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Intercultural Competence for Ministry: Mapping the Road Ahead

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For a book purporting to be a “toolbox,” that is, a practical resource for engaging complex challenges with handy and accessible aids for remedying the situation, this chapter may seem at first rather theoretical. All I can say is that I am a big believer in what some wise person said long ago: “Nothing is more practical than a *good* theory.” Intercultural competence needs to be addressed from a more penetrating and comprehensive theoretical *and* practical perspective because what is at stake, really, is a deeper grasp of the Catholic Church’s very identity and mission, one that goes beyond mere pragmatism. It is about what we do, but also about what we become and are! The reality of globalization, migrations, commerce, communications, and the struggle for human dignity has implications for the most basic units of the Christian community today—for each Christian individually as well as for the family, parish, diocese, apostolic movement, school, or Catholic organization. Hence mind-sets, heart-sets, and skill-sets in intercultural encounter have become increasingly indispensable for life, work, and ministry in today’s world and church. Both domestically and globally, matters of war and peace, communications, travel, migration, and business are bringing people and their cultures together as never before in human history.

The Catholic Church is surely no stranger to this worldwide development. While at times throughout history Catholics have not paid attention to their own preaching by falling into ethnocentrism and racism, overall the church has been and is today more than ever a pioneer in intercultural sensibility. The very term “catholic” refers precisely to

the church's mission to include all humanity in the loving embrace of a merciful God who desires to reach out to the ends of the earth in a relentless drive to *include* all rather than *exclude* anyone. Two millennia ago at one of the most critical moments in the fledgling church's history, St. Paul the apostle argued that the Gospel message and membership in the Christian community were open to all and that to be a follower of Jesus Christ did not require subscribing to Jewish norms and customs nor to those of any other culture. The Christian community was fundamentally open to all as a result of God's *universal love* and the *radical equality of all believers* in and through baptism. Hence the life of the church at all levels—family, parish, diocese, regionally or universally—has always been characterized by *a negotiation of differences*, giving and receiving, from among the myriad cultures and ways of being, thinking, feeling, and acting of a people. Moreover, this outgoing, inclusive understanding of the church's identity and mission captures the essence of the stunning program of ecclesial reform spearheaded by Pope Francis from the very start of his amazing pontificate. At the heart of it is the Holy Father's invitation to renew the church and the world by building cultures of encounter and dialogue.

After all, openness to culture in all its manifestations and emphasis on dialogue were signature features of the Second Vatican Council, as well as of the refreshing reforms being carried out today by Pope Francis in the spirit of that council fifty years after its closing. Moreover, the recognition of cultural diversity and intercultural effectiveness became priority concerns for the US church that the bishops directly confronted and affirmed when they established in 2008 the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity, for which I served as first executive director. These learnings and reflections flow directly from my experience of the secretariat in its early years.

Within four years of the establishment of the secretariat two important developments occurred: (1) the Cultural Diversity Network Convocation took place at the University of Notre Dame in 2010, and (2) coming on the heels of the convocation, a five-module workshop titled *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers* (BICM) was published and disseminated in 2012. Practical lessons are waiting to be learned by paying attention to the experiences, methods, and contents of these two groundbreaking events. That is why in the remainder of this chapter I propose to review the more salient takeaways from the Notre Dame Convocation and from the five modules that constitute

the BICM workshop because they afford insights into what intercultural competence is all about, map out the territory to be explored, and offer many practical lessons. I will highlight features of these experiences and resources that may be replicated or adapted to the growing number of diverse pastoral and organizational situations found in parishes and dioceses, as well as in Catholic schools, organizations, and apostolic movements. Hopefully, those looking for practical tools or at least suggestions will find something of value.

Lessons from the Cultural Diversity Network Convocation

The Notre Dame University gathering brought together a select group of five hundred leaders—laity, religious, and clergy, including several bishops—from six major families of US Catholics: European Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, African Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and migrants, refugees and travelers. In designing the process, a broad base of participants was invited to give input by means of (a) initial, nationwide consultations with bishops and with existing leadership groups among the six communities identified and (b) informal surveys of leaders in the field, that is, in shared or multicultural parishes, diocesan offices, schools, seminaries, and Catholic organizations. In assuming leadership in planning the convocation, however, the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity had to overcome a serious obstacle to credibility. Many of the diverse communities perceived the very creation of the secretariat as an instance of a questionable emphasis on “multiculturalism.” Let me explain.

