I

NTERCULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Intercultural sensitivity is a way of being, living, expressing ourselves, relating to others, and acting, which enriches people from different cultures who come in contact with each other. It has nothing to do with a relationship motivated by economic greed, or by social, political and religious omnipotence. These attitudes bring about the domination of one culture over the other, exploitation, ethnocentrism, discrimination, and contain strong remnants of a colonialist approach. A humble, solidary, and patient heart, which overcomes prejudice and ambition, is the basis of intercultural sensitivity. This is essential for evangelization, because it stems from the Gospel, from the example of Jesus, who sent us “to the whole world”[[1]](#footnote-1).

The Church objectively and officially stated its position in this regard in the II Vatican Council, using different emphases in various documents (Gaudet Mater Ecclesia, Gaudium et Spes, and Ad Gentes). This intercultural attitude found clear expression in the Ad Gentes decree, which invites us to welcome the seeds “planted by God in ancient cultures already prior to the preaching of the Gospel” (AG 18, 2).

Intercultural sensitivity appears more explicitly in Marist literature and culture after the II Vatican Council. The *Capitulants’ Message* at the end of the 17th General Chapter stated: *“*We aim at deeply respecting local cultures and at our full incarnation as apostles, in order to elicit the liberating irruption of the Good News in every persons’ heart”[[2]](#footnote-2). Regarding the formation of missionaries, the document about the Missions states: “This remote formation, as far as possible and useful, should include the study of the history of social structures, customs, moral mindsets of people, and languages. It should aim at the acquisition of practical skills and the adaptation to new cultural contexts. Regarding non-Christians, it will follow a new spirit in line with Vatican II, which demands the conversion of the apostle’s inner gaze”.



Intercultural sensitivity takes into account the simplest day-to-day circumstances like timetables, concrete tasks, the weather, and other local situations. People express themselves in concrete life through the areas of culture, social order, family, politics and religion. “*A nation expresses its soul through its culture*”[[3]](#footnote-3). Marist missionary Brothers need an attitude of *deep incarnation* in response to specific situations like language, culture, and sociopolitical conditions”. The document also encourages a simple life style in line with local culture, and a respectful attitude regarding local expressions in the areas of art, liturgy, and prayer, which are important intercultural elements and ways of incarnating the Gospel.

Article 91 or the Constitutions – which are the highest expression of our life, mission, and spirituality – emphasizes all these aspects: “The Brothers are quick to recognize the Gospel values already present in the diverse cultures, and, by their service and example, they help to purify whatever in these cultures is out of harmony with the Gospels. By the way they work to promote these values, they attest to the quality of each culture. In so doing, they gain new vigor in their Marist missionary spirit. The style of life they lead helps their integration into the country to which they have been sent (…). During the first years of their missionary experience, Brothers must have the time and the means of studying the local language”.

Intercultural sensitivity also impinges on our relationship with nature, and entails taking care of the Planet and of creation as a whole[[4]](#footnote-4).

It is clear that intercultural sensitivity does not only regard *ad gentes* missionaries. We are speaking about the normal attitude of any educator, formator, or shepherd, and about anyone who realizes that people in our world urgently need fraternity, new ways of relating to each other, and unity in diversity. This kind of relationship challenges the political and economic domination schemes existing in today’s world. Intercultural sensitivity nowadays is a clear prophetic and evangelical sign[[5]](#footnote-5).

1. Three examples can help us understand thisapproach.*Bernardino de Sahagún* (+1590), in Mexico, understood the benefits of learning the Nahuatl (Uto-Aztecan) culture and language for both the Aztec and Spanish people, and promoted the cultural exchange between the Franciscan/European and the Aztec communities. *Matteo Ricci* SJ (+1610) did the same between the Italian/European and the Chinese cultures, respecting the customs of the people and defending the Chinese rites. In Brazil we can mention *Sister Geneviève Guidolin,* known as *Genoveva Tapirapé* (+2013). Born in France, and belonging to the Little Sisters of Jesus inspired by Charles de Foucauld, she spent 61 years living with the Tapirapé people in the Amazon rainforest, fully integrated in their culture. These are excellent examples of intercultural sensitivity, which brings about mutual enrichment and makes the signs of life bloom. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The document on *Apostolic Life* says: “The II Vatican Council reflects about the situation in the world and states that *‘today, the human race is involved in a new stage of history. Profound and rapid changes are spreading by degrees around the whole world. Triggered by the intelligence and creative energies of man, these changes recoil upon him (…). Hence we can already speak of a true cultural and social transformation, one which has repercussions on man’s religious life as well’”* (GS 4, 2). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Missionaries shall be aware of people’ cultural expressions, according to the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (AG, 18). Our 17th General Chapter, in its document about *Missions*, advises: *“Missionary brothers must have an attitude of service: they comes to teach and learn; they should not aim at imposing their views and personal ideas”.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. *Gathered* *around the Same Table*, and especially *Water from the Rock*, 39. The final part of this last document, which invites us to envision new dreams, also indicates this intercultural dimension as an important part, not only of our mission, but also of our spirituality: *“Like Saint Marcellin, humbly anchored on the rock of God’s unconditional love, we actively engage in creating new paths of intercultural and interreligious dialogue”* (WFR 155. Cf. WFR 3). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. More recently, the *II Marist International Mission Assembly* of 2014 presented us with a number of challenges and key questions in this regard. The text of Nairobi asks us *“*to promote ‘inter’ processes (international - intercultural - intercongregational - interecclesial), which can strengthen the Marist mission in new lands”. Then it poses the corresponding key questions: “How could we foster ongoing missionary availability? What could we do to envision diversity as an opportunity to grow? How could we enrich each other at all these levels? What networks could we organize to be at the service of these “inter” processes?” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)