
5 Being the minority

Video

<https://vimeo.com/388458024/c12378a3d1>

Scripture Passage

Syrophonician woman Mk 7:24-30

Reading

Intercultural Life as a Sign of Prophetic Hope - Part 2

Sr. Adriana Carla Milmanda, SSpS



How to Live in an Intercultural Key?

Culture, as we have been able to outline it, is something that goes beyond all the areas, aspects, and facets of our life. It is the very medium through which we organize our perception of reality, build a collective sense of the world that surrounds us (material and immaterial), and communicate. Hence, culture is compared to the lenses through which we look. At the same time, it is also compared to an iceberg, because culture permeates our life so intimately that it becomes impossible to know it objectively and to reach the deepest tones that give our lenses their color. Our values, moral codes, preferences, sense of respect, sense of authority, sense of order, our management of time, etc. ... everything is crossed by the culture and the cultures of the groups of belonging in which we have been socialized. For me, this was a fascinating discovery that I was only able to recognize when I found myself in Fiji, in a culture so different from own.

How, then, can we open ourselves to this reality of multiculturalism and start living in the key of interculturality? How can fear or the dangerous mere tolerance of “different” be overcome so that we can begin to go out to meet other men and women? Interculturality, more than a topic, is a process; it is a new paradigm that wants to respond to the reality that surrounds us and imposes itself on us; it is a key from which to re-read our life and mission as consecrated persons in today's world.

Within the time at our disposal, I would like to highlight at least three elements that, according to my experience, are essential when it comes to finding ways to begin to introduce this new paradigm in our communities:

1. Preparation: since it is a counter-cultural option, intercultural life requires dedicating time and effort to the preparation of the Sisters. This preparation includes:
 - Basic knowledge of the traits and salient characteristics of the interacting cultures (nationality, ethnicity, generation, education, socio-economic origin, etc.). Instead of focusing only on what unites us (which is very good, and it is very good to nurture it), interculturality also challenges us to explore, value, and capitalize what differentiates us.

- The creation of a “safe space” of trust and mutual care, where one can express oneself freely without fear of being judged and/or labeled.
 - The use of various strategies that help to maintain the motivation that leads to going out to meet and to welcome the “difference” by overcoming the difficulties that will occur in communication.
2. Intentionality: prior motivation is an element that must lead us to sustain, over time, the intentional effort to build on the basis of the differences. Intentionality requires growth in intercultural sensitivity by looking for:
- tools that favor
 - communication (verbal and non-verbal) and
 - the resolution of both expressed and latent conflicts.
 - personal and community work that strengthens and develops
 - resilience capacity and
 - detects in time the dangerous conformist attitude that is content with a simple “tolerance” of the difference.
3. Spirituality: intercultural life, as a proposal that emerges from our “Catholic” (i.e., “universal”) faith, is a life-long personal and communitarian process of conversion. Ethnocentrism (taking our culture as the center of the world and the norm for measuring other cultures), cultural stereotypes and their consequent prejudices are present in the world, in the Church and in each of us. Recognizing this and opening, ourselves personally and as a community, to deconstruct them implies setting out on a path of transformation or conversion. As a spiritual path, intercultural life and mission is not so much a goal but rather a search and a process. There are no recipes, nor are there quick solutions to the conflicts that it entails. Rather, interculturality challenges us to live with the paradoxes and the gray zones of the liminal spaces that open us to transformation and growth. This is precisely why intercultural life has the fragility and power of a “sign.”

3. The Fragility and Power to Become a Sign

Signs give us clues, call our attention and point us to something that goes beyond themselves. They are concrete, they are temporary, and they must be correctly interpreted and decoded. Now, for all these reasons, signs are fragile and limited... but they also have an extraordinary symbolic power that can capture our imagination and connect us with the transcendent, with the unseen values, the meaning of life, utopia, hope, and faith.

In this sense, the contribution that the consecrated life can make to the reflection and praxis of interculturality in today’s world is unique and urgently needed. In fact, interculturality, devoid of its symbolic potential and its horizon of a Project that transcends it (the Project of the Kingdom), runs the risk of becoming a new colonialism, a new form of manipulation in the hands of the most powerful of the day. It can be used as an instrument in the service of the logic of an economic and political system that is inherently exclusive and imposes itself without measuring costs or consequences for the most vulnerable, broken, and humiliated cultures of millions of people who are “crying out” to survive.

On the contrary, interculturality, as a spiritual path, can give us and the world a totally different alternative. Today, religious life, immersed as it is in an increasingly globalized world, is called to respond to the signs of the times, by becoming a cross-cultural and intercultural sign of the radically inclusive and egalitarian Project of the Kingdom of God:

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26–28)

This was the founding and revolutionary experience of the first communities and of the first disciples of Jesus! The radical and egalitarian inclusiveness of Jesus' proclamation and praxis was the characteristic identity of the first communities that gradually separated them from Judaism. However, this path was and remains a path of progress and setbacks made of key moments of personal and communitarian conversion. Let us remember, as one of the paradigmatic cases, for example, Peter's "conversion" in the text known as the "Conversion of Cornelius" (Acts 10:1–48). In this extraordinary account, preceded by the vision of the cloth in which Peter is "challenged" by God to eat animals that, for him, are culturally and religiously impure, he ends up breaking a whole series of taboos (receiving and lodging pagans, eating and fraternizing with them, entering their home and baptizing people who have not been previously circumcised) to state, to their total amazement and awe, the fact—which he himself had just grasped—that God shows no partiality:

³⁴ Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵ but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34–35)

In Jesus himself we can trace his personal "conversion" from ethnocentrism, which he humanly shared with us, in his encounter with the Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician woman where Jesus lets himself be challenged and interpellated by her until he accepts to abandon a first, clearly excluding position. In this account, we see how Jesus lets her teach him that the Good News of God and of the Kingdom that he came to inaugurate was not limited only to the people of Israel (cf Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30).

