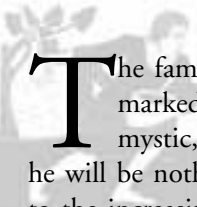


Model for Intercultural Competencies in Formation and Ministry: Awareness, Knowledge, Skills and Sensitivity

Fernando A. Ortiz, Ph.D., ABPP and Gerard J. McGlone, S.J., Ph.D.



The famous Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, remarked “the Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or he will be nothing.” One could apply this prediction to the increasingly diverse church in the United States, highlighting the importance of intercultural competencies among the clergy and noting that “the priest of tomorrow will be interculturally competent, one who has authentically and fully experienced culture, or he will be nothing.” Intercultural competency is understood as the capacity to notice, respect, appreciate and celebrate individual differences. These competencies were traditionally considered a one-sided reality that resided primarily within the individual. However, this individualistic focus has recently been challenged to incorporate a more holistic conceptualization of competencies including the environment, organizations, institutions and macro-systems that directly or indirectly influence priestly and religious formation. The seminary is inherently a richly complex environment where diversity is found in symbol, ritual and community. The development of these competencies ultimately builds on this organizational and communal infrastructure.

Holistic Interculturality in Formation

Definitions of culture abound. In this article, we understand culture broadly, not narrowly confined to ethnicity and race. In his address to the presidents of the Asian bishops’ conferences, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger defined culture:

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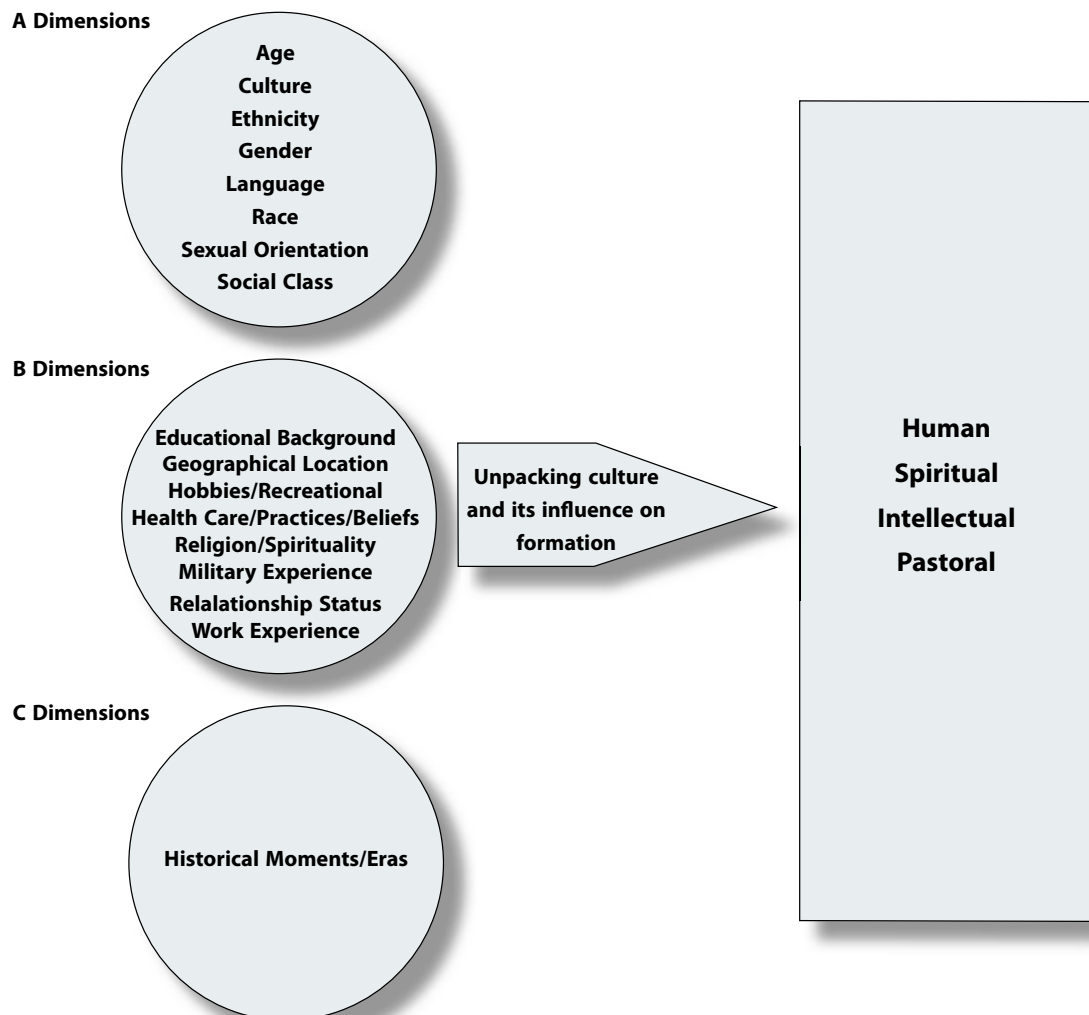
[The] historically developed common form of expression of the insights and values which characterize the life of a community...culture has to do with knowledge and values. It is an attempt to understand the world and man’s existence in the world, but it is not an attempt of a purely theoretical kind. Rather it is ordered to the fundamental interests of human existence. Understanding should show us how to be human, how man is to take proper place in this world and respond to it in order to realize himself in his search for success and happiness. Moreover, in the great cultures this question is not posed individually, as if each individual could think up a model for coming to terms with the world and life.¹