The secretariat had come about as the result of merging longstanding secretariats, one for Hispanic Affairs and the other for African American Affairs. The new secretariat merged those two secretariats and added three other major communities to its purview—Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and migrants, refugees and travelers. A serious and often legitimate criticism of this “multicultural” approach is that it short-circuits the need for the parish, diocese, or organization to establish and maintain *credibility* with the base of these diverse communities. Each cultural group needs its own space to pull itself together in contexts where it has sometimes or even often been neglected, overlooked, powerless, or discriminated against. As a result, there is a necessary role for what some call silos—spaces where distinct groups

feel comfortable and can process their concerns and build up the necessary experience to engage the wider ecclesial and social reality *from a position of strength* rather than powerlessness. Unity in the church, after all, does not fall down miraculously from the sky. It happens as a result of much prayer and hard work: attitudes, knowledge, and skills that create communion out of the many differences of language, culture, social class, and other forms of diversity so characteristic of our times. In creating the Secretariat for Cultural Diversity at the USCCB, the Catholic bishops made a prudential judgment that time was ripe to move to a *second moment* in the realization of communion in diversity. This required bringing credible leaders of the diverse communities into real dialogue (give and take) among themselves and with the bishops and their representatives, and maintaining this dynamic among all parties concerned. One of the benefits of moving to this second moment in building up ecclesial communion is the opportunity for all participants to grow in attitudes, knowledge, and skills that support a deepening sense of mutual respect and trust.

A second source of criticism and concern regarding the drive toward “multiculturalism” is that it undercuts the urgent need to identify and raise up credible leaders from the respective ethnic/racial groups. Instead of having its own proper leaders recognized, persons from other groups are often raised up to leadership of these multicultural organizational units. No matter how well-intentioned these leaders may be, they are unable to serve as *role models* to encourage more leadership development in each diverse community. Echoing some of the same concerns noted here, the US bishops’ Committee on Hispanic Affairs cogently voiced the ongoing concern about a mistaken multicultural way of thinking, as well as of a “one-size-fits-all” mind-set in their 2002 document titled “Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry.”

Participants in the symposium spoke with concern about a “multicultural” model that consolidates minorities under one office, which is headed by a coordinator. In the experience of the participants, this model often dilutes the identity and vision of Hispanic ministry and those of other ethnic ministries. It can reduce effectiveness in dioceses, parishes, and Catholic organizations and institutions. The leadership in Hispanic ministry is particularly concerned about the reduction of resources and the limited access to the bishop that can follow the establishment of multicultural offices. Also expressed was concern about

exclusion of Hispanic ministry from the decision-making process, particularly in the areas of budgets, plans, and programs specific to Hispanic ministry and its impact on other ministerial areas and in the mission of the church as a whole.¹

In the same document, Hispanic ministry leaders note that the purpose of multiculturalism is to promote integration and unity among the diverse cultural groups in church and society. As such, multiculturalism is certainly a positive and necessary development. Yet the committee notes,

Multiculturalism . . . has been critiqued for abetting a “one-size-fits-all” mentality in pastoral ministry by creating a situation in which all groups are put into the same basket. This can have a negative effect on diverse communities by depriving them of the exercise of subsidiarity and of opportunities to form their own leaders and develop appropriate pastoral and educational models, resources and initiatives.²

Another criticism of multiculturalism came from the African American community, which noted that emphasis on cultures can eclipse or erode awareness of *racism* which, despite real gains of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and '70s, continues to be a reality and matter of serious concern to the church and society. For all these reasons, then, a troublesome level of discomfort and uneasiness among the various ecclesial leaders of the diverse cultural and racial groups had to be reduced, if not eliminated, if the convocation process was to enjoy an adequate level of credibility among all concerned. The path forward, therefore, required those charged with initiating the process, that is, the Secretariat of Cultural Diversity, to demonstrate as much as possible an openness to every racial/ethnic community, an ability to listen, learn, and model intercultural effectiveness and mutuality at each step of the way.

