



Formation in Interculturality for Formators and Leaders of Female Consecrated Life

Challenges and Good Practices

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Abstract

The study of culture and the understanding of interculturality are needed by women formators, leaders and superiors of communities of consecrated life for women. At UISG, from local to global levels, we have seen the need for leaders and formators to know the dynamics of culture and the call to become intercultural in order to build communion and witness to the prophetic nature of consecrated life. This short essay indicates the paths followed and the challenges still to be met.

Keywords

Formation – Interculturality – Consecrated life – Leaders

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Introduction

I am very pleased to participate in today's panel to share experiences of formation in interculturality. Obviously, I will be focusing on female religious life, from my experience within the *Unione Internazionale delle Superiore Generali* (UISG) where we have almost 2,000 leaders of female congregations responsible for 600,000 sisters worldwide. In the past decades, the leadership and membership of religious congregations has become increasingly multicultural. Donald S. McGavran refers to «the flourishing of luxurious human diversity» worldwide and this is also true within religious communities. Some speak about this phenomenon as «a bewildering diversity»¹ and Sr. Marie Chin RSM refers to «the labyrinth of cultures in religious life»².

The recent document from the Dicastery for Consecrated Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins*, at n. 7 notes that:

«Many religious congregations, especially female congregations, have passed from almost entirely monocultural contexts to the challenge of multiculturalism. International communities were established that for some institutes represented the first courageous experience in leaving their geographic and cultural boundaries»³.

However just because sisters live in multicultural contexts does not necessarily equip them to negotiate multiple cultures and become intercultural. There are many challenges in learning to live interculturality but we can learn from good practice.

1

Understanding culture and intercultural dynamics

It takes study, experience, good honest conversations, reflection and time to understand culture and intercultural dynamics; it is a complex learning process – a journey of awareness and of deepening. The study of culture and an understanding of interculturality is necessary on the part of formators and leaders. It should also be part of initial and ongoing formation. Understanding culture is like peeling an onion, as layer after layer unfolds. Culture has been compared to the air we breathe, which we only notice when it is absent. It is the «set of norms according to which things are run or simply “are” in a particular society or country, and to which members of the society or group adhere in values, attitudes, interpretations and behaviors»⁴. Cultural identity is an important part of a person's overall identity. To understand and respect another person's culture is to affirm that person's identity and acknowledge her/his dignity.

At UISG from local to global levels we have seen the need for leaders and formators to learn about dynamics of culture and the call to become intercultural in order to build communion and to witness the prophetic nature of consecrated life. Sometimes in religious life statements are made such as «well this doesn't apply to our province – we are all from the same culture». Yet we have largely ignored local sub-cultures or allowed the congregational culture to obscure the fact that members come from many different rich cultural backgrounds. The congregational culture has masked instead of celebrated difference.

In recent years female religious congregations have undertaken “cultural audits” to determine to what extent sisters feel respected at the level of their cultural identity. This type of exercise – asking participants to respond anonymously to a questionnaire – provides an opportunity for honest sharing in a safe environment about cultural differences and their impact. In one such safe environment sisters shared the following experiences. One person said: «I feel that I have tasted a rich banquet hosted by members of the global community (...) and I will never be the same again». Some spoke of the experience, as an opportunity for personal transformation; of the chal-

lenge of becoming a learner and being led like a child; of uncovering one's own prejudice and a tendency to stereotype others; many spoke their new appreciation of the cultures in which they were living and ministering.

Then there were other voices. A sister from an immigrant family said: «While most of the community are warm and welcoming, some of them are very hard to accept me in the way of my English speaking and culture. I try very hard to speak like them but my tongue couldn't do it well». An African sister living in a predominantly European community said: «When others say *I don't see colour* while the remark is well meaning I don't find it helpful as colour is an essential part of who I am». Another sister said «living in an inter-tribal, inter-racial community is hard, you can't identify the contents until you scoop into the pot and taste them».

