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**Interculturality and Internationality:**
*a utopia or a constructive tension for a Franciscan Missiology?*
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Introduction: The theme of this morning’s symposium is to attempt an answer to this question. The first step, which falls to me to perform, is to describe the meaning of the terms involved in the question and their implication for evangelisation for us as a fraternity according to the pattern of St. Francis of Assisi. It becomes increasingly clear that our understanding of “international” and “intercultural” today has undergone many changes from earlier interpretations of the same. Since time is of the essence, let me begin.

A. What is culture?

Pope John Paul II in his Message for the World Day of Peace (1st January 2001), defined culture in this way: “Culture is a form of man’s self-expression in his journey through history, on the level of both individual and social groups (n.4).” He goes on to say that “people are marked by culture whose very air they breathe through the family and the social groups around them, through education and the most varied influences of their environment, through the very relationship they have with the place in which they live (n.5).” There is, in fact, no human being who is not rooted in some culture. To offer still another definition:

“A culture is a way in which a group of people live, think, feel, organise themselves, celebrate and share life (Menamparampil, 2002, p. 15)”

Culture is, therefore, an integral part of each person’s identity—an aspect to be explored, to be valued, to be safeguarded. Gregory Sheridan (1999), for example, in his book Asian Values—Western Dreams, lists several values traditionally characteristic of Asian cultures, especially of those influenced by Confucius and his disciples: namely, “a stress on authority, filial piety, harmony within the home and within society (p. 9).” A similar examination of other cultures would give a somewhat different listing according to the accent given to certain human values as a result of the cultural evolution of each people through history. Aylward Shorter (1998) does his study with regard to African values; Thomas Menamparampil, with those of India. At the same time, no cultural expression exhausts the human experience; no culture is autonomous and self-sufficient. Finally, no cultural expression can completely “incarnate” the Gospel. As a result, each culture has its limitations, its need to be in dialogue with other cultures in order to broaden its outlook and stretch its understanding. We as Christians realise that every culture must likewise be open to the transforming power of the Word of God.

Each culture, therefore, needs to examine itself in relation to the values it holds dear, their relation to values of other peoples and cultures and their effective compatibility with the values of the Gospel. Only in this way, can the members enter more meaningfully into a compassionate relationship with members of diverse cultures, with the ultimate objective of realising together the “kingdom of justice, love and peace” which Jesus preached and inaugurated by His life, death and
resurrection. In a word, each culture, as each individual person, remains in constant need of conversion and growth. One can truthfully speak about the ongoing formation not only of individuals but also of the cultures to which they belong.

It is only with this humble awareness of the limitations of each culture that one can realistically hope for an interculturality which goes beyond the hegemony of the majority or the mere juxtaposition of peoples within a certain geographic boundary, or of a heterogeneous group of religious living under the same roof.

B. What is interculturality?

Interculturality, as it is increasingly understood, involves a challenging and probably never-ending process of development through interaction between members of different cultural groups. It certainly means more than mere “living in peace” with one another, “equal but separate.” It cannot be reduced to some token cultural interaction, e.g., foods, music, and similar folkloric expressions. Inculturality cannot be imposed by creating an artificial unity which suffocates all differences. Denial of the existence of differences does not foster unity; neither does defensive separatism. In effect, interculturality comes as the result of the integration of contributions from various cultural expression to form something NEW without diminishing the value of each cultural component.

Mark Williams (2001), in a book which originated as an attempt to understand racial differences in the United States, comes up with ten lenses, i.e., perspectives, with which one can approach the issue of diversity, esp. cultural diversity (cf. Appendix A). His listing could certainly provide the basis for an honest self-examination with regard to our approach to people of other cultures, our Christian training and Franciscan formation notwithstanding. The point of departure for true interculturality involves an awareness of my own culture and its limits while striving to reduce the prejudices and blind-spots which affect my way of viewing and interacting with members of other cultures. Menampampil (p.15) states it this way: one needs “to work hard to understand others, delve into the meaning of their symbolisms, learn to recognise and respect their value-systems, and participate intelligently in their celebrations.”

Moving beyond one’s cultural limits begins with an attitude of listening to one another. Listening takes time and effort; judgments needs to be suspended; willingness to risk is involved. Most of all trust must be created and maintained if cross-cultural understanding is to take place (cf. Armstrong, 2004). McLean (1991) highlights two virtues, already mentioned in the writings of Aristotle, as critical to this process: prudence (phronesis) and sagacity (sunesis). While prudence is taken to mean a sense of right judgment in evaluating one’s own and others’ culture, sagacity permits one to weigh these cultural values in the light of their impact on other cultural expressions. This balance between self-interest and others’ interests seems to be at heart of interculturality, calling forth a generosity and self-emptying which such a dual attitude implies.

Pope John Paul II, in the previously cited message for the World Day of Peace, speaks of transcendent values which are found in the hearts of all people: solidarity based on justice, the yearning for peace, the lively sense of the value of life throughout all its stages and in all its manifestations, education toward an integral humanism, the challenging call to forgiveness and reconciliation, the healing of memories. These are the motivators already on a human level in our pursuit of universal brotherhood. “The authenticity of each human culture, the soundness of its underlying ethos, and hence the validity of its moral bearing, can be measured to an extent by its commitment to the human cause and by its capacity to promote human dignity at every level and in
very circumstance (n.8).” The ultimate goal of human longing is to arrive at a civilisation of love and peace.

