Embracing our differences ... 
witnessing unity in diversity

Love Gives Everything
Called to Deepen Communion

The call to deepen communion has echoed in the hearts of School Sisters of Notre Dame around the world, “wherever we are—in every place, in every time, in every situation” (You Are Sent, Constitution 9). In our world today, we experience the need for a unity that embraces all humanity and the whole of creation. The pandemic, which continues to impact our lives, has exposed our false securities and opened us to a greater awareness that we are interconnected, that we are a global community (cf. Fratelli Tutti, 7, 32).

The challenge is to “accept the world as a sacrament of communion” (Laudato Si’, 9) and to live into the fuller meaning of this truth. Unity in diversity is the way of the future, a journey for all of us, which we begin anew each day. As School Sisters, we have committed ourselves as persons and as congregation to expand our understanding of interculturality and live mission more interculturally.

While enriching, this commitment is demanding. In this issue of In Mission, we share experiences of our sisters who are opening themselves to diverse cultures and are welcoming transformative encounters.

Becoming intercultural involves new learning and patient listening, seeing with new eyes and engaging in lifelong conversion. In this process, we are stretched, grow, and become more mature and capable of fostering unity in a divided world. Intercultural living is discipleship, a faith journey. It is God’s mission, and together we are called and sent to deepen communion. For in God’s eyes we are “joined in a splendid universal communion” (Laudato Si’, 220).

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The culture of religious life in an intercultural community

By Sister Delia Calis SSND, (AM)

My memories of interculturality during my initial formation are not so much about formal education regarding intercultural living or attitudes. Rather I would say, my awareness, struggles, and growing comfort came from shared experiences.

I remember when I was a novice (1961) and we, as a Canadian province, responded to the call to go to Third World countries, especially for the ministry of education. We sent four Sisters to Bolivia. What a sending it was!

All of us felt we were going with those sisters to South America. We opened ourselves to the diverse Latin American cultures and we, as a whole province, were stretched and changed. Liberation Theology called us to see, judge, and act which became integral to our way of making decisions. Our world expanded and many of us desired to participate, go to Bolivia and later Peru. (Nearly 30 of us “Young Sisters” took an intensive course in Spanish at the University to prepare in the hope of being sent.)

In a more general sense, interculturality did not enter specifically into our initial formation. However, I would say that the culture of religious life was taught, lived, and modeled for us and became part of our lives. Many times the values of SSND built on values from home and so integration of cultures enriched our lives. Other times, with rules, regulation, and observances, there were difficulties and tensions between the culture of the convent and the culture of home. The different personalities and backgrounds of both the sisters and the young aspiring to be members, provided ample opportunities to grow in respect and acceptance of differences.
In my experience in living in a multicultural community, giving myself time and listening patiently were treasures that helped to build unity among us despite the differences related to cultures and languages.

At times, there was a doubt as to why waste so much time listening to explanations and interpretations of the other. After all, during this time you can do something good for others. Over time, I began to experience positive fruits of patient listening, such as a sense of closeness with others, and encouragement to change my own thinking, to give up fixed opinions. My understanding of others and myself was broadening. I praise God for the richness placed in our hearts and minds. My view of the world, the Church and local events also deepened.

Patient listening led me to consciously and courageously open up to what is new and different. After all, everyone has their own unique wisdom and richness of experiences that allowed them to develop and grow in more and more zealous service to God and the people to whom they are sent.

This was a gift. It was associated with an internal readiness to change, to transcend oneself in one’s thought patterns. It led to a lively and more intense way of being and performing daily activities. It was not always easy, because it was connected with fear and the risk of being misunderstood, judged or ignored. When I think about these experiences today, I can see how important time is in creating an intercultural community. Not everything can be built at once.

Patient listening, involves transcending oneself, a readiness to change, coping with anxiety, and the courage to share oneself and to consciously searching for what connects us. This is spread over time and requires patience. It is worth taking up all the challenges related to building the intercultural community, because then the joy of the fruits of these struggles is even greater and lasts. We become more mature, more enriched and more capable of building unity with others in a divided world.
The Paschal Mystery -- the essence of interculturality

By Sister Hedwig Marie Ganter SSND, (ALC)

One of the provincial leaders visiting the first group of novices at the Latin American Novitiate asked, “What do you find the most difficult in your life here?” They replied, “The differences of culture”. “And what do you find the most life giving and enriching?” They replied, “The differences of culture”. This sharing expresses clearly that at the heart of intercultural living is the PASchal MYSTERY: in dying to self, we gain new life.

And how is this paschal mystery lived out in the concrete? In my experience of living more than twenty-five years in intercultural communities, this continues to take place through the skills of listening, dialogue, and conflict management.

