From International to Intercultural Living
through Vincentian Spirituality

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Abstract

This reflection explores the challenge of moving from international to truly intercultural living in Vincentian communities, based on the author's personal experiences in culturally diverse settings such as Chicago and Dublin. While internationality is a demographic reality, interculturality requires intentional conversion, openness, and mutual enrichment. The article argues that Vincentian spirituality, rooted in charity, mission, and Christ-centered service to the poor, can become a unifying force across cultures. Key Vincentian values—simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal for souls—must be embodied differently by members of varied backgrounds. Intercultural community life demands creating a welcoming home, appreciating differences, and renewing minds to foster communion. Drawing from Trinitarian communion and Saint Vincent's call to "love each other well," the piece calls for esteem-based dialogue, mutual respect, and embracing difference as richness. Ultimately, Vincentian spirituality can be a catalyst for authentic intercultural transformation when lived intentionally and grounded in daily shared experience.

Cette réflexion explore le défi que représente le passage d'une vie internationale à une vie véritablement interculturelle dans les communautés vincentiennes, sur la base des expériences personnelles de l'auteur dans des environnements culturellement diversifiés tels que Chicago et Dublin. Si l'internationalité est une réalité démographique, l'interculturalité nécessite une conversion intentionnelle, une ouverture d'esprit et un enrichissement mutuel. L'article soutient que la spiritualité vincentienne, enracinée dans la charité, la mission et le service des pauvres centré sur le Christ, peut devenir une force unificatrice entre les cultures. Les valeurs vincentiennes fondamentales – simplicité, humilité, douceur, mortification et zèle pour les âmes – doivent être incarnées différemment par des membres d'horizons divers. La vie communautaire interculturelle exige de créer un foyer accueillant, d'apprécier les différences et de renouveler les esprits pour favoriser la communion. S'inspirant de la communion trinitaire et de l'appel de saint Vincent à « s'aimer les uns les autres », l'article appelle à un dialogue fondé sur l'estime, au respect mutuel et à l'acceptation de la différence comme une richesse. En fin de compte, la spiritualité vincentienne peut être un catalyseur d'une authentique transformation interculturelle lorsqu'elle est vécue intentionnellement et ancrée dans l'expérience quotidienne partagée.

Esta reflexión explora el reto de pasar de una vida internacional a una verdaderamente intercultural en las comunidades vicentinas, basándose en las experiencias personales del autor en entornos culturalmente diversos, como Chicago y Dublín. Si bien la internacionalidad es una realidad demográfica, la interculturalidad requiere una conversión intencionada, apertura y enriquecimiento mutuo. El artículo sostiene que la espiritualidad vicentina, arraigada en la caridad, la misión y el servicio a los pobres centrado en Cristo, puede convertirse en una fuerza

unificadora entre las culturas. Los valores vicentinos fundamentales —la sencillez, la humildad, la mansedumbre, la mortificación y el celo por las almas— deben encarnarse de manera diferente por los miembros de distintos orígenes. La vida comunitaria intercultural exige crear un hogar acogedor, apreciar las diferencias y renovar las mentes para fomentar la comunión. Partiendo de la comunión trinitaria y del llamamiento de San Vicente a «amarnos bien», el artículo aboga por un diálogo basado en la estima, el respeto mutuo y la aceptación de la diferencia como riqueza. En última instancia, la espiritualidad vicenciana puede ser un catalizador para una auténtica transformación intercultural cuando se vive de forma intencionada y se basa en la experiencia cotidiana compartida.

Keywords: Culture, Interculturality, Ethnocentrism, Vincentian spirituality.

After more than 30 years of living in Vincentian communities, the Vincentian Residence of Chicago where I lived for almost two years gave me the opportunity to fully experience the vicissitudes, the seed and the weeds, of living in an international community. There were members from all over the world. Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas conformed this rich mosaic of our community. For obvious practical reasons, English was the common language. However, and despite the multiple origins, Anglo culture was shaping everything, from the way we prayed to the meals we ate, including our community recreation patterns. Some international confreres made an easy adaptation, others not so much. While it was obvious that we were living in an international community, interculturality was not so clear.

