# CULTURAL CONVERSION AND CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

## A Basis for Communal Discernment

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IN ORDER TO DO DISCERNMENT IN COMMON, there must be an 'in common'. I would like to discuss some of the difficulties of communication involved in setting up such an 'in common' in a multicultural group. In order to discern the movements of spirits in its life and deliberations, I believe that at least some members of a multicultural group must have achieved a certain degree of cultural availability or mobility which can issue in what I will call a cultural conversion.

*My perspective*

I would like to begin by indicating the experience which provokes my interest in the problem of communal discernment in a multicultural context, and which gives me a point of view on the topic. While I have some direct experience of communal discernment, mostly in my own religious community, the Society of Jesus, I am writing mainly from the perspective of an interpreter and of someone who is bicultural. I have worked as a simultaneous translator for various religious groups who were trying to come to some decision. I usually interpreted from French and Italian, sometimes Spanish, into English. If a group needs the services of interpreters, then it is necessarily multicultural – or at least bicultural. These groups did not always use explicit techniques of communal discernment, but they would have liked to describe their interchanges and deliberations as discernment, if not discernment in common. My job was not to facilitate communal discernment, but to facilitate communication as a help to discernment. This often meant going beyond helping people to understand linguistic messages by helping them to bridge communication gaps caused by cultural differences.

However, I have not only witnessed problems of cross-cultural communication. I have also lived them in my own flesh. I myself am

bicultural: my mother's first language is French, and my father's is English, and I was raised in both French Canadian and English Canadian cultures in one and the same family. I come from New Brunswick, the only officially bilingual province in Canada. More precisely, I come from the north-western part of the province which is almost entirely French-speaking. My parents sent me to the English-speaking stream in the local school system, but this use of English was always in a French context, and most of my teachers – even of English – were not native English speakers. To be bilingual is not so unusual for someone from my part of the country, but to be bicultural is. I have two ways of feeling, two ways of thinking, two ways of seeing the world. In my teens and early twenties I often felt confused and resentful about not being completely of one culture or the other, especially since cultural identity was a sensitive issue then in my part of Canada. Now I regard my 'ambi-valence' as a creative position. I will not directly invoke this fundamental and formative part of my experience, but you can imagine that it colours everything I will say.

So I will approach the problem of communal discernment in a multicultural setting more from the point of view of communication than from that of discernment. By communication I intend more than the exchange of information; I mean the building up of relationships. I will expand on this shortly when I discuss what I mean by culture.

*Some definitions*

A multicultural group is a group made up of persons from different cultures. While language carries culture, and to know either a language or a culture well one must know both, I will distinguish between language and culture. People in a multicultural group might use the same language, but that might be a second or third language which they have in common, like foreign students at a university, or members of the curia of a religious congregation in Rome who are all working in the Italian language. In such a case, people may be speaking in a common language, like Italian, but thinking and feeling in English, Polish and Tagalog. Or the members of the group might have the same first language, for example English, but have quite different cultures and idioms, for example a group with members from Kenya, Ireland, the United States and Hong Kong. While a multicultural group can and, over time, will develop its own group culture, a common language does not necessarily mean a common culture of origin. I will use the term 'cross-cultural' to indicate communication across these cultures of origin.

What is culture? I do not mean culture in the sense of education, where one can say about someone that she or he is cultivated or cultured. I intend it in a more anthropological sense, along the lines of the definition which the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus (1995) used in its document, *Our mission and culture*. The explanation reads as follows:

> 'Culture' means the way in which a group of people live, think, feel, organise themselves, celebrate and share life. In every culture, there are underlying systems of values, meanings and views of the world, which are expressed, visibly, in language, gestures, symbols, rituals and styles.[1]

I am interested in communication at this level. In fact, for the present discussion, I assume that the specifically linguistic problems of communication have been dealt with, either through a common working language spoken and understood more or less well, or through facilitation by interpreters. I am trying to go beneath linguistic communication, beyond the contents of the messages, to cultural communication. Both levels of communication are necessary to build cross-cultural communion in a multicultural group.

*An example*

Now I would like to give an example where there was linguistic communication but where there was a gap specifically in cultural communication. This will be a composite illustration, which I have put together by drawing on a number of experiences.