Pope Francis states: “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue’.” (Encyclical Letter Fratelli Tutti on Fraternity and Social Friendship) 198.

True listening and dialogue imply dying to self, a conversion of heart. Habits of clinging to my own opinions, views and convictions die hard!

This leads me to the need for conflict management. Prayer and an openness to change are essential to enter into this process. At times, I have had to pray days in order to be free enough to listen and to avoid making judgments, while realizing that no one culture is superior to listen and to avoid making judgments, while realizing that no one culture is superior to another. Being patient and willing to take the time needed are essential to this process.

One of the insights that has kept me motivated is that this need for unity in a diversity of cultures is the way of the future in our world. As You Are Sent states, “By our unity...we witness to the possibility of overcoming national and cultural barriers” (General Directory 36)

As we move toward unity in our intercultural living, what is most beautiful and rewarding, is that more and more we are who we are called to be: persons created in the image and likeness of God, who is ONE in a diversity of THREE.

Just like caring for a garden, an intercultural community takes time, understanding and daily efforts to grow. Pictured (l to r): Hedwig (Hedy) Marie Ganter SSND, Lucy Ramirez SSND, and Leetta Hammack SSND.

Photo: SSND
In trying to explain the meaning of interculturality, the image of a garden came to mind. There are a great variety of plants. Some flowers are big, brightly colored; others are small and delicate. Some have the ability to nourish and others have healing powers. God has created a world with abundant life that serves to enhance the lives of each, whether as plants or humans.

As a School Sister of Notre Dame, I experienced the many different cultures of the people in Slovenia. This is my homeland, a small country (about 2 million inhabitants) in Central Europe. It is necessary to study other languages and collaborate with other cultures.

This year we celebrate the 30th year of our independence. However, it was not always a country of freedom. Starting in WW II, my country was governed by the communist regime in Yugoslavia. Religious were not allowed to teach in schools, our apostolate was mostly pastoral work in the parishes. When I was 19, the congregation sent me to study in Munich, in our Bavarian province. I quickly learned German and became accustomed to a very different school system. I felt at home in the community of candidates and sisters.

From 1968 candidates, novices and some sisters from Slovenia joined the Bavarian province for education and formation. Later when the “younger” Slovene sisters met, we all recognized the importance of our formation in Bavaria. Without realizing it, we were learning what it meant to live in an intercultural community. We learned to adjust to the joys and difficulties of living with many cultures. Years later, the congregation asked me to return to Germany to care for the elderly sisters. I worked for over two years. I enjoyed assisting and nursing sisters. The nursing team was international: Polish, Rumanian, Slovene, and German. Our formation prepared us to be witnesses of interculturality to the world.

“Christ is the center of our community and the source of our unity. (YAS, C 6.) Mother Theresa wanted one congregation. Unity is our charism. In this difficult time, we are called again to realize that “our striving for unity embraces all humanity and the whole of creation.” (YAS, C 9)
The future of international religious life depends significantly on the ability of each community to live interculturally; those who fail to do so will fragment and die. (A.J. Gittins – Living Mission Interculturally)

A culture of compassion

By Sister Beatriz Martínez-García SSND, UN-NGO Representative

Interculturality has become a popular word. However, that does not mean that it is understood. A few days ago, I read a review of the book Entrañable Dios. Las Obras de Misericordia: Hacia una Cultura de Compasión by Xabier Pikaza and José A. Pagola which highlights that compassion is God’s way of being. The culture of compassion is imperative to live interculturality.

Two experiences bring to mind what Anthony Gittins identifies as an intercultural community culture: “Everyone is directly affected by the presence of cultural others… all members commit themselves to live outside their own comfort zone.”

My first experience occurred in 2009 when I participated in the SSND International Program. We were a group of sisters of seven different nationalities. English was the common language for 98% of us, it was our second or third language. We spoke with the accent of our respective nationalities. We were all foreigners in Rome unable to speak the local language. These characteristics influenced our intercultural living, i.e., all of us were committed to leaving our comfort zone, to opening ourselves to the novelty of the other person. Our community was not a group of majorities or minorities, but equals in a place which no one could claim as her own.

The second experience is at my current ministry as representative of our SSND Congregation to the United Nations. I relate with and work collaboratively with men and women of diverse nations, ethnicities, languages, beliefs. My experience is that once again I find myself in a relationship of equals. None of us represents our own culture or country; rather we collaborate to act for the dignity of humanity and care for creation. We are all called to live with compassion.

The common threads of these two experiences are relationships of equality and compassion. Thus, living interculturality is possible.