Something that contributed mightily to the creation of a sense of mutual regard among the diverse groups was the diverse composition and planning of the Notre Dame Convocation's steering committee. Perhaps even more consequential was the composition of the committee on prayer and worship. It was essential that the various groups truly see themselves in the convocation's program of prayer and worship, since this would set the tone for everything else. Much thought was given to this and, consequently, among the participants on the committee were excellent Latino, African American, Asian American, Native American,

and European American liturgists and musicians who knew from real-life experience how to blend elements of the church's sacred liturgy with rituals, symbols, and narratives of the diverse communities, and do so in a respectful, integral, beautiful, and inspiring way.

Perhaps the single most effective method used at the very outset of the encounter was *storytelling*. Each cultural group, including the European American or Anglo, as it is sometimes called, was asked to reflect on its particular Catholic heritage and express how it lives its Catholicism through rituals, symbols, and narratives special to it. Something very interesting occurred when the groups went off to discuss their particular ways of being Catholic, of bringing faith and church teaching to life. The various non-European groups, including the African Americans, went at it with gusto and found great joy and pride in reviewing their customs and distinctive styles of Catholicism.

If truth be told, however, the European American white group was a bit stumped. The task seemed somewhat awkward or strange to them for a couple of reasons. First, because the European Americans were simply used to thinking of their way of being Catholic as virtually the only way, they were the "insiders," as it were, and the other cultural groups were the "outsiders." This in itself was a revelation for the European American group, which discovered that the convocation process did not simply assume that the traditional US way of doing things was *the* norm, much less the only way to proceed, but simply *a* norm in a church that *de facto* is a communion of diversity. The European Americans discovered what it's like to *level the field* by becoming simply one group among many. The experience of being an outsider can be a revelation. Perhaps another reason for some European American participants feeling "stretched" by the experience was that US Catholicism is very driven by the enforcement of standards. It is a very post-Tridentine Catholicism that may suffer from rigidity and from too much organization, standardization, and concern with rules. Many other forms of Catholicism lived by persons of other cultures are more spontaneous and *expressive*. They bring a rich aesthetic orientation, imagination, color, movement, affectivity, and sense of celebration to their Catholicism. Tendencies toward rigidity and inflexibility—what Bishop Robert Barron calls "beigeness"—hold some forms of Catholicism back from achieving a truly *inculturated evangelization*, which goes well beyond simply engaging the mind or keeping the rules.

Thus the promotion of intercultural competencies has everything to do with bringing the faith to life, giving real traction to what we believe by expressing it in captivating stories, gestures, rituals, and symbols instead of reducing it to the banality of standard norms and practices in the name of order or orthodoxy—what Pope Francis calls “turning the church into a tidy museum.”

A practical question that arose during the convocation had to do with the need for every parish, diocese, school, and organization to ask how willing it was to treat “outside” cultures with respect and even mutuality. Without doing so, one does not get to first base in intercultural relations. It has been observed that sometimes a genuine sense of hospitality in Catholic parishes is only skin deep. People say “welcome,” but they place a serious condition on it, namely, that the newcomers fit in and conform to the host community’s way of doing things, to their social class sensibilities or other distinctions. True interculturality and hospitality in a Christian sense, at least, requires real openness to the *other* based on love and an ability to both *give* to others and *receive* from what they have to offer. It is not merely a matter of tolerance or “going along in order to get along.” This realization marked the interaction among all the cultural groups to a notable degree at the convocation.

Mapping the Road to Intercultural Competence: What to Do

The first part of this chapter has tried to convey the idea that growth in intercultural competence requires careful thought and planning, but most especially a *change of attitude*. Responding to diversity in one’s parish or in the diocese is not just a matter of “being nice” to others or engaging in a kind of hospitality that is skin deep. This second part outlines specific strategies and activities that are deeply *challenging* because they promote growth in cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in various cultural contexts. Yes, they require change in mind-sets and approaches to ministry in the concrete situations in which ministry is carried out. Some of these recommendations are general, others more specific, but all of them require imagination and an ability to take risks, or what Pope Francis likes to call “going out,” leaving the security of the sacristy for the dangers of the street and risking “getting into an accident.”