Much of what I experienced in Chicago took me back to the summer of 1995 when, as a newly ordained priest, my then Provincial sent me to Dublin, Ireland, to improve my English. I did not have to worry about paying for the plane tickets nor did I have to worry about room and board, but I was responsible for any other expenses. Although I travelled with a little personal pocket money, it was not too much and I can say that my stay in Dublin was "austere". I very much enjoyed the free museums and spent many hours reading in the botanical garden, mindful of every penny.

One day, an African confrere, who was also staying there, came to my room. Although I had had almost no contact with him, he opened the conversation by asking me for money to travel around the island. Shocked, I refused, not wanting to give him what little money I had for a trip I could not afford. I think he simply assumed that I, being white and European, would have money to give away. I believe that his petition was born from that subtle bias that simply assumes that any member of the "global North" is insultingly loaded while any member of the "global South" is outrageously poor, helpless and powerless. In such a scenario, his request made sense, no matter how far from reality was in my case.

We need to understand and accept that we come to the community culturally biased, bringing with us a set of values, presumptions, prejudices, preconceptions, and misjudgments nursed by our own cultures that affect and condition all areas of community life. The internationality of the CM does not entail its interculturality. Despite the common elements that we share, there is still much work to do for our international communities to become truly intercultural. Will one of those agents of transformation, promoting authentic interculturality in our communities, be the common Vincentian spirituality as it is expressed in and by each culture? In other words, could be Vincentian spirituality a catalyst for interculturality?

In this article, I will first offer a brief understanding of some common elements of Vincentian spirituality that cultures may embody differently. Secondly, I will tiptoe over the framework that sustains intercultural discourse defining some basic concepts. Thirdly, once I have discussed some implications from the point of view of Vincentian spirituality, I will move forward to address the need for conversion in intercultural community building. Finally, and from a theology of incarnation, I will refer to the need to move from the abstract of ideas to the concreteness of daily experience, knowing that barriers that separate can become bridges that unite if we commit to finding common ways to embody Vincentian spirituality.

1. Vincentian Spirituality as the Bedrock for Community

In general terms, "charism" can be understood as personal magnetism, that capacity that certain people have to capture the admiration of their followers. From a Catholic perspective, charism is a personal gift given by the Holy Spirit to a believer for the spiritual benefit of a community. Since it is a personal gift, it would be appropriate to say that Vincentians do not share Vincent de Paul's charism since it ended with him. We share his spirituality, a particular way of understanding and living the Gospel according to certain guidelines.

Robert Maloney understands spirituality as "an energizing vision, a driving force… the specific way in which a person is rooted in God… the specific way in which he or she relates to the created world… a vision that generates energy and channels it in a particular direction."[1] Based on the 1984 new Constitutions, he also offers a brief schema of Vincentian spirit as "the spirit of Christ as sent to preach the good news to the poor… concretized particularly through love and reverence toward the Father, compassionate and effective love for the poor, docility to divine Providence."[2] Similarly, Pat Collins understands spirituality as "a matter of being filled, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit in one's daily life."[3] For him, spirituality "involves a distinctive kind of religious experience which is influenced by the foundational charism which has been inherited from St. Vincent."[4]

Taking into account the aforementioned, we can depict Vincentian charism[5] as St. Vincent de Paul's prophetic vision to grasp the urgent problems of his sociological, cultural, and religious milieu to give an evangelical response. Spirituality thus would be the way in which the Holy Spirit continues to fill the hearts of Vincent's yesterday and today confreres to live out his intuitions in any given time. Therefore, we need to ask what St. Vincent's intuitions are about.

To understand Vincent's spirituality, we need to recall two fundamental moments in his life: Folleville and Chatillon-les-Dombes. In the former, while hearing the confession of a dying man taken for a saint, he discovered the state of spiritual poverty in the countryside and felt the call to evangelize the poor. In the latter, when he saw the people's generosity towards a family in extreme poverty, he felt the call to organize

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[1] Maloney. "The way of Vincent de Paul", 13.
[2] Ibid, 14.
[3] Collins. "Reflections on the Life and Spirituality of St. Vincent de Paul", 1.
[4] Ibid, 3.
[5] I have deliberately decided not to be too precise in the terms because today it is generally accepted that Vincentian charism and Vincentian spirituality are interchangeable terms.

charity. In short, Vincent's spirituality is grounded on the experience of charity and mission.