In other cultural audits members have spoken of the experience of the hurt caused by overt or covert prejudice, generalizations, wounding remarks, reciprocal misunderstandings. Despite these experiences conversations rarely take place around differences and issues such as racism is never addressed openly. Some practice a double approach: «In the presence of members from the "other" culture, we emphasize the positive... but when we are with those of our own culture, it is all the negatives (about the other culture) that emerge». The congregation who undertook these audits were subsequently able to reflect on the experiences shared and to ask themselves individually/communally what needed to change, what conversion was needed so that all sisters felt truly "at home".

The missiologist Aylward Shorter invites us to begin our intercultural learning by first believing «...in the positive character of other cultures» and then actively nurturing «the desire to be enriched by them». He says «(we) must welcome those of other cultures and give them (our) unreserved trust»⁵. Formators and leaders and members in congregations must be prepared to learn not only the spoken language of the other, but also come to know the different cultural signs and symbols which transmit meaning, as we know a shake of the head doesn't mean the same thing in all cultures and silence carries different levels of significance! In my experience many misunderstandings arise in multicultural communities because there is a lack of basic knowledge to understand and interpret the communication or behavior of a person from another culture. Cultural knowledge *involves understanding the norms and communication rules of other cultures* so that the behavior of people from another culture can be interpreted accurately. Various studies indicate that most cultural awareness happens on a trial-and-error basis and that the inaccurate knowledge gleaned can often have negative results.

Different frameworks exist which draw on the work of cultural anthropologists and intercultural specialists to help us understand culture and cultural dynamics. Here is one such framework with 9 lens:

1. *Who Are We? High and Low Context Cultures.*
2. *Who am I? Ego-centric and Socio-centric Cultures.*
3. *Who Is In Charge? High and Low Power Distance Cultures.*
4. *How We Deal with Uncertainty? High or Low Uncertainty Avoidance.*
5. *Doing or Being. Being or Doing Cultures.*
6. *Time Orientation: Long or Short Term Orientation.*
7. *Time Orientation: Linear or Circular.*
8. *Space Orientation: Close or Distant.*
9. *Formation Learning Cultures.*

Lens number one highlights the role that *context* plays in communication between people from different cultures –elements such as body language, silence, facial expression, formality, have difference levels of importance in different cultures. Lens number two focusses on how people define themselves and their relationship with

others – we often speak about “*I*” cultures and “*We*” cultures indicating whether the individual or the group has primacy within the culture. Lens number three highlights *how power and leadership* are distributed in cultures – whether people feel equal or unequal. Lens four focuses on a person’s degree of comfort in dealing with *uncertain or unknown situations*. Lens five notes a culture’s propensity to put more emphasis on *being or doing*. Lens six and seven highlight the different ways that *time* functions in a culture, emphasis on the short-term or long-term. And whether time seen as “clock time” to be measured incrementally or seen as “abundant time” and finally lens number eight looks at the way people orient themselves in *space* in relation to others. Finally, the 9th lens reminds us that within religious life sisters have been shaped by *different formation_cultures* that prevailed at different times. These formation cultures presented different images of God, understanding of Church, ways of praying etc. Studying these lenses helps sisters to understand culture and to grow in the ability to become intercultural.

2

The Challenge to Go Beyond

Becoming intercultural calls members of religious congregations to go beyond mere understanding and respecting other cultures; it is to allow themselves to be transformed by other cultures. Anthony Gittins presents intercultural living as a «theological or faith based-based undertaking»⁶. It is not just about living side by side, under the same roof as others... it requires the transformation or conversion of all involved⁷. It is not easy he says and demands «graciousness, diplomacy, compromise, mutual respect, serious dialogue and the development of a common and sustained vision»⁸. Anthony Pernia former Superior General of the SVD congregation said the following: «Interculturality encourages and promotes people from different cultures to interact with each other and therefore mutually enrich and transform each other, the individual and the community as a whole»⁹. He then identifies 3 characteristics of a genuine intercultural community:

- a. *Recognition of other cultures* – allowing minority cultures to be visible in the community.
- b. *Respect for cultural difference* – avoiding any attempt to subsume the minority cultures into the majority cultures.
- c. *Promoting a healthy interaction between cultures* – seeking to create a climate whereby each culture allows itself to be transformed or enriched by the other culture¹⁰.

