

**Many Cultures--One Heart:
A Spirituality of Tenderness and Compassion in a Multicultural World**

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Many Cultures Together

One of the social realities which globalization has heightened has been the increasing presence of many cultures together. Cultures have, of course, always rubbed up against one another throughout history. But what we see today is that more people than ever are affected by what has come to be known as multiculturalism, that is, the situation in which people must learn to live with more multiple cultures simultaneously.

The language of multiculturalism developed in the 1990's, when this process of cultures coming to occupy the same social space accelerated. The word "multiculturalism" now means different things to people. For some, it stands for a kind of cultural relativism, where no single culture can make any claim on us. For others, it is an idealized view of celebration of difference which rarely occurs in reality, except perhaps as tourism or an appreciation of the exotic. For still others, negotiating life in many cultures is next to impossible: we can at best move out of our own culture for periodic forays into other cultures, learn certain rules of respect for others, and incorporate elements of those other cultures into our own.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the term "multiculturalism" had taken on some unsavory meanings in some parts of the world. It meant a suppression of what had been the dominant culture in a given place, in favor of privileging other, newly arrived cultures. It harbored a highly romantic view of the "other" which critics saw as destructive of the

social cohesion of a society, and a naive understanding of how real people interact in concrete situations.

This is all to preface what I have to say, and what no doubt others will say later in these days. Multiculturalism has been chosen as a major theme for this ASC International Symposium. The intention of the organizers of this symposium was surely not to endorse the multicultural battles of the 1990's. It flows rather out of a realization that cultures are now in closer contact with one another than was the case in the past. This is due to migration, the relative ease of travel, and developments in communications technologies. These encounters of many cultures are not brief episodes, but enduring facts in our communities and cities. The cultural "other" is no longer a distant and exotic fact. The cultural "other" is now our neighbor, our coworker, and is marrying our children.

As women committed to the Gospel, and cooperating in the great work of Christ's redemption, dealing with the "other" as a manifestation of the plenitude of God's creation, and as a call to reconciliation of all things through the blood of Christ is part of your challenge to apostolic mission. The multicultural reality of the world in which we live is the stage and forum in which you work. Not to see how your charism addresses this dimension of the world today would be to close your eyes and hearts to what God is working in the world. How are we to respect difference as part of the dignity of human persons and cultures, yet gather people into the community of creation redeemed by the blood of Christ, "a communion of love into which people of every tribe and tongue and nation are united" (*ASC Constitution*, 6)? How are we to reach "especially the poor, the oppressed, the deprived" (*Constitution*, 4)? It is these kinds of questions we need to explore in this presentation.

This presentation itself will be in three parts. In the first part, I will sketch out some of the dimensions of multicultural living which we experience in the world today. This forms a necessary background to a reflection on where and how we encounter other cultures today. In the second part, I will highlight some of the specific issues and challenges which arise from multicultural living. In the third and final part, I will look toward a spirituality for living in a multicultural world, drawing upon the resources of both the ASC charism, and the 2001 plenary session of the International Union of Superiors General, entitled “Many Cultures--One Heart.”

Multicultural Living Today

In order to set the scene for talking about multiculturalism, it would be worthwhile to recall some of the forms of living together with many cultures. Some forms can be stimulating; others are experienced as threatening. Still others carry with them a profound sense of dislocation.

When most people think of multiculturalism, they think of urban settings where many cultures have flowed together. Cities, to be sure, have often been the site where cultures have come together. What is significant about multiculturalism today is the extent to which areas of the world which were once homogeneous now have a great variety of cultures, or a few cultures of larger population than was once the case.

Countries which have been destinations of immigration, such as the United States, Canada, and Australia, have had many cultures coming together since their beginnings. For most of the history of the United States, those cultures were coming from Europe (and at one stage, forcibly moved from Africa as slave labor). In the last third of the twentieth century, the immigration has been especially from Asia and Latin America.