As disciples of Jesus and as followers of Francis of Assisi, we have additional incentives to pursue interculturality until Jesus’ prayer at the Last Supper is finally realised: that all may be One. Oftentimes, the same Holy Father writes about the “spirituality of communion” which needs to accompany and motivate our efforts in becoming agents of evangelisation through our intercultural fraternities. In his Novo Millennio Ineunte, Pope John Paul II describes clearly his understanding of “communion”. Basing the notion of communion solidly in the doctrine of the Trinity, the Pope sees the need to view our sisters and brothers with the eyes of faith, recognising them as members of the same Mystical Body of Christ. Furthermore, the spirituality of communion implies the capacity to recognize, in faith, what is positive in each brother and sister not only as a gift from God for them but likewise as a “gift for me”. Finally (n.43), Pope John Paul II invites us to make room for our brothers and sisters, resisting selfish temptations motivated by greed, competition, careerism, distrust and jealously.

In a similar fashion, St. Francis called his early followers and calls us today to unite together to form the ideal Friar Minor. Both the early and the later Rule give us much to reflect on in terms of what attitudes Francis expects of us toward one another and toward those outside the community, including great sinners and political enemies. Chapter XVI of the Early Rule is the classic text to help us understand how we are to evangelise as Franciscans, primarily through the testimony of our fraternity. In some ways we can speak of the early friars as forming a cross-cultural community, at first not so much with friars of different nations but of friars of different social classes, levels of education and political outlook.

C. What is involved in developing interculturality, also on an international level?

The presence of multiple cultures has become a increasingly common phenomenon in many countries in the world as a result of migration, many times associated with political or social upheaval. Other times interculturality begins with a choice on the part of some, e.g. a religious community, to create an international community for the purpose of creating an international fraternity as the basis of mission. In both instances, similar dynamics are involved, some of which have already been specified in the previous paragraph.

The most effective context for cultural mutuality comes through the art of dialogue. Pope Paul VI (1964) already pointed out some indispensable characteristics of those who enter into authentic dialogue: clearness, meekness, trust and pedagogical prudence. By these terms he means that dialogue presupposes comprehensibility, requiring the proper and precise use of words and expressions to communicate one’s thought. Dialogue is not proud. It “proposes”, not imposes. It is never offensive, but always charitable and respectful in its approach. True dialogue seeks to eliminate self-interest (insofar as this is possible) to order to foster confidence and even friendship among those engaged in the dialogue, with a sensitivity to their diverse background and mentality. A more than superficial knowledge of another language and the experience of some level immersion in a diverse culture could certainly facilitate the dialogical process.

The globalised world in which we live, and about which much more can and perhaps should be said, offers both a help and a hindrance to true interculturality. On the one hand, facility in communication and transportation, the availability of a world-wide marketplace and the general democratisation of the world’s societies seem to favour a greater sense of oneness within the human
family. At the same time, however, this same process of globalisation favours the entrepreneur, one who is willing and able to enter and persevere in the sometimes frantic economic race, often having no time to consider what he may be losing in personal rootedness and social traditions both of which remain critically important to one’s personal and social identity. *One can wander far, but one still needs a home.* Thomas Friedman (2000) speaks of the need for both the LEXUS (sign of globalisation) and the OLIVE TREE (sign of local rootedness). As a reaction, sometimes even an unconscious one, to the rapid pace and unnerving dimensions of globalisation, a given culture can close in upon itself or assume a negative, if not aggressive, attitude toward the overpowering influence of these global processes, sometimes identified with one culture or one nation.

In terms of a religious community, such as our own, Arbuckle (1995) reminds us in his article of how difficult this can be in the concrete, daily conditions of community life where REAL interculturality is expected to be lived. To be specific, an intercultural community is one in which each member feels “at home” in all senses of the word, and not merely a guest, even if a privileged one. Such togetherness moves beyond tolerance and courteous respect to enter into the nitty-gritty of human interactions, which can and often do involve some level of conflict. There are authors who believe that just as an individual grows only through struggles and difficulties, so also does a community, particularly an intercultural/international one. *It is advisable that some skills in conflict management be taught as part of the formation program throughout the Order.*

Moving beyond the local level (which always remains the essential building block), Catherine Harmer (1993) enumerates some structural changes which also need to take place if interculturality is to become a reality on the international or Order-level:

1. sufficient autonomy of the various geographical/cultural entities
2. local leadership or preparation of local leaders in each of these
3. congregation-level committees organised to reflect the cultural composition of the congregation
4. similarly with regard to the composition of general chapters
5. in the use of multiple languages
6. and in the make-up of central administration
7. as the impact of the founding culture recedes into the background.

What seems to be important on the practical level is to have a sufficient number of “bridge-persons” who are adequately conversant in more than one language and have had extended experience in more than one culture. They can be of great service as mediators in this process of the level of Conference and on the level of the Order as a whole. *In today’s world it seems appropriate that the Order encourage the preparation of a suitable number of friars capable of exercising this role at the level of Conference and Order.*

**Conclusion:** At the conclusion of this brief overview of some of the variables involved in interculturality, I believe you can intuit my answer to the question posed at the beginning of this paper. I believe intercultural and truly international communities are both theoretically and practically possible and in fact are a source of incentive for us to grow as human persons, as disciples of Jesus and as followers of St. Francis of Assisi. Such communities serve likewise as launching pads for evangelisation, forging links in increasing layers of concentric circle uniting all men and women with one another and with the Lord Who stands at the Centre of all.

I am sure it should be also clear that the process is not an easy one and perfection lies perhaps beyond our human reach in this world. I have tried to present some modalities of what
interculturality implies. I am sure our other speakers will develop approaches which will affirm and complement, correct and challenge the points I have tried to make in my paper. I look forward to a lively interchange likewise among all the participants at this Congress.

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Select Bibliography


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