My experiences among the Roma people

By Sister M. Éva Csompilla SSND, (MG)

I have been working among Roma people for eight years now. They are a distinct ethnic and cultural group of traditionally nomadic itinerants living mostly in Europe. Often I meet one-on-one with the children, mainly in learning situations.

For me the encounters with them have always been transformative, joyfully or painfully so. Spending time with them touches me, and every time causes me to reflect ever more deeply about their lives. I never leave unconcerned.

When teaching them, I use the same methods and the same approach as I use with my class in school. In my experience, it pays off to start with a game. It may take away a few minutes of learning time but we gain more by having fun, releasing the tension, tuning in to each other.

Since I have worked part-time around Roma men, women and children, I discover things that I cannot explain. There is only a question, maybe an inkling. For example, not long ago, I asked one of the mothers if she used to read fairy tales to her little girl, as a means to grow and enrich her vocabulary. Her answer was no. Later I thought about her answer. It came to me that I had made an assumption based on my childhood. Is it possible that the mother said no because she had difficulty the reading the stories? Would she expose her shortcomings for her child to hear?

I experience daily that both Roma parents and children can trust, dare to ask questions and show their shortcomings to those who are welcoming to them, who also dare to show their own vulnerabilities, who do not want to lecture them, and from whom they experience compassion and attention. Those who are simply present for them. It is a very enriching opportunity and adventure to be among Roma people!

Here is my voice---Audio files are in English for this first attempt. Reading the sisters’ intercultural experiences provides one component of their story. Hearing a person speak gives an added dimension. Here are audio links from sisters talking about their experiences of living interculturally.

Life among the First Nation by Sister Mary Jeanne Davidson SSND AM
Returning to my native culture by Sister Joan Marie Van Beek SSND CP

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When we hear the word “interculturality” it is very familiar to us because the Banat, where our monastery is located, has always been shaped by different cultures. Romanians, Germans, Hungarians, Serbs, Bulgarians, Jews, Slovaks and Roma (or travelling community) belong to the minorities who have lived together here for centuries. This diversity of peoples, which arose over time under certain geographical and political conditions, still shapes interethnic relations today. The linguistic diversity in the Banat is a wealth for the whole community, as every single language is a direct expression of culture as well as individual and collective identity.

We also experience this interculturality in our community life and in the parish. Each of us three sisters has a different mother tongue – Romanian, German or Hungarian. On one hand this is a wealth, but on the other hand it is a challenge. We try to integrate this diversity into our daily life. For example, sometimes in our community we sing and pray in the three languages. On major holidays we have a church service in the parish in the three languages, which requires a lot of openness, tolerance and patience. On Sundays, each of us has the opportunity to celebrate the service in her mother tongue.

Diversity is also addressed in our ministry of education. We have a Hungarian school in the city of Timişoara, where Sr. Renáta is teaching. The Catholic kindergarten, which is led by Sr. Carmen, has in addition to the Romanian speaking group, a Hungarian one.

Living interculturality means preserving our own identity while simultaneously being open to others. The ability to live interculturally is not a matter of course, but requires a new beginning every day in dialogue, appreciation, acceptance and humility.

Membership in our world-wide community broadens the scope of our concern and fosters in us a readiness to be with and to serve people of various cultural backgrounds within our own nation or in another country.

(GD 36)
Embodying interculturality

by Sister Maureen Wekesa SSND and Sister Lucy Waigwa SSND, (AF)

Our living interculturally for the past eight months as School Sisters of Notre Dame in our Cape Coast community has been a blessing. Here in Ghana, we are 18 sisters from ten different countries and cultures. We come from Europe, North America and Africa. We have experienced that awareness of one’s cultural background, openness to share and a willingness to learn from other cultures is essential for intercultural living.

Almost every day is a cultural experience, as we taste different foods from our various cultures. Some of these dishes include chapatti, banku, ugali, plantain, Moi-Moi and various soups. This has been a wonderful experience, which has widened our horizons and helped us to see the world differently.

Our cultural background along with the Akan Ghanian culture, in which we live, has nourished our prayer life. We actively participate in the Church services, using the local Fante language.

We have learned to listen more intently, hold our opinions lightly, which in community decision-making offers a greater sense of ownership. These skills have helped us to build trust among ourselves and with local people among who we live and work.

Community prayer and gatherings provide opportunities for us to share and celebrate our rich cultural diversity. Our regular faith sharing incorporates our life experiences and daily encounters with the people in our ministry.

Intercultural community living does not happen quickly. It is an intentional commitment that one makes on a daily basis to common shared values. Our expression of these values may differ based on our personalities and culture but with a common vision and focus on the Trinity, interculturality becomes a beautiful expression of living our faith community.