One region which feels the strain of multiculturalism especially today is Europe. Many of the countries of Europe had been relatively homogeneous culturally over the past several centuries. But the second half of the twentieth century saw, first, movements of populations within Europe, and later, the influx of peoples from the eastern parts of the Mediterranean rim and from sub-Saharan Africa. Likewise, former members of the colonies of Britain, France, and Portugal came to the imperial homelands. In the last decade this has produced considerable social tensions and xenophobia, even at times hatred of foreigners. Right-wing political parties have emerged in a number of countries pledged to curbing the influx of outsiders. Calls regularly are made for a greater cultural assimilation of these peoples. Yet Europe is faced with a profound dilemma. Because of its low birthrates, the importation of peoples is necessary to keep the economies of the various countries going. Europeans find themselves caught between wanting to maintain cultural homogeneity, on the one hand, and economic prosperity on the other.

Issues of cultures together are not confined to this larger social arena. Every international religious institute faces the challenge of coming to terms with multiculturalism within their own confines. Most of these institutes were founded in Europe, and often bear a clear stamp of a particular European ethnicity. The majority of their new members, however, are coming from outside Europe and areas to which Europeans have emigrated. Parts of Africa, the Philippines, India, Korea, and Indonesia produce the greatest number of religious vocations today. This fact is creating growing tensions in many religious institutes over how things are done--areas like formation, use of money, and forms of community living. As an international institute, the ASC is no stranger to these tensions. They occur not only in houses where members of different cultures must find ways to live

together. The tensions are usually most marked in how different regions interact with one another, especially in international gatherings and at general chapters. Issues of inculturation weigh heavily on the hearts of those from the newer regions of the institute; they feel that a European culture is being imposed on them in the name of the charism of the institute. For those from the longer established parts of the institute, the fear is that the newer regions do not understand the charism; they wonder whether it is being adequately transmitted. It is worth recalling here the words of your *Constitution*:

“Therefore we try to live together as sisters and as friends, loving each other as Christ has loved us. Such love implies accepting one another with our differences, honest communication, gentleness, and reverence. With a listening heart we try to understand and respond to what the other is sharing.” (no. 7)

Both of these instances--the formation of multicultural societies and the experience of many cultures within an international religious institute such as the ASC--present challenges and create tensions. But they do not represent what are perhaps the most profound senses of dislocation which occur as a result of the movement of peoples around the planet today. Let us spend a few moments examining some of those dislocations which make up part of the picture of multiculturalism today.

First of all, *the experience of migration*. Peoples have migrated since the dawn of history, but migration has become an intense, and often deeply dislocating, experience today. People migrate especially for economic reasons, but sometimes also for political ones. What makes migration different today is that travel is relatively quick and inexpensive compared to previous eras. (However, for those who are seeking to enter a land outside legal means, the travel is often arduous and dangerous). The comparative ease

of travel means that leaving one's homeland no longer is necessarily a definitive step as it was in earlier times. Thanks too to the advances in communications technologies, many people are able to keep more in touch with, and even visit, the relatives they have left behind.

While this may seem to ease some of the stresses of migration, it also makes migration an action that more and more people are likely to take up. This is evident in the fact that today the majority of the world's migrants are women. These are women who leave their families to earn money to support their families. They work as domestics, in sweat shops for making clothing and shoes, and at jobs which require skill at assembling delicate items, such as the building of computer boards. They often live and work under substandard and even dangerous conditions. They suffer from isolation and loneliness in their separation from their families. Migration is one of the largest social facts of our time, and one of the areas where apostolic witness and ministry is most urgently needed. I am aware that some of your members have taken up this challenge directly.

Another kind of dislocation is suffered by those who become *displaced persons* and *refugees*. These are people who have had to flee their homes because of political conflict. They are unwilling migrants, either within their own countries or to locations abroad. If they are placed in camps as displaced persons or refugees, their freedom is restricted and their day-to-day existence is often tenuous. If they end up in another country, they may have uncertain legal status in their new location. Along with coping with the strangeness of the new situation, they may be suffering trauma from what they witnessed in their homelands.

A third kind of dislocation connected with people on the move is the *trafficking in women and children*. Women are lured, abducted, and sold into what amounts to slavery for the sake of prostitution and sexual tourism. Children are abducted from the streets or are even sold by their parents into slavery, either for labor or for sexual exploitation. The labor is often dangerous; the sexual exploitation leaves both women and children vulnerable to disease and HIV/AIDS, to physical abuse, and even to death.