For Pernia, interculturality can therefore be described as «mutual multi-directional exchange and enrichment»¹¹. We can only really “enter” into another culture when we have first “exited” from our own culture. We have to break away from the ethnocentrism that binds us to our first culture. We have to constantly check with whose ears are we listening and with whose eyes are we hearing? We need to alter the cultural lens through which we see and hear others because communication must flow out from a genuine commitment to laying down our life for others.

3

A Spirituality to Sustain an Intercultural Journey

The process of acquiring an intercultural identity is a process of transformation. The Asian theologian Peter C. Phan says that the development of an intercultural identity is grounded in what he calls to the state of “*marginality*”. This occurs when a person is able to stand poised between two different worlds while often experiencing an

acute sense of displacement, loneliness, self-doubt, isolation, and restlessness. According to Phan *marginality* is a state of being able to live in what he calls the «betwixt and between»¹². We can have this kind of experience when living in a political, social, cultural or linguistic context that is not our own. It is also the common experience of any person or group who lives at the edge – at a periphery, a border or a boundary.

Sacred Scripture provide multiple examples of what it means to be transformed by entering into the culture of another: from the lives of Abraham and Sarah, Ruth and Naomi and in the life of Jesus and the experiences of the early Church. Abraham and Sarah are seen as model immigrants who demonstrate «how to live at peace with the host peoples of the land and share ownership of the land»¹³. They show deep respect for the people and for local practices and traditions. Abraham always sees himself as a “ger” or resident alien and he never ceases to see himself as a stranger in a land of promise (*Gn 23, 4*) and always respects the law of the land. The story of Ruth and Naomi is another wonderful parable of the transformation involved in becoming intercultural. We remember the words of Ruth to Naomi as they leave Moab and return to Judah “Do not ask me to abandon you or forsake you” she says. «Wherever you go I shall go. Wherever you live, I will live. Your people shall be my people and your God will be my God too»¹⁴.

Conclusion

Finally our growth as intercultural persons can be sustained by the example of Christ who was truly the marginal person par excellence. St. Paul tells us that within his godhead Jesus moved to a new state of being: «...being in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet»¹⁵.

Within his society, Jesus was a stranger even to his own people. The letter to the Hebrews expresses this state of being as follows: «Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. Let us go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured»¹⁶.

The example of Jesus' life is calling each of us, to go outside the camp as he did to be among those who are different, to meet strangers and foreigners. Jesus was the marginal person who broke down all barriers between Jew and Gentile, between male and female, between slave and free. He was the reconciler who could move between two or more worlds and also within each world. He was the one who could stand in the breach.

During these past years the UISG in collaboration with members of the Divine Word Congregation and their sister congregation the Sister Servants of the Holy Spirit have offered in person and online training programs to teams of 4-5 persons including formators and leaders from almost 120 congregations. By the end of the 8 or 10 day sessions the congregational teams have developed a congregational plan. The content of the program includes the elements that I have outlined in this paper and many more.

Becoming intercultural required undertaking a faith-filled journey to become a person, who respects all cultures; a person who can appreciate difference and is ultimately able to negotiate different worlds and to be transformed by them. In conclusion may we learn more about and constantly celebrate the rich and luxurious diversity of cultures that we find within our communities and places of ministry? In the words of the Irish poet John O' Donoghue may we grow in the realization that: «... our friends were once strangers. Somehow at a particular time they came from the distance into our lives. Their arrival seemed so accidental and contingent. Now our life is unimaginable without them»¹⁷.



Endnotes

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