The good news of the Spirit is that the historical conjuncture in which we find ourselves today invites us to assume the multiculturalism of our communities, societies, and pastoral services as a possibility for conversion and transformation instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved. It is not and will not be easy; it will not give us the security and stability that we have lost and long for. There are no recipes to ensure success. However, if interculturality, as a radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, captures our imagination, it will have the extraordinary power to make our communities into the sign that today's divided, fragmented, and conflictual world needs and is calling for.

Let us imagine how our charisms can be re-founded through the encounter with the values of other cultures. Let us perceive the multifaceted wealth that they would acquire. Yet, this Easter will not come without a cross. Giving a real place to the intercultural implies "letting go" of that for which we, as an institution, have perhaps given our life and our passion for many years, in order to make room for the newness that is emerging. The "E" culture is the fruit of a process of synergy, where the result is greater than the simple sum of the parts.

4. The Urgency of an Intentional Choice Based on Prophecy and for Hope

Like any vocational process of call and conversion, interculturality is not only destined to our personal and/or communitarian growth, which only leads us to seek a more peaceful, comfortable, and tolerant life. Today, intercultural life and mission will become a sign of prophetic hope, if they are constructed as a new alternative lifestyle. The re-foundation of religious life today is impossible without interculturality as a sign of the times of the contemporary world.

Because humanity has become so scandalously divided and conflictual, we (individually and corporately) must make a choice. Either we prefer to continue sinning—through exclusion, separation, and the maintenance of limits—, daily eating and drinking our own trials... or we resolve to accept, today, God’s radical option for humanity and, with His help and our firmness, change our lives. There is no third way. Both, the future of humanity and the Church depend on this. (Anthony Gittins)

Intercultural life as an intentional option for religious communities that cross borders and open up to the “different,” deconstructing the “pretended” and anti-evangelical superiority of some over others, by becoming a “workshop” where, through life itself, different relationships between cultures are tested: relationships of service characterized by equality and not domination, mutual empowerment without hierarchies that belittle or stifle life, dialogue and not assimilation, encounter and not colonization, inculturation and inter- culture.

Yet, embracing interculturality based on the Project of the Kingdom is not just an intra- community exercise. The true fruitfulness of this praxis, which is daily at stake in the ad- intra life, is the potential prophetic impact that will turn it into hope for today’s world. Interculturality will be a sign of prophetic hope for humanity, if our own experience of living together, valuing and giving a mutually transforming place to “difference,” with the doors opening inwards, puts us on the path to go out to meet those who are different, marginalized, invisible, and exploited today.

Only those who have gone through the personal conversion from ethnocentrism to intercultural sensitivity will have eyes to see and care about the suffering of those who are invisible and excluded from the contemporary world. As in the parable of the “Good Samaritan,” only the “foreigner,” from whom nothing was expected, was the first to be able to see and then help the man lying on the roadside, renewing his hope and denouncing— implicitly and prophetically—the blindness of the Levite and the priest who had passed by... (cf Lk 10, 25-37).

We, too, if we let ourselves be challenged and enriched by the “foreign” and culturally “different” gaze, we will allow the re-foundation of our charisms, broadening the vision of our founders in a way that we cannot even perceive today. This is not an easy path nor will it be free of challenges, but if we respond to the signs of the times, confident that the Spirit is at work, then we can announce the good news of interculturality and denounce everything that denies it, with the strength and the richness of the radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated.

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Possible activity

What We Want You to Hear

Objective:

To assist listening between groups about their experiences and to promote intercultural sensitivity.

Procedure:

Each cultural groups reflects as a group on these questions:

- What do you want everybody in the others groups to hear about your experiences as a Filipino, Korean, Irish, Aotearoa/New Zealander? (It would be helpful to illustrate your points with examples that actually happened in the group or elsewhere)
- Is there anything you would like everybody in other groups to promise never again to do or say to you as Fijians, Australians etc.
- What things do you like in the other groups that you would like to see them continue doing?
- What kind of things would you like the other group to start doing that could be supportive of you?

The groups take time to answer these questions separately and to appoint a spokesperson. Then each group shares its reflections through its spokesperson in plenary session.

For Reflection

MINORITY

I was born a foreigner.

I carried on from there to become a foreigner everywhere

I went, even in the place planted with my relatives,
six-foot tubers sprouting roots, their fingers and faces pushing up
new shoots of maize and sugar cane.

All kinds of places and groups of people who have an admirable
history would, almost certainly, distance themselves from me.

I don't fit, like a clumsily-translated poem;
like food cooked in milk of coconut where you expected ghee or cream,
the unexpected aftertaste of cardamom or neem.

There's always that point where the language flips into an unfamiliar taste;
where words tumble over a cunning tripwire on the tongue;
where the frame slips, the reception of an image
not quite tuned, ghost-outlined, that signals, in their midst, an alien.

And so I scratch, scratch through the night, at this growing scab on black on white.

Everyone has the right to infiltrate a piece of paper.

A page doesn't fight back.

And, who knows, these lines may scratch their way into your head –

through all the chatter of community,

family, clattering spoons, children being fed –

immigrate into your bed, squat in your home, and in a corner, eat your bread,

until, one day, you meet the stranger sidling down your street,

realise you know the face simplified to bone,

look into its outcast eyes and recognise it as your own.

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