In the midst of these dislocations, often of a horrific nature, are profound challenges which people on the move face. If they come from rural areas and find themselves now in cities, there can be a sense of dislocation in the move from what were largely premodern situations of small-scale, village communities, to the confusing realities of modernity, with its individualism and anomie. In some instances, it is also a confrontation with the postmodern world of rapid communication and social fragmentation. Again, women experience these dislocations--called in Latin America living in *tiempos mixtos* (mixed times)--especially. They are responsible, on the one hand, for holding their families together in the shantytowns which ring the urban centers; and earning money doing domestic labor in the homes of the rich or in hotels and office buildings in the center of the city. They see the clash between the premodern, the modern, and the postmodern in the lives of their children who struggle to carve out their identities amidst competing senses of self, belonging, and sociality.

The coming together of cultures in a single place creates both convergences and dislocations. On the one hand, the coming of cultures together can create new possibilities and people recognize the specific gifts which newcomers are bringing. The strong sense of family which many immigrant groups have can be a welcome tonic to the fragmentation of

families in Europe, North America, and Australia. Women, especially, discover a new freedom in such countries beyond the patriarchal restrictions of their homelands. Children growing up find new possibilities, even as they struggle with being accepted in the culture of their parents and the dominant culture in they now find themselves.

But the dislocation for the newcomer who is not welcomed, for the illegal immigrant, for the refugee, for those exploited for their labor or for sexual use gives another face to multiculturalism today. The struggles of long-time residents to understand and to welcome the stranger become strained by dealing with so much difference and the social conflicts which inevitably arise.

The richness of God's creation and the acute pain of the world come together in the encounter with multicultural living. The glory of God's face and the ache of God's heart are experienced at one and the same time.

Some Issues in Multiculturalism

Before turning to the resources for a spirituality in the face of multiculturalism, we need to pause briefly, here in this second part, to remind ourselves of some of the underlying issues regarding multicultural living. It is important to keep these in mind as we try to craft a spirituality which will meet these challenges, both in our community life and in our apostolic ministries.

The multicultural reality created by the forces of globalization requires us tending to two streams of thinking and acting at the same time. One is a respect for the difference which others bring to us. The other is to find ways of interdependence among the many cultures in order to have a socially cohesive community--be that within the ASC or in the

Church and the wider world we serve. Let us look at each of these--difference and interdependence--in succession.

Difference is what strikes us first about cultures coming together. Difference in language, difference in appearance and clothing, difference in customs, difference in ideas and values--all of these jar us a bit. That is because so much of our personal and social identities are built on sameness. Indeed, the word "identity" comes from the Latin word for "the same." Our whole lives are a construction in sameness and continuity so that we can live without undue tensions in our society. Moreover, sharing a sense of sameness--in families, in religious communities, in our neighborhoods and cities--creates a powerful sense of belonging. After survival, belonging is perhaps the strongest human need we have.

Encountering difference jars both sameness and belonging within us. It calls into question who we have been and who we think we are. Some people welcome difference as an adventure and a challenge. But for all of us, there is a maximum of difference we can absorb at any given time. That threshold for difference varies in each of us. It is affected by our own sense of self-worth, our previous experience with difference, sometimes by our age. What is happening in our time is that we are all being exposed to a greater sense of difference, and so are all called out of our own circle in ways which earlier generations did not have to face.

How we perceive people other than ourselves, how we interact with them is rooted in our own sense of self and our own previous experience. But we can learn skills of intercultural communication which can enhance our capacity to interact with others. It is now more important than ever that we incorporate a capacity for intercultural

communication in our initial and ongoing formation programs. Just as greater sensitivity to psychological difference reshaped formation programs three decades ago, now we must look to what we need to live in a multicultural society.

However, respect for and honoring difference is not an absolute value. If we raise what makes us different to absolute status, then we become incapable of communicating with one another at all. Everyone would live in a tiny, isolated world, because no one could possibly understand us in our otherness. That is why a second stream of thinking and acting is needed in a multicultural world alongside that of difference. This second stream is *interdependence*. We have to find ways to live together and to work together for the common good.

This is an area that is now being explored in cultural studies. Much of the cultural work of the 1990's was devoted to exploring difference. That exploration needs to continue, since we are far from finished with knowing how to live and interact together. But there is now a growing realization that we must look to how we come together as a society as well.

