

VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT IN AN INTERCULTURAL WORLD

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Introduction

The Preparatory document for the upcoming Synod on *Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*, in describing the situation of “young people in today’s world” notes:

It should not be overlooked that many societies are increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious... The situation can lead to uncertainty and the temptation of relativism, but, at the same time, can provide for increased possibilities for fruitful dialogue and mutual enrichment. From the vantage point of faith, the situation is seen as a sign of our times, requiring greater listening, respect and dialogue...from a certain point of view, young people, because of globalization, tend to be more homogeneous in all parts of the world. Nevertheless, they remain in their local surroundings and their unique cultural and institutional settings, which have repercussions in the process of socializing and forming a personal identity... The challenge of multi-culturalism is present in a special way in the world of young people... ¹

/Clearly, we live in a multicultural world due to migration and globalization, and our young people have been shaped by it; but are they able to discern God’s will in that world? How? Are they prepared and able to both live in that world and engage in that world? /

How do we discern if a candidate has the capacity to live and work interculturally, and how do we help them to grow in intercultural competence? Let us look at the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed in all areas or “pillars” of what we often call “integral formation.” ²

1. Intellectual Formation / Academic studies

Anthropology, ethnology, and sociology are important disciplines for understanding culture and understanding oneself as a cultural being. An intellectual framework, giving one the language and concepts to understand and analyze culture itself, helps make further development in intercultural competence possible. An essential aspect is the understanding of one's own culture and how it shapes one's own worldview and behavior. Only when I grasp the role of culture in my own life, can I move beyond an ethnocentrism that limits me to my own culture's vision of human life, morality, and faith. Obviously, this ability is essential for anyone undertaking intercultural work. Given the reality that so many contexts are multicultural and impacted by migrations of people, there is also the need to have the intellectual tools to analyze the dynamics of any cultural group as well as the intercultural encounters between groups.

The Synod Preparatory document, following *Evangelii gaudium* 51, describes three moments of discernment as *recognizing*, *interpreting*, and *choosing*. After *recognizing* how life (including one's experience in another culture or with people of different cultures) affects oneself, one has to *interpret* "what the Spirit is calling the person to do through what the Spirit stirs up in each one... A person needs to be capable of taking into consideration the effects of social and psychological conditioning, which even requires *the involvement of one's intellectual faculties*, without falling into the trap of constructing abstract theories about what would be good or nice to do."³ One has to know how he/she is conditioned by one's culture, and an intellectual understanding of how culture works is necessary for such discernment.

2. Human Formation / Personal Growth / Affective Maturity

In addition to conceptual knowledge, an attitude of openness is needed to experience a conversion not only of the mind but also of the heart. Facing one's own prejudices, racism, or ethnocentrism can be a traumatic and emotional experience. Growing in self-awareness of how one may react negatively to other cultural values and worldviews can be a painful process of change. A candidate's ability to face these intensely personal issues is a key element of discernment for intercultural life and work. How do I deal with those who are "other"?

Those discerning or in a formation program must be firmly but gently invited to examine their own biases and insensitivities while developing awareness of themselves as cultural beings. They may experience anxiety about truly engaging in other cultures, as it may threaten their own self-identity. It may be challenging to move beyond this apprehension, to move out of their own personal comfort zones. Vocation directors and formators can gently and gradually encourage them to be reflective of culture and invite them to enter into cultural dialogue. They must find an atmosphere of openness and trust in their community in order to have the "safe space" within which they are invited to experience such a conversion.

Growth in human and emotional maturity fosters deeper attitudes of patience, openness, dialogue, respect, humility, and tolerance – precisely those qualities needed for intercultural competence. Fernando Ortiz and Gerard McGlone, studying the dynamics of intercultural competence needed for church ministry in the USA, note: “Because culture embodies differences, those in formation become comfortable with ambiguity and the capacity to be open and respectful to the perspectives of others. With this openness comes the opportunity to be immersed in other cultures, while being flexible and adaptable with one’s identity.”⁴ Emotional maturity is needed in order to break free of a rigid mono-cultural or ethnocentric view of the world, enabling one to live interculturally. Ortiz and McGlone go on to conclude that intercultural competency is “positively correlated with emotional intelligence and affective maturity... The development of intercultural competencies is also positively correlated with intellectual curiosity, cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity.”⁵ The lack of such qualities, or the inability to grow in these qualities, would be an important component in discerning one’s vocational call to engage in an intercultural world.