I was interpreting for a group composed of people from many cultures, but one where I noticed particular communication difficulties between some people from Spanish-speaking cultures and some from English-speaking cultures. From the discussion it was clear that they understood the *content* of each other's communication, with or without the help of interpreters. But they did not appreciate the *forms* of each other's communication, and this made it very difficult for them to pay attention to each other. The difficulty was something like the following. Spanish speakers often communicate their emotions clearly when they speak, and this is achieved through intonation, gestures, and the grammatical mood of the verbs. These characteristics indicate the speaker's attitude toward the subject at hand, his or her relationship to it. Repetition can also be a common feature of communication, expressing nuance, and indicating the topic's degree of importance for the speaker or even for successive speakers. However, a native English

speaker unfamiliar with Spanish-speaking culture can feel intruded upon, even threatened and confused by such a 'strong' expression of emotion. And to such a listener, repetition can seem unnecessary, a sign of a lack of preparation or even of self-control.

On the other hand, a native English speaker might be relatively dispassionate in his or her communication. This is achieved through using a narrow range of vocal intonation, relatively fewer gestures, and many passive verbal constructions, especially in more formal speech. The passive constructions make the subject, the speaker, seem to 'disappear' grammatically. Furthermore, the message will probably be concise; to say something once, and clearly, should be sufficient. To a Spanish-speaking listener, the conciseness and apparent 'lack' of emotion seem to indicate that the speaker is detached, not serious about the topic, and possibly not interested in the listener either. These were the reactions which some of the Spanish speakers and English speakers had to each other.

*Discussion and interpretation*

The people who had these difficulties understood the contents of each other's communications, but because they did not understand the forms, the specifically cultural dimensions of the communications, they became increasingly frustrated with each other and found it harder and harder to listen. There was linguistic communication, but affective and cultural communication were failing, and communion and bonding were poor. Instead of each person examining his or her own assumptions and ways of understanding, each blamed the 'others' for the sense of frustration. I suspect that the relative success of strictly linguistic communication only reinforced a false expectation that there was no need to go a deeper level.

The confusion and mutual incomprehension described above are analogous to the onset of the culture shock which one can experience in an unfamiliar culture. I think that the phases of culture shock can help us to clarify what it means to be transformed at a cultural level. Culture shock is a pattern of reactions which one can experience during the first eight to ten months of living in a new culture. Before indicating these phases, I would like to illustrate culture shock from my own experience.

The first time I lived in the USA, it took me some months to figure out the social cues, and what people meant when they said things. I knew this was my first time living in a foreign country, but I was still surprised to experience difficulties. I had been speaking English almost

all my life, and I thought I knew the States: I had been raised in a small town on the Canada–US border, half my relatives were American, and we visited each other often. We used to call these trips 'going across'. But almost all my American relatives lived in the northern part of the state of Maine, and so they were ethnically and culturally French Canadian. I never experienced any great differences when I went 'across', so I expected none when I moved to New York City to study.

In New York, I noticed that when my American friends said yes or no, they actually meant yes or no; worse, when I said yes or no, they thought I did too! At first I thought they were rather rude and insensitive. At home, and in Montreal where I did my undergraduate studies, we would sometimes use yes or no literally to mean yes or no, but often as part of a language of politeness, meanwhile communicating our intentions through voice tone, body language, or letting the social context speak for itself. Much to my confusion and consternation, this did not work in my new environment. I also found that Americans would share personal information much earlier in a relationship than Canadians would. I did not know what this meant. Finally, after discussing my confusions with other foreign students, reading up on culture shock and, most importantly, after talking over my difficulties with an American friend whom I particularly trusted, I began to settle down. I no longer felt threatened by the differences; indeed, I even began to enjoy them. I came to admire many things about American culture and, through the contrast, I was able to perceive and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses of my own Canadian culture.

The same process happens each time one moves to a new culture. So when I moved to Rome almost two years ago to work as an interpreter, I was ready to go through the same process again. But being ready and actually going through the experience are two very different things. When I felt particularly frustrated, I used to complain to myself that I understood Italian but not Italians. But at least I knew that my frustration was a 'phase', and I could laugh at myself. The reverse can happen too. Now I am back 'home', but I have been transformed so now I am suffering a mild 'reverse culture shock' (e.g., our coffee is awful . . .).