The danger in thinking about interdependence is that we can succumb to the current patterns of power in our society. One form of social cohesion is assimilation, in which all those who are deemed "other" have to become like *us*, that is, the dominant culture in a society. That implies that what is different about others is really peripheral or marginal to their identity. It ends up not taking seriously other people and other culture in their own integrity, that is, how they see themselves. Our language of unity, or all being sisters and brothers in Christ, while well intended, often is an assumption of assimilation. It can lurk too in our anxieties about whether members from newer regions of our institute really

understand our charism. That may be just a way of trying to ignore their difference. We have to be careful, then, about what we are saying and what such words imply.

I have found that women are especially attuned to the dangers of assimilation. In patriarchal societies, women are made to conform to models outside themselves and outside their own experience. Women have, potentially, the gift for understanding the importance of difference because they themselves have so often been made to feel “different” or “other” in their own societies by men and by patriarchal structures.

So what are alternatives to an assumption of assimilation with its unreflective language of unity? One suggestion is that we focus on *solidarity*. Specifically, a *solidarity of others*. Solidarity is a word which has come into Catholic Social Teaching, especially in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. It entails a linking together not only of our interests, but of our hearts. It is built upon the principle that we are all created in the image of God and as such, have an intrinsic dignity. It is to that dignity that solidarity is addressed. The expression of that solidarity, with one another and with cultures, takes into special account difference. Difference is not ignored or erased, but is seen as an indispensable part of who the other is, and who the other is for me and for society. In other words, we have to come to a place where the otherness of another person or a culture is indispensable, not only for our relationship, but for who I am. Interaction and acceptance of that otherness has to become part of who I am and who we are as a community. It is not just an exotic decoration to show our internationality, but a basic part of who we are.

To arrive at this solidarity of others is not an easy task. Simply wanting to do it is not enough to achieve it. It requires a rigorous self-examination, it requires a listening heart, it requires learning about patterns of intercultural interaction. For it to be long-term and self-

sustaining, it must be rooted in a spirituality. And it is to that spirituality which we now turn.

A Spirituality for Living in a Multicultural World

In this third and final section, I want to turn to how we might develop a spirituality for living in a multicultural world. To do that, I wish to draw on two resources. One is the results of the 2001 Plenary Assembly of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), entitled “Many Cultures--One Heart: Women Religious Sent to Be a Living Presence of the Tenderness and Compassion of God in a Wounded World.” I find it to be a rich and provocative document. The other resource is the ASC charism, as set forth in your *Constitution* and in the tradition of spirituality of the blood of Christ which we share.

What does it mean to be “a living presence of the tenderness and compassion of God? I would like to explore this being a presence of God by imagining with you how our wounded world looks in the eyes of God, and what response it evokes from the heart of God. The UISG document underscores in its testimonies and reflection the wounded character of the world. We have looked at that here in terms of the dislocations of multiculturalism--dislocations for long-time residents facing new realities, for the migrant, the refugee, for those forced into labor and prostitution. What does God see and what does God feel? Trying to imagine these things is of course beyond our capacity. But in time of globalization and movement of peoples, we must try to get the big picture, as it were, and stretch ourselves to imagine what the realities of our wounded world mean for God.

Seeing the World through the Eyes of God

What does God see in our world today? First of all, the complex character of the human family. Deep down the human family shares a unity. But it is marked by difference and

division--which are not necessarily the same thing. The importance of difference is affirmed in the miracle of Pentecost, where those listening to the disciples each heard them speak in their own tongue. This did not occur out of a communication technique, but out of an affirmation that the Word of God can be heard in each human language. This is the basis for the respect for human culture which was so strongly affirmed in *Gaudium et spes* at the Second Vatican Council, and is the warrant for inculturation which grew out of that. Moreover, in hearing this message each in their own tongue, they did not feel separated from one another (like we might sometimes feel listening to a translation through our headsets!), but drawn into the same reality of the Spirit. This is the basis for the balance of difference and interdependence I spoke of earlier. Difference is neither made absolute nor is it erased. Interdependence does not dominate or ignore, but seeks a solidarity of others. We need to return to the Pentecost story to deepen, in the Holy Spirit, our capacity to reach this balance of difference and interdependence in honoring and respecting the other in a multicultural world.