Pope Francis suggests that flexibility and a tolerance for ambiguity are essential for a spirit of discernment. He says, “Discernment is the key element: the capacity for discernment. I note the absence of discernment in the formation of priests. We run the risk of getting used to *white or black*, to that which is legal. We are rather closed, in general, to discernment.”⁶ And speaking to the USG just last year, he noted that “in formation we are used to formulas, to black and white, but not to the gray areas of life. And what counts is life, not the formulas. We need to grow in discernment. The logic of black and white can bring casuistic abstraction. Instead, discernment means going beyond the gray of life according to the will of God...”⁷

Our congregations have all emphasized the importance of understanding sexuality in formation, as an essential part of an integral approach to psychological and emotional maturity. In the context of interculturality, an understanding of how culture shapes one’s view of sexuality and sexual behavior is important. I must understand and be willing to explore how culture shapes my affective and attitudinal approach to sexual and inter-gender definitions and behavior.

While the modeling and mentoring of vocation directors and formators of intercultural religious are essential elements, discernment and formation might need other resource persons to help identify and nurture these qualities in candidates – through counseling, workshops, group work, and spiritual direction.

3. Spiritual Formation

Those discerning an intercultural religious vocation will need to develop a spirituality that will ground and be the source of true engagement with those of other cultures. Roger Schroeder states that “we need to develop a spirituality of humility and openness so we can do mission with an attitude and approach of humble listening.”⁸ This involves being open to the on-going process of conversion

from ethnocentrism; Schroeder uses St. Peter's conversion toward the Gentiles with Cornelius, and the Council of Jerusalem itself as examples. We need an openness to the presence of the divine in the "other." As Anthony Gittins states, "Encounters with other people are encounters with other, and previously unrecognized, faces of God, the purpose of which is to glorify God precisely by continuing the mission of Jesus."⁹

The same attitudes of openness, dialogue, respect, humility, and tolerance must be present in order to learn from and appreciate the spirituality of those from another culture. In addition to simply learning about the spirituality of others (whether in a candidate's home parish, a formation community, in the neighborhood, or while engaged in an internship in another cultural context), participating in the spiritual exercises, prayer, and rituals of other cultures gives one the capacity to grow in one's own spirituality by broadening the horizons of how one experiences the sacred.

A vocation for intercultural life and mission today demands growth in flexibility, while not being wishy-washy; an openness, while not being rootless; faithfulness, but not intolerance; comfort with ambiguity, but not embracing total relativism. A deep spirituality is essential in order to live such a "balancing act" in peace and in joy!

4. Communal Formation – Living Interculturality

Our reality is that increasingly we have aspirancy and formation communities that are multicultural – either because of the practical demands to consolidate formation programs worldwide, or by intentional choice. A multicultural community can be a laboratory for growth in intercultural competence. However, we have noted that the mere fact of being multicultural does not automatically guarantee the development of a truly intercultural community, nor does it automatically imbue its members with the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and skills needed for interculturality. Explicit attention must be given to exploiting the riches of a multicultural community in order for it to be a school of intercultural learning.

While inviting each cultural group represented in a formation community to organize community celebrations of particular cultural feasts is an important way of affirming and cherishing the cultures represented, these alone are not enough. Too often, multicultural communities remain on the surface level of food, costume, and a few words of language – the tip of the cultural iceberg. The deeper elements of culture – especially those that create tension and conflict in the community – are never dealt with. Deepening the conversation serves as a training ground for the members' engagement with other cultures. Sharing about one another's cultural background certainly happens in informal conversation in the dining or recreation room, but a more systematized way of having each member of the formation community share about their cultures is helpful. One can't become an expert in all the cultures that might be represented in a community, but one can grow in understanding cultural dynamics that impact communication,

decision making, exerting leadership, etc.

While sharing a common charism, the members of an international congregation bring diverse experiences of church and religious life, shaped by the many cultural backgrounds they represent. The assumption that all have exactly the same vision of church, ministry, religious life, and spirituality can lead to misunderstandings, resentments, and conflict. It is important to recognize the diversity of ecclesiologies and lived experience of religious life, and not to assume that the way it is lived out in the host country is the one and only way the congregation's charism should be incarnated.

Every community is incarnate in a particular country and cultural (or multicultural) context. Working towards interculturality, the community both respects and celebrates all the cultures represented, while helping all members to have a deeper inculturation into the host culture(s) in which the community is located. Certainly, the common practice of an international community would be to use the language of the host country or region as the common language. In addition, the style of leadership and authority, decision making processes, and interpersonal communication will be heavily influenced by the host culture's dominant ways. Finding the balance between respecting everyone's unique cultural background, and everyone's need to fully insert themselves into the cultural reality they are physically present in, is a challenge. An intercultural formation community cannot be a place of refuge from "the world" around itself, but rather should enable the formandi to better understand whatever cultural differences are between them and the people they may interact with in their apostolic activities. For many religious congregations, this would include engaging in the unique cultures of the poor, the marginalized, and the immigrant. How they navigate this interaction is important knowledge for discernment.