A holistic understanding of culture links the meaning and expression of culture to life in the community,

and this expression is never purely individualistic. Furthermore, a holistic understanding of someone’s culture considers all the dimensions of a person’s identity as intrinsically related to values and meanings. We include here a framework that can be used by formators and evaluators to more holistically understand the complexity and beauty of culture. Comprised of three dimensions, this model was initially developed by Arredondo et al.² In the context of formation, dimension “A” would include characteristics a candidate is born with or born into, including age, gender, culture, ethnicity, language, physical disability, sexual orientation and social class. Dimension “B” consists of factors such as educational background, geographic location, income, marital status, religion, work experience, citizenship status, military experience and hobbies or recreational interests. Dimension “C” consists of historical moments and eras; major historical, political, sociocultural and economic contexts; or events affecting a candidate’s vocational development. Figure 1 illustrates all of these dimensions and their relationship to formation.

It is important to point out that, in advancing the development and maintenance of intercultural competencies that holistically respect these individual differences, one does not engage in cultural and moral relativism. A mistaken notion of cultural diversity attempts to tolerate and naively embrace the ills of secularism and moral relativism. Some have expressed distrust of this type of multiculturalism, particularly when it is used as an ideology to embrace a centerless and incoherent variety of perspectives that are ultimately incompatible with a sound Catholic anthropology. This is especially important when one examines the interface between seminary and religious formation and curricula, which is strongly rooted in Western Christianity:

In general critics of multiculturalism argue that it will cause much greater problems than those it is intended to address. Some even depict it as a threat to freedom, progress, reason and science. In their view, the very notion of multiculturalism denies the standards of objectivity and



truth which are the foundation of Western civilization and that widespread acceptance would therefore lead to barbarism. One author who does not endorse multiculturalism, speaks of objectivity as the search for the widest possible intersubjective agreement. It is true that at one extreme, the assumption that all cultural values are equal could lead to an empty and valueless moral and cultural relativism. Multiculturalism recognizes that all should enjoy the presumption that their traditional culture has value but it does not assume that all cultures are of equal value.³

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If one takes to heart the exhortation of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, “to find God in all things”—that is, in every person, every place and every thing—it makes sense that one can find God in all cultures. However, cultures are also wounded and limited. One therefore engages cultures with respect and a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion, without assuming that all components and dimensions of culture are absolutely healthy or have equal value. The Gospel can transform these elements of culture. In dialoguing with cultures, one adopts an attitude informed by a theology of listening and encounter. In 1995, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger offered helpful perspectives on this dialogue:

