that are indigenous to your culture? Why or why not? If you answered yes, name some of the foods that you eat. If you answered no, what types of foods do you eat?
10. Did you ever live with your grandparents or extended family?
11. Do you actively participate in an organized religion?
12. How important is religion in your family? Why ?
13. If religion is important in your family, do you plan to pass this on to your children? Why or why not?
14. Are the roles of men and women specifically defined in your family? If so, what are they?
15. Do you have any eating habits/rituals that are specific to your culture?
16. Define and describe the most important (or most celebrated) holiday of your culture.
17. If you are from a culture that speaks English as a second language, do you speak your native language? If not, why? If so, will you teach your native language to any children you have?
18. How is physical contact viewed in your culture?

19. What is considered most disrespectful in your culture?
20. What is considered most respectful in your culture?
21. What would you say is, from your perspective, the most commonly held misconception about people of your culture?
22. Have you ever experienced racism? In what form?
23. What can be done about racism and prejudice, in your opinion?
24. Do young people today have a sense of culture?
25. What is the best thing about living here?
26. What is the worst thing about living here?
27. Have you ever felt excluded based on your gender or culture?
28. Do you remember excluding others based on Culture or Gender?

### *Personal Names*

#### **Objective:**

To explore the meaning and personal importance of participants' names.

#### **Procedure:**

Participants are divided into mixed cultural groups of 5-7 people.

Each group appoints a reporter who will note and later share anything s/he feels other groups should hear. Hand out sheets of paper on which are written the questions in a) below. The facilitator or someone invited by her/him begins

#### a) **Explain:**

- \* What is the meaning of your name?
- \* Why you were given that name?
- \* How do you feel about your name and how do others react to it?
- \* Would you like to say anything to the group about how you would like to be known?
- \* What is the place of nick-names in your culture?

#### b) **Reports from Small Groups**

Reporters give their reports in the plenary group.

#### **Question in the Plenary group: Have you any difficulty with names from other cultures?**

- What have you learnt from this sharing?

### For Reflection

**Interculturality** is a dynamic process that invites people of the community not only to live side by side, but also to cooperate and co-create an intercultural society together (Vižintin 2016).