God also sees division in our world. Difference becomes a source of division in the world when it is perceived as a threat rather than enrichment. The profound inequalities in our world, especially those caused by the acute poverty from which so much of the world suffers, stand out most starkly. Poverty hampers the growth and development of the human family. The clinging of the rich to their possessions while the poor are kept out of sight, excluded outside the door, is perhaps the greatest sin of our times. But other injustices come into view as well: discrimination against women, minorities within populations; the exploitation of peoples and of the earth itself; the ravages of war and of disease upon the innocent.

Here the counterpart to the Pentecost story, found in the Book of Revelation, gives an image of a people redeemed out of the great tribulation (Rev 7:13-17). Again, it is people of every tribe and tongue, people and nation. The powerful image of a people who have been through great suffering and distress, now redeemed through the blood of the Lamb, who no longer hunger or thirst, where all their tears are wiped away--this image of redemption and liberation stands before us as a horizon of hope that draws us forward. As we are drawn to this hope and given the encouragement to throw ourselves into creating a space where no one is excluded, no one is diminished, no one is forgotten.

The Heart of God before the World

How does the heart of God respond to this world, arrayed in difference and also deeply divided? That response flows out of God's love and God's mercy. The love of God is expressed, first of all, in having created the world in its multiplicity. This plenitude of creation (referred to in the New Testament as the *pleroma*), is a sign of the richness of God's possibilities. It culminates in the Incarnation, when the Second Person of the Trinity, assumes our lives in all their particularity--the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Jesus did not assume generic humanity, but became part of a culture in a given time and place. In doing this, he sanctifies all human cultures. The Incarnation, along with Pentecost, extends God's favor on difference.

God also responds to the world in mercy. The woundedness of our world is painfully evident. God's mercy is difficult for us to grasp because it so surpasses our own efforts at mercy. It is born out of that infinite love which is in the heart of God. It is a mercy which sees the world as it is, but also sees the world as what it can become. The ever-flowing font of mercy is also the source of forgiveness about which Jesus testified so eloquently.

That mercy is nowhere more present than in the wounds Jesus suffered to bring all things together. That forgiveness speaks nowhere so movingly as in Jesus' gentle and tender compassion with which he treats his disciples after his resurrection.

It is that compassion, that tenderness which we are called upon to participate in. It is a compassion that indeed "suffers with," as the very word means in its root. It is a compassion which walks with those who suffer, who are confused and disheartened, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is the tenderness which can see all sides of the dispute in situations of division. It is a tenderness which is a healing touch to broken hearts and disappointed dreams.

God's perspective, what God sees and what God feels, calls us ever more deeply into presence: the presence of God so that we can be God's presence in the world. This brings us to the ASC charism, to which I will now turn.

The ASC Charism

There are two things within the ASC charism which speak especially to living and working in a multicultural world. How do we manage to see the world from God's perspective, and respond to that world from the heart of God? The UISG document challenges women religious to be "a living presence of the tenderness and compassion of God." I think that the ASC charism of adoration speaks especially to that capacity to be a presence.

There are two dimensions to that presence. One is coming into the presence of God. The other is being a presence of God in the world. The second flows from the first. We cannot be a presence *of* God unless we are a presence *in* God. Coming to be ever more fully in the presence of God arises out of contemplative prayer, a form of prayer developed especially in the practice of adoration.

In dealing with the complexities and the frustrations of a multicultural world, we are constantly reminded how inadequate our perspective is. There is so much which we do not understand. The differences are too many. It is only by moving ever more deeply into the presence of God that we can hope to see the world with God's eyes, and feel the world with God's heart. Adoration reminds us, in the first instance, of the difference between ourselves and God. God is so much greater than ourselves. But acknowledgment of that difference need not separate us from God. It is rather an invitation to move out of ourselves, and allow ourselves to be drawn into the unfathomable love and mercy of God. It is God who leads us; we do not achieve this of ourselves. It is only in that ever deepening presence of God that we can come to see and feel the world as God does it, at least in some measure.

