

FORMING FOR COMMUNITY IN A MULTI-CULTURAL, INTERNATIONAL, MULT-GENERATIONAL CONGREGATION

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Introduction

What I present here is a continuation of the reflection upon the constituent elements of our Institute's charism: mission, community, and spirituality in the framework of being a Society of Apostolic Life. We have heard many interesting presentations which help us to understand better who we are, It is important for us to have as much clarity as possible about this, For it is an essential aspect of the ministry of vocation and of formation to be able to articulate and to formulate for the prospective candidates and for those in formation, who we are and what we are about. Church documents have repeatedly reminded us that a "clear identity" is essential for vocation and formation ministries.

This afternoon I will be reflecting upon three aspects of our life and what they mean for formation; namely, the fact that our Congregation is multicultural, international, and multi generational. Although these three aspects of our Congregation have long been with us, we are more keenly aware of them today than ever before. We need to reflect on each of these three facets of who we are in order to make our formation programs more responsive to our membership.

How do we form in a diversity of cultures, nationalities, and ages? I don't pretend to have the answers, but I would like to offer some insights largely from my own experience. I do so in the hope that these reflections will contribute to our dialogue since all of us present live in or have lived in multicultural, international, or multigenerational communities. Our collective experience speaks clearly of the timeliness of the theme!

Community Life

To set a context for my remarks I wish to recall that some kind of life in common is one of the characteristics of all Societies of Apostolic Life and it certainly was an important element in Gaspar's dream for the C.PP.S. The very fact that we are here in this Abbey of San Felice stands as testimony to it, since it was Gaspar who was convinced of the convenience or the band of itinerant missionaries to live in community for the better realization of their mission. It is also clearly expressed in our own Normative Texts (C 6). This text states that our community life is grounded in the Blood of the New Covenant. In the spirituality of the Blood of Christ we find our deepest motivation for life in community. It is the Blood of Christ which brings together, unites and harmonizes. The Blood of the Covenant forms us into family and confers on us an identity. It is the Blood of the New Covenant which was shed on the Cross in order to reunite everyone in one family and it is the Blood shared in the Eucharistic Cup which commits us to be builders of community, willing to put forth our best energies in order to make God's dream of Communion a reality. As Missionaries of the Precious Blood we wish to proclaim with our lives God's call to communion and we commit ourselves to being instruments of communion in today's fragmented and individualistic societies.

Our Normative Texts also postulate the "bond of charity" as the basis of this community life (C 7). And we have heard how young people coming to us today to discern their vocation are indeed looking for community. This is a desire that I have heard repeated frequently during my visits and dialogue with the candidates of the world-wide Congregation.

But forming community and promoting healthy relationships within such variety is a very challenging task. Let us turn now to examine some of the areas we need to pay attention to as we work towards achieving our goal. While not pretending to present an exhaustive list of all that is

needed, I would like to offer some insights which I have gleaned from my own experience of living in cultures other than my own by birth, for the past thirty years. You, with your rich and varied experiences, will be able to add more. This will be the objective of the discussions in your groups.

Intercultural

We have heard in the opening presentations about the diversity of cultures in which we are immersed in different regions of the world where the C.P.P.S. is engaged in mission. We recall, for example, the presentation on India given by Fr. Peter Gali. He spoke of the challenges of forming in a multilingual and caste system.

I preface my remarks about forming for community in a multicultural community, by recalling a very basic fact that we need to keep always before us. *"God has spoken to us in many and varied forms throughout the history of the world and in the fullness of time in Jesus.* (Hebrews) There are "semina Verbi" in every culture of the world. At the same time, however, no one culture can claim to identify fully with the Reign of God! This may seem like an obvious statement, but the first thing we have to leave behind, the first "kenosis" we are called to experience when interrelating with another culture is any sense of "cultural superiority." A sense of cultural superiority has been the cause of the extinction of peoples, of ethnic cleansing, of racisms and prejudices which we are all too familiar with and which constitute one of the most anguishing "cries of the blood" in our world today. When we stand before a person of another culture we must do so with the attitude of Moses when he stood in God's presence (cf. Exodus 3:4-6). He took off his sandals for he was standing on sacred ground. We must grow in our own sense of respect as we share the lives of others who come from cultures different from our own. We are on sacred ground!