Rooted in charity and mission as the pivotal axes of Vincentian spirituality, Vincentian communities should be characterized by the following threefold traits:

-**Christcentrism**. Following Jesus Christ is central to St. Vincent's deeds and teaching. Abelly, the first of his biographers, considered that the saint "left us a miniature portrait of his whole life and a sort of motto when he said one day: *Nothing pleases me except in Jesus Christ*."[6] All his interior and exterior activity responded to the desire to imitate him, doing what was good with the same feelings, affections, and attitudes of Jesus. Christ became man to evangelize the poor and spent his life serving the neediest, the sick and sinners, the downcast and the marginalized. Vincentian spirituality, charism, and communities are grounded in this image of Jesus Christ, evangelizer and servant of the poor.

- **Love and reverence to God**. For St. Vincent, the Christ who inspires his contemplation and action is the Word incarnate to carry out the will of the Father. He said: "The spirit of our Lord is a spirit of perfect charity, filled with a marvelous esteem for the divinity and an infinite desire to honor it worthily, a knowledge of the greatness of his Father, to admire and extol it unceasingly. Jesus Christ had such high esteem for Him that He paid homage to Him in all things in His sacred person and in all that He did; He attributed everything to Him... Jesus Christ was so full of esteem and love for the Father that he did nothing for himself, nor to seek his own satisfaction: I always do the will of my Father."[7] Love and reverence to God entail a faith-filled reading of the signs of the times, a personal and communal discernment of God's will, and a confident surrender to Divine Providence's designs.

- **Servant of the loving design of the Father**. Knowing and fulfilling the Father's will was Jesus and St. Vincent's leitmotiv, and it must also be the heart of the Vincentian community. This loving design of the Father is shown in his self-emptying, which means that Christ becomes incarnate and takes on the condition of those he was going to save: he made himself a servant and poor. The life of St. Vincent, once detached from the temptation of power, was nothing more than a continuous service to the poorest, living like them, in poverty. Therefore, the Vincentian community must be an example of service and poverty.

This threefold set of traits goes along with five virtues that color the Vincentian identity and mission: simplicity, humility, meekness, mortification, and zeal.

- St. Vincent de Paul understands **simplicity** as saying things as they are, always speaking the truth, without duplicity or deceit. It also consists of purity of intention, doing things only for the love of God, without seeking any other end. Simplicity is also reflected in a modest lifestyle. Today we would be speaking of genuine authenticity, a sort of personal integrity highly needed but scarce in current times.

- **Humility** is the recognition of personal and communitarian lowliness and faults. Practicing this virtue entails esteeming others as more worthy than oneself. For

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[6] Abelly, Biography of SV, The Life of the Venerable Servant of God, Vincent de Paul. Vol. 1, chap. 19, p. 102 in the English edition.
[7] Conference XIII. 1658.

St. Vincent de Paul, all good comes from God so people *should* put all their confidence in Him, who showers the humble with his gifts. Today we would be speaking of a person aware of his capabilities without self-conceit, detached from any kind of comparison with others.

- **Meekness** is the ability to overcome anger with love. It is also described as affability, gentleness, and serenity of spirit based on respect for others. For St. Vincent, it combines gentleness with firmness. Today we *would* be speaking, among other things, of peace-building through that capacity to endure offenses with forgiveness, compassion, and mercy.

- Imbued with the spirit of his time, St. Vincent de Paul understood **mortification** as the denial of the exterior (sight, touch, hearing, etc.) and interior (understanding, memory, and will) senses, as well as denial of the passions of the soul. It is an ongoing struggle that seeks indifference and detachment through passion control. Since mortification is an instrumental virtue that allows us to achieve our goals, today it would be better to speak of sacrifice, abnegation, effort, or the ability to give up something good to achieve something better.

- **Zeal**. Although St. Vincent was not very explicit in describing this virtue, he understood it as a burning love for Christ to go everywhere in his name, even to lay down one's life for him. It implies working for the salvation of one's neighbor and overcoming laziness or lack of fervor. Today we would still speak of a persevering and faithful love for Jesus Christ, for whom one would be willing to make the greatest sacrifices, even to the point of laying down one's life in distant lands or difficult places.

