

# REFLECTIONS ON INTERCULTURATION

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## 1. Introduction

The problem of interculturalisation is a pressing one in the world of today. Everyone, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, educators and others are concerned in this debate.

I am Marielle M'vè, Religious of Jesus and Mary. I come from Gabon in Central Africa. My parents come from two extremely opposing cultures. Born in 1977, I have spent most of my life in different regions. Since being accepted as a postulant in the Congregation in 2003, I have lived with Sisters from very different backgrounds by way of race, language, ethnicity, custom and personality. In the apostolate I work with young people, first in Gabon and now, for the last eight years, in Cameroon. There I meet with young people of distinctly different cultures.

Interculturalisation is a fact I have always had to face, as do a good many Africans. It is noticeable in the Congregation, and, today, it is appearing in every country due to the globalisation of the world. Travel, exchanges, congresses, and immigration-- multiple occasions when people meet. Every day, we find ourselves confronted with friends, colleagues, employees of different origin, necessitating the adoption of a new manner of seeing and acting so as to make it possible to live together and reduce geographical and cultural barriers.

While developing this subject, I think it right first to define the idea of interculturalisation and to link it with the life of Claudine. Then I will share my own experience before proposing a practical exercise in promoting mutual friendship.

## 2. Approaching interculturalisation and linking it with Claudine

Interculturalisation is a powerful cause which plays a major part in interpersonal and professional relations. Derived from the Latin 'inter', between, and 'culturel', culture, interculturalisation is the sum of all relations and interactions between different cultures, through meetings and debates. This presumes intercultural exchange founded on dialogue, mutual respect and the desire to preserve the cultural identity of each one.

Interculturalisation is not multiculturalism which is several cultures living together without any mutual sharing or assimilation. It is different from acculturation which infers the modification of the culture of a group or of persons under the influence of another culture. It is the opposite of

pluralism, a system whereby different ways of thinking are accepted so that people remain as individuals with no connection between them.

Interculturation is, on the contrary, openness to the diversity of others. It comes down to the way one sees the other and, from him, seeing oneself. It is the culture of understanding the human person.

Originally, interculturation concerned chiefly the phenomenon of migration. Actually, the term appeared in the '70's in Europe concerning the integration of migrants. Then, it was extended to include every rupture of culture and can be applied to all types: ethnic, national, religion, generation or social group.

Interculturation is at the heart of the Congregation because our communities are a veritable mixtures of cultures: diversity of continent, language, generation and personality. Even at the beginnings, there was diversity of age and experience in the group –widows, young ladies, experienced women. There was, too, the desire to open up beyond the frontiers of Lyons: Belleville, Monistrol, India, and, today, the Congregation is present in 28 countries.

The Congregation incorporates this theme in her First Priority: “Live pardon, reconciliation and healing”, living unity in diversity, overcoming obstacles and promoting the growth of confidence.

The African Delegation is working on this subject especially since the last Chapter on OUNTU, a South African humanist philosophy which develops the thought “ I am because we are”. Thus OBUNTU faces us with the responsibility to work for the good of others. It promotes respect for everyone, co-operation, trust between individuals. It recognises the value of each person and encourages the building of unity. Reflecting on the connection with the Three Priorities one finds the same philosophy expressing the same emphasis on openness, solidarity, fraternity and the spirit of self-sacrifice. The rest will follow.

This interest in interculturation finds its roots in Mother Foundress. From her earliest years St. Claudine learnt to give herself for others, looking after her brothers and sisters and helping her mother with her tasks. With the upheaval of the war, “to do good to the poor became a necessity for her”. Claudine threw herself unreservedly into the apostolate, visiting the sick, the poor, her brothers in prison not afraid to lose her life. She did not hesitate to welcome the two destitute little orphans, to comfort them, feed them.... transforming herself into a real mother.

With her big heart she loved everyone, seeing the beauty in each. She made a place in her heart where 'the other' could shelter and grow. She agonised over the plight of so many abandoned children, even welcoming those whom some considered "gutter snipes".

In great openness, Claudine overcame all barriers and renounced vengeance and hatred so as to pardon the one who betrayed her brothers. Even at the age of 48, she submitted to take the rigorous exam. demanded by the government of those responsible for a boarding school and obtained the brevet.

Always welcoming herself, Claudine urged her Sisters to accept one another: "Do not do to others what you would not like done to yourself". In this spirit, Claudine learned to accept the faults of others and to find a word in defence of neighbour.