In my own experience in formation ministry in Chile (where I once lived in a formation community comprised of: chi Jeans, a Peruvian, Guatemalans and Salvadorans, with myself a North American) I learned that this is one of the most basic virtues we need to acquire: respect for what is different, for cultures which are foreign to oneself! Most of our problems in the house of formation were due to cultural rivalries and misunderstandings and a sense among some that their culture was superior to the others. This need for respect not only applies to diverse foreign cultures, but there are often diverse cultures within the dominant culture itself. For example, in our community were several men in formation from the middle class and other from the more impoverished social class, and one from a higher economic class. Cultural prejudices and a "superiority complex" were clearly at work in the interpersonal relationships and this caused many different problems for community life.

It is very important for us first of all as formators, to take an honest look at ourselves and to be able to identify our own personal prejudices and veiled racisms and stereotypes. We as formators must avoid at all costs racially tinted jokes and degrading comments about the culture of another. We must be the first to create this atmosphere of respect. We need to have formators and vocation personnel who are sensitive to cultural issues and who are basically freed from racisms and prejudices and who are able to detect such attitudes in others. Fr. Clarence Williams has developed seminars about such issues in his ministry in the United States and in other parts of the world.

Culture is a very complicated thing! And it is a reality which lies at the core identity of a human being and designate a people's way of life. Pope Paul VI when speaking of evangelization of culture refers to the need to evangelize "with the force of the Gospel the criteria of judgment, the underlying values, the points of interest, ways of thinking, the sources of inspiration and the patterns of human behavior" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 19: cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 53). Thus cul-

ture is an expression of the whole person. To deny a person his culture and cultural expressions and even more so to ridicule them or to suppress them is to strike the very heart of the individual and to deny the very core of his identity.

As Missionaries of the Precious Blood we are called to proclaim the Word of God, the Gospel of the Blood of Christ. That Blood speaks of the “preciousness” of every human being. It is the Blood that Christ shed which “breaks down the walls which separate us” (cf. Eph. 2:11-12). To live the spirituality of the Precious Blood is a deep motivation for us to develop attitudes of deep respect and appreciation of cultural diversity. We must first of all announce this “Word of God” with the testimony of our personal lives together in community.

I would like to suggest now a few things we might do in order to develop greater cultural sensitivity.

- **Tools for cultural analysis and understanding.** The understanding of cultures and cultural sensitivity is something relatively new in our times. None of us were ever prepared for the cultural diversity which we are experiencing today. Many of us were raised in villages and towns where there was basically one dominant and perhaps the only culture present. There was little cultural diversity in the formation houses most of us lived in and we had little or no contact with the international community. Thus one of the elements which we need to incorporate into our formation programs is the study of cultures and their dynamics. Otherwise it will be hard to understand many of the internal dynamics going on within our multicultural formation communities, or in the community at large.

- **Study of languages.** As we grow in cultural diversity the need to study at least one language other than one's language by birth becomes more and more a necessity. In the United States, for example, it is recommended that seminarians in the country should study Spanish, since it has

become the second language of the country! The Spanish-speaking catholic population now makes up approximately 30% of the Catholic Church in the United States. I will return to this point again when discussing our internationality.