I have just barely highlighted some central elements that can serve as a unifying force in the face of the undeniable cultural diversity experienced in the Congregation of the Mission. However, assuming that they shape uniformly the spirituality of the Congregation regardless of the country in which the missionaries live is simply a foolhardy exercise as different cultures can appropriate and express those elements in quite different ways.

2. The Challenge of Intercultural Community

On August 11, 2021, I arrived in Chicago. That same day, I realized how different that community was from the ones I had lived in. At dinner, there were missionaries from Kenya, India, Vietnam, Rwanda, Slovakia, Colombia, and the United States. A few days later, our small UN had expanded with missionaries from China, Nigeria, and Poland. My initial enthusiasm at seeing myself in the company of such a diverse group was based on the naïve idea that despite the country of origin or the color of the skin, deep down we were all the same, people with common traits that would make living together easier. I could not be more wrong.

We follow Jesus the Evangelizer, we belong to the same Congregation, we strive to live out the gospel as missionaries, we have an acceptable knowledge of our spiritual tradition, and yet some things make us radically different. For starters, we have been born into different cultures and have been raised accordingly. Internationality does not mean interculturality, understood as the intentional process of personal and communal conversion that makes us go beyond ourselves to open up to the richness of the "different other".

That is why it is so important to carefully define terms, to know what we are talking about when we refer to the interaction of cultures in an international community. In this section, I will first briefly describe the meaning of each of the words related to the term "culture." Next, I will reflect on the challenge of intercultural living, understood as the transition from the ideal to reality. I will conclude by suggesting some implications from the point of view of Vincentian spirituality.

2.1. Defining terms

Being one of those terms easier to use than to define, **Culture** demands the most clarification as there are more than 350 definitions. Let's pick one. Gittins[8] describes culture as "the human-made part of the environment," which would include "materials… institutional elements… symbolic elements… and moral components." Culture is also "the form of social life… a meaning-making system… [*that*] pervades a whole society and makes intelligible communication possible… An enduring social reality… transmitted over time, through the generations; it is an ongoing process rather than a simple social fact."[9] In short, Gittins affirms that culture is "the way people in groups react to, form, and shape their environments."[10]

Etymologically, a **monocultural** society would imply the existence and predominance of a single culture in a given space. Historically, societies have been this way, promoting internal cohesion and a strong sense of belonging. There have always been those who went beyond the boundaries of a monocultural society, those who ventured outside the group either to trade or to explore new lands, but as Gittins says, "most of us live and die within our own social group of culture."[11]

The term **bicultural** is applied "to a person who grows up in one culture and later encounters another culture and language, learning each sufficiently to be able to pass more or less freely between two worlds."[12] Thus, bicultural refers to that capacity or learned ability that would allow us to live culturally and linguistically in two different worlds simultaneously.

With the increase in migration, finding different cultures coexisting in the same space is no longer unusual. In fact, any city or place in the world presents a great variety of cultures. "Where different cultural groups coexist in the same region, we have a **multicultural** society and living conditions… In general, people do not commit themselves –or seek– to build a new, integrated community."[13] At this level, there is no interaction, just coexistence.

One step further, implying a certain engagement with different cultural realities, we can find the term **cross-cultural**. When "people try to build bridges between their cultural communities by sharing, listening, learning, and being open to change,"[14] we are before a cross-cultural action. Indeed, cross-culturality entails "the notion of engagement and necessitates the crossing of one's own boundaries… This may lead to the creation of

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[8] Gittins, Anthony. "The Challenge of Intercultural Living. Anthropological and Theological Implications." In Intercultural Living, ed. Lazar T. Stanislaus (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 64.
[9] Ibid, 64-65.
[10] Norton, Intercultural Sensitivity, 132.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid. 19.
[14] Stanislaus. Intercultural Living Vol. I. xxiv.

a new culture".[15] Although the cross-cultural person may move from one culture to another in a certain way, he/she never forgets his/her origin and will always be a foreigner to others.