May all people share

by Kurt Haspel (ÖR-IT/CE)

Sister Claudia is a member of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in the province of Austria-Italy. She has lived and worked in Romania and Austria over the past decades. From 2004-2015 she was in Timisoara (Romania) with other SSND Sisters. Together with Sr. Alvera, she cared for the elderly sisters there who wanted to live in community again. It had been 40 years since the dissolution of all convents by the communist government.

Sister personally experienced the long, bleak state of life after the fall of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu. She recalled her first impression from her early days. “I was struck by the appearance of what was a once flourishing city. The desolate buildings, the bumpy sidewalks, the shabby buses, the leaky market hall, the inadequate supply of goods. When buying a piece of furniture or a washing machine, the number of the person’s passport was entered! At that time, many relief supplies came from Germany. I was happy to help with the distribution of these goods.” From today’s point of view it is hardly imaginable that waste separation was completely unknown.
Much has improved over the years. A boost for this region in Eastern Europe will be in 2023, when Timisoara becomes the “European Capital of Culture.”

Sr. Claudia found that the spirit of SSND was present in Romanian culture. “I came into a good community that included some girls from the countryside who couldn’t afford boarding school. I enjoyed listening to the sisters when they told me about the past. Despite many privations and hardships, they remained a joyful, contented people.”

Sister came to understand that to live one’s faith, one has to live in and share the culture of the people she serves. She did not reject her roots but came to see God working in a new dimension. With patience and a continued willingness to work toward a common vision, an intercultural community can emerge.

The key is respect of people and culture

by Sister Walter Marie “Willie” Ray SSND, (CP)

Sister Walter Marie Ray was born on the island of Mogmog, a tiny Micronesian island, one of the small islands that make up Ulithi Atoll. The islands are 1,242 miles north of Papua New Guinea.

Sister Willie, as she is affectionately known, left Mogmog in 1964 for Yap (107 miles), Guam (422 miles) and eventually the United States (7,703 miles). Having lived on a remote island and then moving to a larger island and finally living and working in the Midwest of the United States, Sister Willie has had many intercultural experiences.

As a School Sister of Notre Dame, Sister Willie has been an educator since 1976. She is also passionate about reducing the effects of global warming. She has seen first-hand the destruction of rising sea levels on Mogmog. Several of the Ulithi Atol islands have already disappeared. On Mogmog, her family and friends are affected by loss of land and food shortages.

“My experience of interculturality, moving from culture to culture, is that I am always afraid of not fitting into the norms of the culture where I am currently,” said Sister Willie. “Being from a simple island community and moving to a rigid religious life was difficult.” She seriously considered leaving. However, she persisted and became a School Sister of Notre Dame. Sister acknowledges that over the years much has changed. “We have learned much about interculturality. I feel much loved by my sisters in community. I am always touched when sisters are interested in how we do things in my culture.” It is very different today. “We are learning to accept other cultures and others accepting our culture.”

“Interculturality is not easy,” said Sister Willie. “Sometimes it was difficult to the point that I wanted to just sit down and cry.” However, she said two values have supported her and continue to strengthen her in community living, “Respect of people and culture and the attitude of “one for all and all for one.”
Sister Mary Goretty Aboge (AF), chair of the Congregational Interculturality Team, began the first online session of the Interculturality Extended Laboratory on June 19, with “This is the day that the Lord has made!” As the sisters appeared one by one on the Zoom screen, they delighted in welcoming each other from all across the globe (4:00 am in Southern California, USA and 8:00 pm in Kyoto, Japan). They chose the name LAB, because a laboratory is a space of building and transformation, a secure space to experiment. In this case, the experiment fosters new interpersonal relationships, respecting and embracing multicultural diversity. The Interculturality Lab allows participants to share and expand their understanding of interculturality and acquire skills to initiate conversations in local communities and provinces.

Sister Inês Camiran (GC) set the stage by acknowledging the diversity among us and situated our goal and objectives within the call of the 24th General Chapter expressed in *Love Gives Everything*. She also reminded us of Pope Francis’ challenge in Fratelli Tutti: “We need a ‘we’ culture” (*Fratelli Tutti* 35) and “I am counting on you to wake up the world” (*Apostolic Letter to Consecrated Persons*).

Sister Teresinha Dorigon (ALC) led the engaging introduction to this study of interculturality. She emphasized the radical distinction between being an international, multi-cultural congregation and being an intercultural community. Becoming an intercultural congregation will require new learning, “seeing with new eyes”, and lifelong conversion.

Interculturality is a vocation received through the Gospel! The intercultural life is an authentic discipleship experienced by people who are culturally diverse coming together because of God’s mission. The participants in the Interculturality Extended Laboratory have embraced this work with enthusiasm and delight!