But what does the word “dialogue” really mean? After all, dialogue does not take place simply because people are talking. More talk is the deterioration of dialogue that occurs when there has been a failure to reach it. Dialogue first

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comes into being where there is not only speech but also listening. Moreover, such listening must be the medium of an encounter; this encounter is the condition of an inner contact which leads to mutual comprehension. Reciprocal understanding, finally, deepens and transforms the being of the interlocutors. Having enumerated the single elements of this transaction, let us now attempt to grasp the significance of each in turn.

The first element is listening. What takes place here is an event of opening, of becoming open to the reality of other things and people. We need to realize what an art it is to be able to listen attentively. Listening is not a skill, like working a machine, but a capacity simply to be which puts in requisition the whole person. To listen means to know and to acknowledge another and to allow him to step into the realm of one’s own “I.” It is readiness to assimilate his word, and therein his being, into one’s own reality as well as to assimilate oneself to him in corresponding fashion. Thus, after the act of listening, I am another man, my own being is enriched and deepened because it is united with the being of the other and, through it, with the being of the world.

All of this presupposes that what my dialogue partner has to say does not concern merely some object falling within the range of empirical knowledge and of technical skills, that is, of external know-how. When we speak of dialogue in the proper sense, what we mean is an utterance wherein something of being itself, indeed, the

person himself, becomes speech. This does not merely add to the mass of items of knowledge acquired and of performances registered but touches the very being of men as such, purifying and intensifying his potency to be who he is.⁴

Intercultural competencies then include (a) awareness of the other, (b) knowledge about the uniqueness of the other, (c) sensitivity to the dignity of the other, and ultimately, (d) a set of skills to enter into dialogue and listening with otherness.

Examples of Development of Intercultural Competencies

Those in formation audit their own biases, prejudices and insensitivities while developing awareness of themselves as cultural beings. They critically examine the existence of racism and xenophobia in ecclesial institutions, particularly prejudices against foreigners and immigrants, and advocate for a more interculturally respectful church and society. This is consistent with the gospel mandate to go to all nations and cultures while preaching the good news. Instead of seeing others by focusing on differences (such as, He is from India), men and women in formation learn to focus primarily on the identity of the person as a son or daughter of God. This requires the ability to step out of one's own worldviews and accept every person for who they are in God's creation. This is essential in fostering a true sense of community in formation. When building intercultural competencies, one is especially understanding of those men and women in formation who may be apprehensive about engaging cultures because they fear a loss of identity or faith. It may be challenging for some to transcend or move out of this apprehension, cultural inertia and personal comfort zone. Motivated by Christian charity, formators can gently and gradually engage these men and women, encourage them to be reflective of culture and invite them to enter into cultural dialogue.

We would like to reiterate that the development of intercultural competencies is both an individual as well as an organizational endeavor. Moreover, this endeavor should not be viewed as a burden or a problem to be resolved, but rather as a gift and a blessing. The manner in which professors, for example, approach the study of Scripture, Theology, Anthropology or Ecclesiology could include references to cultural diversity. Critical questions posed within the academic pillar of intellectual formation can be framed in a reflective and systematic manner

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while also referencing unity, otherness and diversity. In discussing the nature of the trinity, for example, a class discussion can focus on the concepts of unity and diversity from a theological perspective and the implications of this Trinitarian analogy for human relations.

Similarly, intellectual formation could challenge ethnocentric attitudes and raise cultural awareness as men and women critically converse about concepts such as American exceptionalism, Manifest Destiny and ethnocentric individualism. Similarly, students can engage expressions of xenophobia outside the United States that may include nationalistic tribalisms and ethnocentric notions imbued with hateful anti-American attitudes. The seminary culture, with its rich repertoire of theological and philosophical skills, can reflectively encourage those in formation to dialogue on these important cultural realities. These conversations should take place in a context of respect, inclusion and acceptance. As part of an ongoing and holistic faculty development on intercultural competencies, it may be necessary to invite experts on different cultures for in-services and educational experiences with faculty and formators.