The contemplative practice of adoration brings us into the more profound union with God which, in turn, allows to be a presence of God in the world. As we gain greater transparency, so that the glory of God, God's great love and unfathomable mercy, shines through, the world experiences a little more of the healing and reconciliation which the blood of Christ has brought to us. The adoration which is part of the ASC charism is not an end in itself, as your *Constitution* implies, but rather the source of your apostolic mission in the world. The adoration makes the ASC community "a living image of that divine charity with which that blood was shed," to cite the *1857 Constitution*.

Adoration, then, is the entryway into becoming a presence of tenderness and compassion in a multicultural world. Ultimately, that world can only be understood from the perspective of God. It is God who alone can truly embrace all the difference. And it is God who heals the division. To echo those famous words of Blessed Maria, it is through

adoration which we will come to under “that beautiful order of things which the Great Son of God came to establish through his blood.”

With that brief reflection on the important role adoration plays being a presence in a multicultural world, I would like to turn to a second aspect of the ASC charism which is important for living and working in a multicultural world. That aspect is living the Paschal Mystery. This is central to ASC spirituality, and indeed to the spiritualities of all the Precious Blood family. Living so as to be conformed to the pattern of Christ’s death so that we might come to know the power of the resurrection (to paraphrase Paul’s description of the Paschal Mystery in Philippians 3:10) is at the heart of our vocation. To die with Christ so that we might be raised with him is fundamental to our discipleship. Out of the many rich possibilities from which we can enter the Paschal Mystery, I would like to hold up just one which illumines our response to a multicultural world.

The death we die with Christ in a multicultural world is a clinging to our own set understandings of ourselves and our community. The things which flare up in the encounter with the difference of other people and other cultures is prejudice and stereotypes of the other (sometimes even hostility), and an entrenched ethnocentrism about our own selves. Prejudice and stereotypes thrive on generalizations about other people and cultures, not recognizing within them the variety and individuality we treasure in our own settings. Ethnocentrism is believing that my culture is at the center of the world. It is the belief that there are only two ways to live in this world: my way and the wrong way.

Think of what Jesus had to die to in his suffering and death. Here is the one who had embraced humanity in all its specific character--on the eastern rim of the Mediterranean basin. His suffering and death is a story of having to let go of one thing after another.

Most of his followers desert him. He is treated as a criminal, an outlaw. He is mocked by the soldiers and Pontius Pilate as a king. Yet he is a king rejected by his own people. He even has to let go of any scrap of human dignity as he is crucified on the cross.

In his resurrection, God makes of him something new. At first his closest disciples do not recognize him, so transfigured is his appearance to them. But they also come to see his wounds, those wounds of his suffering and death. They remain, even in his transfigured body. They are reminders which do not allow Jesus or us to erase from memory what he has gone through.

Multicultural living requires this kind of dying to ourselves, letting go of those things we think are essential to our identities, so that God can create something new in us. For the ASC community as an international religious institute, that entry into the Paschal Mystery begins with how you live together amid the many cultures you represent. This is one of single greatest challenges that all international religious institutes now face, and will have a profound effect on how we are able to be a living presence of tenderness and compassion to the multicultural world. We have to move out of ourselves and our familiar ways to make room for new manifestations of grace amongst us. It is only in that being conformed to the suffering Christ that we will be able, in some measure, to experience the power of his resurrection. It is from that experience that we can hope to be that manifestation of God's great love and tender mercy for the world.

Central for all of us in the Precious Blood family is the vision of the redeeming blood Christ effecting this new creation. The images of the redeemed coming together, out of every tribe and tongue, people and nation, washed in the blood of the Lamb stands as a powerful source of hope that the confusion we may now experience, the suffering which we

now undergo, and the disappointment which now cloud our dreams will be washed away in the blood of the Lamb. Peace and reconciliation will come to the world, through the blood of Christ's cross (cf. Col 1:20). That blood will do this reminds us of the struggle of the forces of life and death which now make up our wounded world. That we have a God of such unbounded love and mercy to shed blood for us will help us find a way through this multicultural world we now live in, marked as it is by convergence and dislocations, by suffering and by hope.

Questions for Discussion

1. How have you experience multicultural living as a member of the ASC within the community itself?
2. What challenges have come to you regarding multicultural living in your ministry?
3. How does adoration and living out the Paschal Mystery help you address what you have experienced regarding multiculturalism?