She had to fight to overcome prejudice and she recommended her Sisters to have a certain reserve and control of judgement. She encouraged patience, gentleness and humility. She knew how to collaborate and to value the talents of others.

### **3. Personal experience of living interculturism**

Interculturalism is a daily reality in my life given the diversity of culture in my society and because the Congregation encourages it. That has created in me a disposition able to accept difference and to seek how to live together in peace. To do this one must first work on oneself. I am trying to do this so as to overcome my prejudices. One must be open to the reasons of others. So, in my relations with others I hold back my own point of view and try to see the situation from another angle. I make an effort to understand the other person and listen to her point of view even if I do not agree with it, because she has the right to express her opinion and think like that. Knowledge of my own ability and my limits, seeing the fact that my opinions are not shared by everyone, and the welcome I receive from others, have help me enormously to accept others.

Very well aware that I do not know everything, I profit by every new idea which might help me improve. In this regard, the community is a great help, encouraging communication between us, helping us to discover each one's distinctiveness, to respect the freedom of others. Community gives us the opportunity to talk about the values held in other societies, the celebration of feasts, the style of dress, the manner of welcoming strangers. A very good idea was a rota in the kitchen, each one cooking in her traditional way so we come to appreciate the special dishes of other countries.

At the beginning of the year our communities are unsettled faced with the change of members. We mistrust one another, hesitating to discuss certain topics in case it causes a disagreeable atmosphere. Thanks to the efforts mentioned above and of each one, mistrust is replaced by confidence and life can begin to flourish.

Working with young people in Cameroun, I have found that they are more receptive and relaxed when they feel welcomed and accepted with all their differences and ways of acting. I have learned to get to know the customs of a country, the important values, and to appreciate them. I have learned not to compare their country to mine so as not to appear superior or to hurt people. On the contrary, I try to analyse a situation in context of the environment. Certain expressions I use with reservation: “chez moi, chez vous” creates a certain distance between them and me and makes them withdraw into themselves. These young people themselves have helped me notice that If I say, for example, ‘we, in Africa’, they see that I, too, am personally involved and they don’t feel judged so are more open to dialogue.

Here, I follow the thinking that interculturalisation is not a question of culture but of persons. I have lived with people from the same culture but who have reacted differently to the same situations. Therefore it is better to stop before the person with whom one enters into a relationship. When one knows the habits and is more familiar with her ways of acting, one can accept arguments in the hope of finding some points of agreement.

Interculturalisation is everyone’s business and it depends on my decision to be open to the stranger, to refuse to make any premature or hasty judgment about a person; my decision to build human relationships marked by simplicity, politeness and respect.....accepting all the contradictions in life as Claudine did.

Conflicts, misunderstandings and disagreements are inevitable in spite of all good intentions. It is difficult to step out of one’s own framework because certain values are very dear and difficult to negotiate. When one scoffs, it causes frustration and a rupture. Sometimes, it is painful to give up one’s point of view, to be humble enough to recognise the strength of the opinions of others and give up one’s own. It is necessary to remind oneself frequently that it is not a question of competition but of a search for the happy medium, which will make life happier for us, more open and more effective.

## II. SUGGESTIONS FOR A PRACTICAL EXERCISE

It is a game in which each of the participants has to defend a continent other than that of her origin.

### **Aims:**

- To reduce prejudice and distinctions so as to develop tolerance.
- To acquire the ability to accept difference.
- To profit by cultural diversity, discovering the distinctive traits of each one, and to contribute to greater understanding between peoples.

### **Resources:**

- Person to be jury; animator; 4 participants.
- Two rooms, one for participants, one for the presentations.
- Costumes, musical instruments, sound effects, etc.
- Time: 30 minutes
- Questions prepared, adapted to the participants. Each one in turn replies to the same question.
- Alternative subjects for discussion: religious confession, race, profession, character types etc.

### **Presentation:**

- Identity: who are you? - Geographical location, population, skin colour, chief industry etc.
- Social – values held by most of the people
- Cooking – present a dish and explain its distinctiveness
- Culture – show costume and dance etc.
- Science – major technology or invention and how it affects the continent and the world
- Human relations – how you contribute to the global world, or hope to do so.

**Reflections and Evaluation:**

1. How do you feel?
2. What did you find difficult in this exercise?
3. How did you overcome this?
4. What new vision of the other continents do you have?
5. What do you intend to do to contribute to the spirit of community where you live?

**Remarks**

This exercise presumes a serious study of the subject to be defended in order to give precise information.

You will experience the difficulty of entering into the skin of another. This demands good will, readiness to compromise or to change one's point of view.