One place to begin is by simply formulating, reflecting on, and sharing answers about key questions that affect the depth and quality of the individual or collective response to the challenges of intercultural encounters. The space limits of this chapter do not allow me to fully develop these suggestions for action, but they do provide an opportunity to highlight at least some of the contents and practical methods found in the above-mentioned USCCB's BICM workshop. First, I will look at the all-important question of attitude—what has been called *heart-set*. Second, I will outline what kind of knowledge or *mind-set* must be acquired and enhanced. And third, I will profile some practical skills or *skill-sets* required for intercultural effectiveness. These three categories provide the *analytic tools* for properly assessing what to do, where to start, and where one wants to go in the development of intercultural sensibility.

Developing the Right Attitudes

1. *Curiosity*: The literature on intercultural competence insists that one of the more important attitudes necessary to engage others, *any* others, is curiosity. Strange as it may sound, efforts to develop intercultural capacities rise and fall on this. Without a true desire to *experience and know the reality of the other*, efforts to reach out in any form are “dead in the water.” The sad truth is that some people simply lack curiosity and hence they remain locked in self-referentiality and, let me use the proper word, *ignorance*. (My father used to say, “Ignorance is bliss!”) In a world of rising diversity there are many who cannot bear the cost of reaching out for various reasons. This heart-set must be cultivated if the parish, diocese, or wider church is ever to become a real force for evangelization.

2. *Bias, prejudice, stereotypes, and racism*: Here are four complicated attitudes or ways of feeling and thinking that create often insurmountable obstacles and effectively cut people off from one another. These deadly orientations are often, if not usually, held by people in an unconscious and unanalyzed way. Strange as it may sound, the more religious people are, the more imbedded these negativities can be. Module 4 of BICM develops this theme and provides simple group activities that will help ministers identify and moderate these deeply rooted but toxic tendencies in all human beings. These attitudes are perpetual “elephants in our ecclesial living rooms.” One of the first attitudes that must be

overcome is the one that suggests that because we are a church community of faithful, good Christians, such negative tendencies could not possibly be found in us. Yet the recognition of these negative tendencies is so important for the Christian community at all times and places because it puts flesh and bones onto our assertion about the reality of our own personal sinfulness and how sin functions structurally as well in the church as an institution, and also in civil society.

3. *Living with ambiguity*: It goes without saying that exposure to the reality of cultural differences means confronting the fact that human beings deal with all kinds of important life situations in a variety of ways that may even seem strange and puzzling. People usually want clear and straight answers and are uncomfortable with whatever is different or *other*. Differences of language, race, culture, political ideology, and social class often elicit fear. Cultural competence requires an ability to live with these fears and strangenesses—it comes with the territory—in a global church and world. Unity in the parish or church is not the result of denying or rejecting these differences, but of working through them to achieve communion in *diversity* rather than communion in *conformity*.

Developing Our Knowledge

1. *Culture*: Understanding what is meant by culture is the single most important key for grasping the church's contemporary understanding of its identity and mission today. Too many good Catholics, including some church leaders, seem to be challenged by the anthropological conception of culture as "the way of thinking, feeling, and acting shared by a people." Understanding religion depends on understanding culture because culture is "the way we human beings are who and what we are." At the heart of this idea of culture are stories, rituals, and symbols that are the powerful *building blocks of meaning* in people's lives. Module 2 of BICM provides a handy overview of this foundational bit of knowledge for appreciating why insight into cultures and how they work is so essential to *inculturated evangelization*—the church's mission.

In addition to the broad concept of culture, however, intercultural sensibilities require a deeper knowledge of how diverse cultures think about themselves and the world around them. For instance, do they take a *collectivist* or an *individualist* approach to human experience? Are they more feminine or masculine in how they approach experience and

decision making? Do they prize hierarchy or “pecking orders,” or do they prefer egalitarian arrangements that level differences among generations, genders, rich and poor, and so forth? Another defining characteristic of cultures is whether they exhibit and honor the customs and norms of the community’s past, of ancestors. Or are they modern or postmodern, future-oriented and unaware or unconcerned about preserving values from the past? How do diverse cultures relate to time? Is punctuality valued or are relationships so important that they trump punctuality?