- **Intercultural immersions.** A way to growth in understanding and respect for cultures is to have the opportunity of experiencing another culture first-hand. As we have heard in the initial presentations, some of our provinces, vicariates, and missions/delegations have incorporated this into their formation programs. Each candidate at some point before definitive incorporation or ordination must have a cross-cultural experience. I think that this should be an obligatory part of the formation programs of all of our C.PP .S. Congregation, since we are a missionary community and in view of the fact that we are growing closer together in many ways. And such cross-cultural experiences have a two-fold benefit. First of all, they benefit the person who journeys into the sacred space of the other's culture by giving that person an experience of the life, the food, the language, the religious experiences, the value system, and the traditions of the other. By being immersed in the cultural experience one can better capture the spirit and flavor of the culture and come to appreciate it better. At the same time, however, it affords the person the opportunity to understand his/her own culture better. It affords the opportunity to view one's own culture from a distance. Getting a perspective on our cultures-of-birth can be a very enlightening experience when observing them from the perspective of other cultures. The person venturing into another's culture becomes the "stranger in a foreign land," experiencing a great sense of vulnerability, and has to face his/her own insecurities, fears, and prejudices. Affording cross-cultural experiences to our candidates, under the supervision of people experienced in multicultural living, and with the proper evaluation, can be a very valuable tool in preparing our future members for living in a multicultural congregation and society.

- **Cultural inclusiveness.** In a multi-cultural formation community it is important that the diverse cultures have the possibility for their expression in liturgies, through music and language. The same recognition of cultural variety should also have its moments of expression in the food we share and in our community celebrations. To celebrate the distinct feast days and holidays of the different cultures involved speaks to all of our respect and appreciation for their cultures. The inclusion of artifacts and pictures and the art of the different cultures in our houses of formation is another way of showing our respect for those cultures and of helping the members feel a true sense of "belonging" to the community.

- **Cultures and class difference.** It is necessary to say a word also concerning the preparation for our mission of evangelization to those excluded by our society and our church, to the poor and the oppressed. Often our houses of formation become safe and comfortable havens in which to live, far-removed from the poor and the needy we are called to serve in a special way. Anyone who has had contact with those environments knows that their culture is different from the middle-class or upper-class culture of most religious houses. How do we prepare our candidates, then, for mission with the poor and marginalized? How do we raise their social consciousness? It is important in formation that our candidates have concrete experiences of venturing into these very diverse cultures in order to know them and understand them, in order to learn their language so as to be able to accompany them and to speak the Word of God to them in a language they will understand. Put in another way, how do we prepare our candidates in formation to be sensitive to the "cry of the blood" in our own societies? The period of formation of our candidates is an opportune time to train them in this consciousness, in their ability to hear the cry and to discern therein the call of the Blood. We need to offer our candidates opportunities to bridge the culture of our formation houses with the cultures of the poor and needy around us. I think we need to ask

ourselves as well fundamental questions about the life-style of our houses of formation. Do the physical structures of our houses and our style of life help to prepare our candidates for a commitment to accompany the poor and outcast, or do our houses tend to isolate them from reality, creating a kind of comfort zone and security, removing them from the very people we are called to serve? Is it possible to "hear the cry of the blood" behind the walls of our seminary complexes and in comfortable homes in our middle class neighborhoods?

- **Christ the Missionary.** Not only should we be concerned about the technical aspects and study of cultures, but we can also learn much from meditating on the figure of Christ, the Missionary and how Christ interacted with cultural diversity. We also reflect on our Precious Blood Spirituality which speaks of Covenant, of Community- building, of Reconciliation, of the basic Preciousness of each individual, of the New Fellowship we celebrate in the Eucharist, to name some aspects which are pertinent to our theme.
- **Cultural enrichment.** All that has been said above will help the candidates to grow in their appreciation and respect for the other cultures they encounter within the formation community and in the larger community of the incorporated members, as well as prepare them for future ministry as a Missionary of the Precious Blood. The cultural diversities we then encounter in ministry, instead of making us defensive and tearful, instead of viewing them as inferior or as a threat, will be welcomed as an opportunity for enrichment. This is so necessary in the highly competitive societies in which we live. Differences then will not be dreaded but will help us to see the world in a different light. Our life in covenant community will become a communion in our diversity, a diversity which will be viewed and esteemed an enrichment for all!