Given the profound cultural differences among men and women in formation, some of these dialogues may be challenging. Because cultural groups are often organized and structured around power or class, it is important that formators be mindful of international candidates, their relative standing and their cultural experience regarding power, class and the stratification of privilege. International candidates will have most likely internalized some of these sociological realities into their

worldview. Students' own definitions of social and economic class may express themselves in their relationships and interactions while in formation. International candidates, for example, who come from relatively privileged backgrounds, will socialize differently than those from relatively impoverished socioeconomic backgrounds. Formation programs strive to facilitate healthy intercultural communication among these diverse populations so that those individuals from diverse backgrounds can learn how to interact appropriately and effectively with people from any sociodemographic strata. International candidates are often being formed to serve the needs of middle-class American parishes and churches, and not necessarily the church of the poor. They need to develop the competencies necessary for these pastoral assignments and seminary formation programs can play a major role in their development.

Formators also need to pay attention when men and women in formation react negatively against diversity. One may notice that a seminarian is consistently aggressive, resistant and reactive in the face of any conversation about cultural diversity. Instinctive reactions to difference such as aggression, distrust or avoidance may be serious symptoms suggesting prejudice. A different example may be the tendency to self-segregate and form exclusive relationships with those who are ethnically and linguistically similar. The concern with self-segrega-

Formators ultimately foster a seminary culture that is helpful in supporting, challenging and forming men and women who are interculturally competent.

tion or separation among racial groups that occurs by choice in a formation context is that members of different racial groups can become isolated from, rather than in contact with, each other. Voluntary separation can be brought about because different racial or ethnic groups perceive each other as lacking common ground upon which to build friendships. In some extreme cases, unwritten rules may exist among ethnic minority seminarians that interaction with White seminarians, for example, might engender scorn or ostracism from other ethnic minority seminarians. In some instances, racial grouping is desirable so that members of specific groups celebrate, rehearse and relish their own culture. This would be understandable due to commonalities within racial groups. Formators need to discern what may be contributing to self-segregation and encourage positive

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interactions among all the ethnic groups. Excessive ethnic separation may be unhealthy for a truly inclusive seminary culture and may predict ethnocentric encapsulation in future pastoral assignments.

At a more fundamental level, the development of intercultural competencies presupposes an attribution of goodness and dignity to other individuals, especially to those who may be ethnically, racially, linguistically and culturally different. One develops a welcoming, warm and hospitable attitude. Psychologically, a cultural narcissism and entitlement that believes in the superiority of one's own cultural identity and status while denigrating the cultures of others is intrinsically incompatible with this intercultural attitude and competency. Because culture embodies differences, those in formation become comfortable with ambiguity and the capacity to be open and respectful to the perspectives of others. With this openness comes the opportunity to be immersed in other cultures, while being flexible and adaptable with one's identity.

Intercultural competency is not simply about learning how to get along with others; it is essentially about being Catholic. It is the fostering of an ongoing spirituality of Eucharistic consistency. The meaning of the Eucharist penetrates the mystery of culture; therefore, those in formation are called to cultivate Eucharistic consistency, ongoing conversation and conversion to develop intercultural knowledge, awareness, sensitivity and skills. It is in this Eucharistic context that they challenge their own cultural privileges and embrace the mystery of otherness. Communion or participation in the Eucharistic banquet while in formation authenticates intercultural encounters. Men and women are no longer Jews or Greeks, but one in Christ. Respectful and life-giving intercultural competencies are an extension of the significance of the Eucharist. It challenges men and women in formation to show consistency between liturgy and their cultural lives.