2. *Immersion and language experiences*: Finally, a knowledge of other cultures, languages, and religions learned by formal study or personal encounters is important. Personal experience—often as the result of taking risks—is the most important way to grow in intercultural sensibility. *Immersion experiences*, for example, can be gained by travel within or outside the United States but also by careful attention to the places where diverse cultures thrive right next door to us in virtually all US metropolitan and suburban centers. Neither the territoriality of the parish or diocese nor the limited audience of Catholic schools, organizations, and movements exonerates any of those particular units of the church from the mission to reach out and be as inclusive as possible.

Developing Skills

1. *Communication skills*: Effective communication demands that one truly know the one being addressed. One must know, for instance, whether the person or group being addressed belongs to an individualist or a collectivist culture. Even more pertinent is what happens when an individualist culture like that of the United States encounters collectivist cultures like those of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The individualist culture sees life as a process of advancement for the individual person, while collectivist cultures see life as a matter of advancing the well-being of the family and community, not the individual. Time does not allow me to go into all the profound differences between these two types of cultures. The BICM workshop provides a more comprehensive view. Suffice it here to say that ignorance of these differences can lead to huge mistakes by pastors and lay ministers, along with failures to effectively communicate, persuade, and lead.

2. *Face management*: Flowing from the differences between collectivist and individualist cultures is the matter of “face.” Saving face is a major concern in many Asian as well as other traditional cultures like

African and Latin American. This involves attitudes toward elders and ancestors as well as toward hierarchy and authority. Matters of gender relations may also be part of this. Intercultural sensibility demands a basic level of exposure to and insight about how all these complex cultural sensibilities function and interact in today's world.

3. *Conducting meetings/reaching decisions*: Involved here are conflicting attitudes toward the purpose of meetings. Traditional cultures do not think of them primarily as "getting something done." Rather, meetings are mainly about the cultivation of human relationships *for their own sake*. This is the contrast between cultures that stress *doing* (our modern and postmodern developed world) and others that focus on *being*. This is not a matter of right or wrong; it is simply about differences. In decision making, modern cultures tend toward a *democratic*, "take a vote and the majority wins," approach, while many collectivist, traditional cultures prefer a *consensus* approach that seeks to leave no one out.

4. *Leadership and conflict resolution*: In modern, individualist cultures, leaders are chosen because they can "get things done." In some collectivist cultures they are chosen because of the *relationship* they have by reason of age or family heritage, rank or status. Approaches to conflict vary from individualist to collectivist cultures. Individualist cultures see conflicts in terms of issues and seek to address differences directly. Collectivist cultures look first to relationships, not issues, because the most desired outcome is not resolving some issue or other, but maintaining good group face. Hence, being direct in one's communication can be inappropriate and ineffective.

Conclusion

Navigating the complex reality of cultures is not only, or mainly, a matter of skills but also of attitude and spirituality. One needs to be *converted* to the reality of the other, one needs to truly be motivated. Pope Francis is doing his part with his revolution, shaking things up with his calls for an *inclusive* rather than an exclusive church, one that always reaches out to others. But such outreach has consequences. Among them is the need to do our homework and get to work. These pages have focused on analytical tools and a few practical suggestions on how to go about doing that.

The culture of encounter and dialogue proposed by Pope Francis is as old as the Gospel itself. Our frisky Argentine pope did not invent the idea of the absolute centrality of encounter and dialogue for the well-being of the church. These realities have everything to do with the trinitarian, incarnate God we have come to know in Jesus of Nazareth. At this moment in human history, the Catholic Church, precisely because it is “catholic,” is being invited and challenged as never before by this pope “from the ends of the earth” to pay witness to God’s universal love by modeling intercultural sensibility and competence. The conditions are more than ripe for doing this. The Catholic Church in the United States has a privileged role in responding to this challenge, given the historic openness to immigrants and refugees that is one of the deepest and most authentic currents of both our Catholic and American identities.

Endnotes

1. “Encuentro and Mission: A Renewed Pastoral Framework for Hispanic Ministry,” in *A New Beginning: Hispanic/Latino Ministry—Past, Present, Future* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012), 69.

2. *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2012), 42. Another excellent resource is *Best Practices for Shared Parishes: So That They May All Be One* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2013).