International

Our C.P.P.S. Community is growing in awareness of our internationality. The meetings of Major Superiors begun in 1969 and held at regular intervals ever since then have contributed greatly to this growing consciousness. The International Spirituality Workshops in the late '70s and early 80's, as well as the Workshops for Formators held usually every six years, have also helped us to grow in this awareness and to connect the diverse geographical sectors of our Congregation, developing interpersonal relationships, friendships, and increasing correspondence among the membership, aided now by the facility of modern technology, such as the internet and electronic mail. All indications are that this trend to grow closer and closer will only increase with the passing of time. The ease with which we can travel from one place to another is another significant factor which has helped us to grow closer together.

Our "provincial" mentalities are giving way to awareness of the wider community. We are part of something bigger than just our province, vicariate, or mission/delegation. In this respect, it can be expected that this awareness will only become more acute as we move into the twenty-first century. We need to prepare ourselves for this growing contact, communication, and interchange. All that I said above under the title of "intercultural" also applies here. But I would like to emphasize a few more here.

- **Knowledge of languages.** Anyone who has participated in an international Workshop of the Congregation knows the importance of knowing another language. I think we always go away from these meetings \wishing we could speak a foreign tongue and realizing how much more enriching the meetings would have been had we been able to communicate directly in the language of the other. The soul of a people is reflected in their language. Words, style, and idiom of language, the many forms of literature, myths and symbols, customs and traditions, the particular philosophy of life, are all constitutive elements of a given language. During the years of

formation our candidates should be obliged as part of their preparation for mission to learn at least one language other than their native tongue. This will only enhance their capacity for intercultural and international dialogue and exchange.

- **Workshops and exchange programs.** Efforts should be made to promote intercultural and international experiences at different levels of the formation process. Opportunities to spend a prolonged period in another culture, such as Emanuele Lupi of the Italian Province has done in Peru for the past two years become an invaluable experience for learning a language and also for discovering the culture of another. It is enriching both for the person coming into the culture as well as for the host culture. In the ensuing dialogue between the two cultures there is a reciprocity, or gift exchange. Invaluable insights into our C.P.P.S. charism can be gained by all as we discover how the charism is being incarnated in diverse situations in response to the particular needs of that area. Dialogue between the history of our Foundation and its new incarnations, listening to the stories of our traditions and to the stories of the living incarnation of the charism today, is both enriching and stimulating. It challenges us to remain a vital community in an ever-changing world. Hopefully our formation programs in all of our countries will permit and promote such experiences. This too will be a way of preparing our candidates for mission.

- **Awareness of global concerns.** As we grow closer together as an international community in an ever-more interconnected world, through our correspondence, publications, workshops and meetings on the international level, we can all grow in an awareness of the global concerns and discern in them the "cry of the blood." For example, third world countries who are suffering in a very direct way the consequences of the international debt issue can educate the first world countries of their situation. Issues such as the "death penalty", "assisted suicide", and others can be openly debated, and our mission in defense of life, which emerges from the spiritu-

ality of the Blood of Christ, can be discerned together. Community publications, such as *The Cup of the New Covenant* edited in five languages and received by each member of the community is meant to be a tool to help us grow in the awareness of our internationality and to move towards the development of a common language when speaking about our charism.

Intergenerational

With the growing number of our older members and the relatively small number of younger people entering our Congregation especially in the older sectors of our community in Western Europe and in North America, there is a growing generation gap among our members. During the period of formation it is important that an atmosphere of respect is created in which the special gifts of each generation are identified and appreciated. It is important to recall that who we are today and what we have today is the result in great part of the lives of dedication of the generations which have gone before us.

One way of doing this is to promote dialogue with different members of the community, inviting them in to share their stories, to share their faith journey, to communicate their vocational story. This helps to create confidence and trust and promotes fraternity in the bond of charity. At the same time, we need to help our older members in community to understand the present generation, to understand where they are coming from, what their concerns and aspirations are. As formators and those engaged in vocation ministry, we are called in many ways to live the spirituality of the Blood of reconciliation, being bridge-builders, forging connections between our candidates and the incorporated members and between the different generations.