Psychological Considerations

The development of intercultural competencies is positively correlated with emotional intelligence and affective maturity. Formators need to pay particular attention to how international candidates adjust to culturally diverse settings. It is not uncommon to see international candidates suffer in silence while coping with acculturative stress. Because these candidates appear emotionally steady and serene on the surface, one may assume that they are emotionally fine; however, they may be feeling lost in the classroom setting. They may also be having

difficulty understanding seminary practices. Attentive formators can engage these students in small group conversations by using different learning strategies that encourage them to articulate their worries and fears. Classroom spaces need to create a sense of safety where these students can grow intellectually, emotionally and culturally. In some cultures, modesty and reserve is encouraged in classroom discussions: a safe classroom environment is conducive to meeting these students at their own level of cultural comfort. This is particularly critical during the first days of the semester so they can successfully adjust to the academic school year and to the formation program.

The development of intercultural competencies is also positively correlated with intellectual curiosity, cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity.

The development of intercultural competencies is also positively correlated with intellectual curiosity, cognitive flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity. In evaluating international candidates, psychologists assess the capacity for interpersonal relationship and the flexibility to relate to cultural differences with ease. In some instances, candidates may struggle with modifying their cultural patterns and values, for example, in their relationships with women or nonverbal communication. Cultural prescriptions and proscriptions around interpersonal space and touch should also be evaluated. These assessment findings will then need to be translated into formation recommendations. In the event that an international candidate rigidly holds onto cultural scripts that may be offensive to women, or to patterns of touching that are inappropriate in the United States, psychologists can provide formators with recommendations on how to address these cultural values and belief systems, emphasizing what is appropriate in the receiving culture. It takes flexibility and affective maturity for international candidates to acculturate their patterned ways of thinking, feeling and relating.

Evaluators are also mindful that international candidates may carry wounds from their culture. With candidates from countries torn by war, poverty and crime,

one must pay attention to the person's history, capacity to address these wounds in a healthy manner and ability to come eventually to a peaceful and therapeutic resolution. International candidates from profoundly impoverished backgrounds whose families are suffering may have limited freedom of discernment due to preoccupation with their family's plight. Moreover, in evaluating a candidate's vocational profile, it is important to assess their cultural background and to what extent cultural biases may have contributed to misguided assumptions about the priesthood. One may encounter cases where an overly domineering parent has exerted pressure and parental influence on a candidate's vocational aspiration. This circumstance is especially problematic in some candidates from traditional cultures where filial piety and deference to parental expectations and demands are particularly strong and deterministic of one's vocational self-concept. These candidates may seek to join the seminary because of fear and through obedience to parents—another factor that limits their freedom of discernment. Similar to this misguided motivation is a distorted image of the priesthood as one imbued with elevated status, power and self-importance, that is commonly found in deeply hierarchical cultures.

Conclusion

The objective of this article is to raise awareness about the intercultural reality in the church, how this can be lived more authentically and how it contributes towards building the Kingdom of God. The message of the Kingdom of God that the early Christians received from Jesus was an inclusive one that accommodates people of all races, languages, ages and economic and social statuses.⁵ Saint Paul reminds us that cultural differences no longer separate nor divide us. The clearest articulation of his theology of oneness and inclusivity is found in Galatians 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." Strengthening this new identity in Christ, this article calls for the development and maintenance of intercultural competencies. These competencies will allow us to truly see the dignity of the "other" created in the image and likeness of God. Intercultural competency includes awareness of our biases, misperceptions and prejudices. Coupled with self-knowledge and knowledge about the "other," we are able to more competently relate to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Once we achieve awareness and acquire intercultural knowledge, we may develop the necessary interpersonal *skills* to interact and

relate respectfully to the members of our communities. This process requires the cultivation of *sensitivity*. It is at both the individual and institutional level that we develop and maintain intercultural competencies in formation and ministry. Ultimately, intercultural competence (or interculturalization) is the set of competencies held by people from diverse cultures and religious worldviews, who mutually and respectfully demonstrate awareness, knowledge, skills and sensitivity with the intention of discovering the vision of the gospel, which was uniquely revealed by Jesus Christ within a particular cultural and historical context.



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