Given the challenges of engaging in intercultural interaction, there may be a tendency for candidates and formandi (or any community member!) to associate primarily with others of their own or of similar cultural backgrounds. Members of different cultural groups can actually isolate themselves from each other, rather than taking on the difficult process of intercultural engagement. Exclusive cultural isolation may indicate an ethnocentrism which needs to be addressed, or it could lead to excessive cultural isolation in future assignments. On the other hand, there can be a necessary positive affirmation of each cultural group when they come together to celebrate their unique heritage. A good and helpful balance in the community order must be sought. A candidate's behavior in this regard will be useful in discernment.

5. Apostolic/Practical Formation

Perhaps the experience of being part of an intercultural community is the best practical training for engagement in an intercultural world, as the previous section shows. However, there are other specific experiences that can help both the discernment of and formation for such intercultural engagement. Pope John

Paul II's *Vita Consecrata* states:

“...during the period of initial formation, Institutes of Consecrated Life do well to provide practical experiences which are prudently followed by the one responsible for formation, enabling candidates to test, in the context of the local culture, their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative. On the one hand, it is important for consecrated persons gradually to develop a critical judgment, based on the Gospel, regarding the positive and negative values of their own culture and of the culture in which they will eventually work. On the other hand, they must be trained in the difficult art of interior harmony, of the interaction between love of God and love of one's brothers and sisters; they must likewise learn that prayer is the soul of the apostolate, but also that the apostolate animates and inspires prayer.”¹⁰

Many of our congregations include a period of pastoral ministry or other type of internship during initial formation, in line with the apostolic works of their particular charism. If we wish to engage our intercultural world, such an internship should be in an intercultural context. Such a program gives the person the opportunity to apply the intellectual learning of culture in a real-life situation, and further deepens the psychological / emotional strength needed for intercultural life and work.

The role of mentoring is central in order for the person to integrate and assimilate the intercultural experience. Not simply a live-in experience within another culture, the program needs a structure that includes guided reflection on the participant's experience as well as evaluations by both the learner and the mentor. None of the academic studies or growth in emotional maturity can take the place of learning, growing, and changing through the actual experience of interculturality, whether through such an internship or through part-time intercultural ministry during the course of formation.

Knowledge about culture and intercultural dynamics, emotional maturity, and psychological strength are all necessary for intercultural competence. However, they must be placed at the service of building the specific skills that are needed to successfully engage in intercultural mission. Once we acquire intercultural knowledge and have the emotional maturity to achieve a conversion which enables us to be open to and respectful of those from other cultures, we may then work on developing the needed interpersonal skills to interact with, mutually engage with, and work together with those of other cultures.

The skills we need to develop for intercultural mission are many and varied: the ability to empathize with someone of another culture; the ability to tolerate ambiguity; the ability to communicate appropriately and effectively with persons and groups in other cultures; the ability to adapt one's behavior effectively when interacting with those of other cultures; the ability to recognize the source of intercultural conflict and how to deal with it; etc. The goal in developing skills is that such behavior becomes second nature, and one becomes comfortable adapting one's behavior to engage with others effectively.

Beyond the individual skills needed to interact effectively with those of another culture, our increasingly multicultural world (and church) demands that we also develop the skills needed to help groups from different cultures learn to interact, work, and build community together.¹¹ Of course, the individual religious must be competent and comfortable in interculturality to be able to guide a multicultural community towards interculturality or to help resolve a conflict between cultural groups.

6. Formators for Interculturality

We know that vocation directors and formators play a central role in the discernment process. Facing the challenges of appropriating a capacity for intercultural life, formandi need able guides and mentors to help them discern if such a life is indeed their calling. Formators in any context have a complex and difficult task. In addition to insuring that the many elements mentioned already are integrated into the formation process, the formator is charged with personally guiding the candidates to achieve the integral and holistic formation needed for intercultural life. Formators for intercultural life and work need to have the character, personality, and life experience needed to fulfill this difficult role.