When I was in Guatemala as Director of Formation, an elderly priest came to do missionary work in our parish and took up residence with our formation community. Fr. Bill was seventy-six years old when he came and he lived among twenty young energetic, boisterous semi-

narians in their early twenties for the most part. It was edifying to see Fr. Bill sitting outside in the evenings, with the young seminarians sitting around him on the ground listening to his stories. Fr. Bill lived in one of the small houses with six other seminarians, sharing a common bathroom. Sometimes he would come to my room with a piece of paper and would give it to me saying, "Read this later and then throw it away." He had written on the paper all his complaints about the high volumes of radios playing, doors slamming, screaming in the halls, etc. Writing his feelings out was a way for him to work out his frustrations and sometimes anger. His presence among us was edifying and he was loved by all. I share this to point out the fact that different generations can live together. We need to be creative to find the ways to build bridges between them and to be enriched by the special gifts each generation brings to the community. In a society which is efficiency-oriented and tends to put little or no value on the lives of the infirm and elderly, we are called to instill a profound respect for life in all its stages (cf. *Vita Consecrate*, n. 44). It is a mandate of the spirituality of the Blood of Christ!

At the same time we need to recognize that there is a difference between the generation of the formators and those entering formation today. We must be careful not to impose our generation's problems and concerns on the newer generations. Many members of the present generation (those born between 1960 and 1979, commonly known today as "generation x") come from broken homes. Their expectations of community life may be quite different than those of our generation. This also presents special challenges to us as we struggle to build community with them.

Perhaps dialogue with our lay associates and companions can help us to deal with the challenges of building community in a multi generational situation. They could share with us their wisdom and insights gained through their daily experiences.

Conclusion

In order to facilitate all of the above, we need formators who will accompany the candidates with discretion and who themselves have a deep respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity, an open and healthy sense of our internationality, and one who can serve as a bridge between generations. Above all, we need a person who has a sense of his own identity and is at peace with it. Such a person will not feel the need to impose his own culture upon others and is open to dialogue.

To forge true community in such diversity is indeed a challenge. But it is a task made possible by the presence of the One who calls us to community, Christ, the center, the cornerstone of our life together. By living the spirituality of the Blood of Christ we will find the resources we need to build such a community. Living in respect and appreciation of cultural diversity is a concrete way of living in "the bond of charity" as we move into the twenty-first century. Our communities can become "communities in mission" (Mission Houses) that will be a true preparation for our life together in an international congregation and in a society which is ever-more becoming multicultural. In the words of Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrate*, n. 51: "*Placed as they are within the world's different societies – societies frequently marked by conflicting passions and interests, seeking unity but uncertain about the ways to attain it – communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony.*" And in the Document *Fraternal Life in Community* (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life), we are reminded that "this love that unites is also the love that leads us to extend to others the experience of communion with God and with each other. In other words, it creates apostles by urging communities on their path of mission, whether this be contemplative, proclamation of the Word, or ministries of charity; ... and so, fra-

ternal communities become missionaries of this love and prophetic signs of its unifying power."

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Finally, as I stated at the outset, I do not pretend to exhaust this complex and challenging theme, but hope to have offered some guidelines to spark our own imaginations and creativity and to further dialogue on how we form for living in communities which include people of different ages and different races, members with different cultural and theological formation, and with those who have had widely differing experiences during these agitated and pluralistic years (*Fraternal Life in Community*, #32).

Giano, July 4, 1999

Questions for group work:

1. Share your experiences of formation in the field of multicultural, international and multigenerational communities.
2. Of the suggestions shared in the conference we have heard, which ones do you feel more important?
3. Would you add any other suggestions?
4. Are the issues around formation in this area reflected in the current *Profile of a C.P.P.S. Missionary*? What might we include?