There are distinct phases to culture shock, or to making a cultural transition. It can begin with a phase of initial euphoria: everything is interesting and wonderful. Then comes a period of confusion and criticism, once one realizes just how different things are from what one expected at home. One may not identify these feelings as confusion, for

the reaction is often focused on the 'other' culture, on how strange or unreasonable 'they' are, or how difficult it is to get things done etc. Such confusion is part of any learning curve, and how one responds to one's confusion is crucial. In culture shock one can become fixated in a critical, even bitter attitude toward the new, 'strange' culture, thereby defending oneself against what is perceived as a threat; or one can move into a phase of critical appreciation and enjoyment. The latter is the end of the cycle, and the beginning of a new round of the same cycle. But this phase is not always attained.

The hinge between the critical and welcoming phases is to look not at the other culture but at one's own cultural self, at one's own expectations. In order to accept a new culture, one must see and accept that one's own culture is simply that, a culture, and not the normative way of doing things.[2] Then one must become somewhat detached from one's culture. This discovery is a profound transformation, and the transformation of one's cultural self is the threat posed by encountering a new culture. There is really a double transformation here: one with respect to the new culture, and another with respect to one's own culture. I suspect the transformation must be renewed with each new culture encountered or with each new cross-cultural or multicultural situation.

Such a transformation is in effect a cultural self-evaluation. This can sometimes be more threatening than a personal self-evaluation, because our social and cultural institutions are such important identity markers for us. Relativization of one's culture is not the same thing as criticism, but it can be experienced as criticism since relativization involves the implicit acknowledgement of strengths and weaknesses in both the home culture and the new one. Not every transformation means going from bad to good; even good things must be transformed by Christ. This transformation of one's cultural self is not simply a gradual, progressive learning. It means crossing a threshold, and it means allowing oneself to be personally changed. It is a cultural conversion.

I would like to suggest that crossing this cultural threshold, undergoing this same cultural conversion, is also necessary for cross-cultural communication. This is more than a linguistic skill. I would also like to suggest that cultural conversion requires, calls forth and engages a kind of cultural availability or openness which is necessary for cross-cultural communication and which is also necessary to build communion and community in a multicultural context. Therefore it is also an important psycho-spiritual skill, disposition or grace needed for undertaking communal discernment in a multicultural group.

*Conclusion*

The key to discernment is to be able to recognize spiritual consolation.[3] If one is to recognize spiritual movements of consolation in a multicultural group of which one is a member, then one needs the grace and communication skill of cultural availability. This should issue in a cultural conversion necessary for operating well in the particular group. However, there is the prior question of whether a multicultural group can have spiritual consolation if it has not yet achieved some kind of communion. To achieve such communion, cross-cultural communication is necessary, and for that, some degree of both cultural availability and conversion are necessary for the group as a whole – at least for a significant number of its members, or for members who have particular influence in the group. I do not know the answer to this question, but I suspect that to acknowledge the experience of cross-cultural communication is a first step for discernment in a multicultural group. Only then the sense of communion can be recognized as spiritual consolation in the group.

I believe I have seen a multicultural group reach a decision without having achieved cross-cultural communication. I suspect the decision may have been a good one, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and guided by recognizing and discerning movements of personal consolation, but probably not achieved by discerning communal movements of consolation. I suspect, too, that there was personal discontent from not reaching the true cross-cultural communication which is prior to communal discernment of communion. However, there are many ways of bridging the cultural gap. One of the best is simply through the attraction and momentum of friendship, of interpersonal relationship. This can inspire cultural availability and, finally, cultural conversion simply through the desire to get to know the other person. Good will and good group process can facilitate this. Common faith and a common religious vocation and charism, or common work can also greatly facilitate this cross-cultural communication. Ultimately cultural availability is part of loving one's neighbour.[4]

NOTES

[1] Society of Jesus, General Congregation 34, *Our mission and culture* (Rome, 1995).

[2] See Lonergan's concept of 'the classicist notion of culture' in Bernard Lonergan, *Method in theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p xi.

[3] John English, *Spiritual intimacy and community: an Ignatian view of the small faith community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), p 46.

[4] *Op. cit.*, p 28.