Vocation directors and formators must be people who embody the ability to listen to, engage with, and seek understanding of the other. They are models of the kind of dialogical stance needed to engage in intercultural contexts. They are people who are able to learn from their own experiences and from that of others. They approach candidates with attitudes of openness, respect, and love which enables dialogue. Pope Francis, informally addressing the Union of Superiors General in 2013, noted that religious formation today “calls for a different attitude. For example: problems are not solved simply by forbidding doing this or that. Dialogue as well as confrontation is needed... Dialogue must be serious, without fear, sincere.... Formation is a work of art, not a police action. We must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating little monsters. And then these little monsters mold the People of God. This really gives me goose bumps.”¹²

The upcoming Synod’s Preparatory document confirms that these same qualities of openness, respect, and love are needed in all those who accompany young people:

Various research studies show that young people have a need for persons of reference, who are close-by, credible, consistent and honest, in addition to places and occasions for testing their ability to relate to others (both adults and peers) and dealing with their feelings and emotions. Young people look for persons of reference who are able to express empathy and offer them support, encouragement and help in recognizing their limits, but without making them feel they are being judged.¹³

Hence, formators and vocation directors must themselves have good formation, giving them adequate self-awareness, the ability to accompany young people, and

intercultural competence. Formators for intercultural life and work should have had experience of living and working in a different cultural context, which they have successfully integrated into their lives and identity. Not only will such experience enable them to share their own experiences of interculturality with the formandi, but it also sensitizes them to the struggles that the formandi may be experiencing in their own journeys toward intercultural competence.

An intercultural formation community would be best served by an intercultural team of formators. Such a team serves as a model of intercultural engagement for the formandi, showing the real possibility of intercultural collaboration. An additional advantage of having a formation team composed of people of different cultures is that it also offers the formandi the option of talking to a formator who may be more knowledgeable of their own culture than other formators might be. A team is also important for continuity of the formation process (through different stages) and for feedback among the formators themselves. A team can also include bi-cultural advisors, who know both the culture of the formandi and the formator. If candidates and formandi come from multiple cultural backgrounds, no single formator can become truly "expert" in each of the cultures represented, and a knowledgeable helper can be invaluable in the discernment process.

Conclusion: Good Will and Hard Work!

Despite all the potential obstacles to discerning a religious vocation to intercultural life and mission, despite the complexities of interculturality, there is still the possibility of growth in our ability to truly engage with the "other." Anthony Gittens asks:

Are there any true intercultural communities? Yes, certainly in practice there are, wherever people are intentional about living as a community united in their differences and truly respectful of 'the other.' But there could be many more if people believed that intercultural living was not only desirable but also really possible, and if they felt that it was something that could be learned and practiced systematically and effectively. Although goodwill alone is not enough, it is an important prerequisite.¹⁴

If we have the desire, if we have the commitment to work at it, and if we have the goodwill to believe that interculturality is worth the effort, we can move forward. We are all still "on the way" through this intercultural world. Let us commit ourselves to walk with our candidates who are discerning what God is asking of them, just as we all continue to discern what God is asking of us – individually and communally – as we navigate our intercultural communal living and engage in intercultural mission.

- 1 Preparatory Document for the 15th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment*, 1.1-2
- 2 The key elements or "pillars" of "integral formation" are described in various ways. CICALSAL's *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes* states that "The integral formation of a person has a physical, moral, intellectual, and spiritual dimension" (#33). The Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II *Vita Consecrata* states that "For formation to be complete, it must include every aspect of Christian life. It must therefore provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects. Sufficient time should be reserved for initial formation, understood as a process of development which passes through every stage of personal maturity — from the psychological and spiritual to the theological and pastoral" (#65). John Paul II's Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* lists four pillars of priestly formation as human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. Pope Francis, speaking to the Union of Superiors General in 2013, listed four pillars for religious formation as spiritual, intellectual, communitarian, and apostolic. Perhaps for our purposes, we could name five pillars of religious formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, communitarian and apostolic formation — all of which relate to interculturality
- 3 Synod Preparatory Document, II.2
- 4 Fernando A. Ortiz and Gerard J. McGlone S.J., "Model for Intercultural Competencies in Formation and Ministry: Awareness, Knowledge, Skills and Sensitivity", *Seminary Journal*, Fall 2012 issue (National Catholic Education Association Seminary Department, USA), p. 29
- 5 Ibid, p. 29
- 6 SJ General Congregation, Oct. 24, 2016 as reported in *La Civiltà Cattolica*
- 7 USG, November 26, 2016 as reported by Antonio Spadaro, SJ
- 8 Roger P. Schroeder SVD, *What is the Mission of the Church? A Guide for Catholics*, Orbis Books, 2008, p. 129
- 9 Anthony J. Gittins CSSp, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*, Liturgical Press, 2015, Kindle Edition, p.76.
- 10 *Vita Consecrata*, Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, 1996, #67
- 11 See for example, the work of Eric H. F. Law which gives concrete exercises and tools for helping multiple cultures within a parish learn to communicate and work effectively as a united intercultural community.
- 12 Antonio Spadaro S.J., "Wake up the World: Conversation with Pope Francis about the Religious Life", *La Civiltà Cattolica* 2014 | 3-17, pp. 8-9
- 13 Synod Preparatory Document, I.2
- 14 Gittins, op.cit., Introduction