"The words international and multicultural are now common currency, but **intercultural** is less familiar or ambiguous"[16] because, as a theological word, it "carries specific overtones relating to God, faith, and practice"[17] that are strange to many. We can define intercultural communities as those that allow "the different cultures of community members to interact with each other and thereby mutually enrich the individual members and the community as a whole."[18] There is no dominant culture in an intercultural context, all are equally valid as holders of meaning and value, and all contribute to the mutual enrichment of the members. It is more than living together as demands opening up to someone else's culture without losing sight of one's and engaging in a transformative process that conforms to God's ideal of community.

2.2. From *Utopialand* to Reality

As Vincentians, we are called to live in community for the mission's sake like brothers who love each other well, but more often than not, the heterogeneity of the group provokes rivalries, battles for power, suspicions, misunderstandings, distrust, jealousies, and envy that can make community life a hell to run away from. If living with confreres sharing the same cultural background is not always easy, imagine how difficult will it be with confreres from different cultures?

In community life, some people, fixated on an unrealistic ideal, become unhappy and critical of their circumstances. In this case, their ideal of the perfect community is the enemy of the real. We all need to make certain adjustments between the ideal and reality that allow us to see the embryo of the former in the latter. This is essential in intercultural living.

Always counting on imperfections, an intercultural approach to community life that makes it possible to bring down utopia[19] to reality will demand from its members a commitment on three fronts: to build a place all can call home, a place where differences are appreciated and embraced, a place that helps its members renew the way they think.[20]

- The increasing individualism that pervades society has also permeated religious life, turning the community into a space where certain commodities are shared but life is not. As Vincentians, we are called to build a home for all, a welcoming place where the cultural and spiritual diversity of every member is acknowledged and respected. Only in this way will we be able to build a warm and humanizing community where everyone can open up without fear of criticism or judgment. Intercultural communities "are public witnesses to the possibility that people of different cultures and languages, but a common faith and vision, can thrive for a

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[15] Ibid, 84.
[16] Gittins."Beyond International and Multicultural: Intercultural Community Living", 60.
[17] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally, 22.
[18] Maya, Teresa. "Intercultural Living in Consecrated Life in the United States." In Engaging our Diversity. Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today, ed. Maria Cimperman and Roger P. Schroeder (New York: ORBIS, 2020), 42.
[19] From the Greek ou-topos, it refers to an imaginary idealized place or state of perfection that is not real.
[20] See Gittins, The Challenge of Intercultural Living, p. 57-60.

purpose beyond individual whim or comfort, and as a sign of the Kingdom or Realm of God."[21]

- Dealing with people from varied cultures is never easy. The clash of personalities, inevitable in community life, is even more severe when each member belongs to a different culture. Classic conflicts, attitude problems, or misunderstandings can become factors that prevent members from trusting in and opening up to each other. An intercultural community living needs to be aware of one's cultural baggage and personal biases that hinder community relationships. Furthermore, it calls for valuing differences positively, recognizing that humanity is both united and diverse, while cautioning against using differences to divide and discriminate, leading to harmful consequences.

- An intercultural community makes communion in diversity possible, following the example of the Trinitarian communion: different persons with different functions but all united in love. Trinitarian communion is the ideal to which the intercultural community aspires through the renewal of mind and spirit (Ephesians 4:23-24). The intercultural community must be a place where everyone relates to each other with a fraternity-renewing mentality.

Legend has it that there is a pot full of gold at the base of every rainbow. I believe that spending one's life chasing rainbows is a futile exercise. Wealth is not at the end of the rainbow but where my brothers and sisters are. Let us not waste our time on impossible quests but journey together from *utopialand* to reality.

2.3. Implications from Vincentian spirituality

Echoing Romans 12:10, St. Vincent never ceased to repeat to the missionaries that they should live as friends who love each other well (X, 496). From the beginning, the missionaries have translated St. Vincent's advice into community attitudes of mutual respect, fraternity in accepting those who are different, sincerity in speaking, co-responsibility in service, and availability to attend to the needs of confreres. We know that we do not live in perfect communities, but we strive to create spaces where all can thrive.

Drawing from our spiritual tradition, a Vincentian community that aspires to harmoniously integrate its members' different cultures embodying St. Vincent's ideal must rest on three pillars: awareness of a common experience, a common understanding based on esteem, and the acceptance of difference as richness.

- Common experience "involves imbibing a common heritage, sharing in common traditions, learning a body of common knowledge through our studies, participating in common symbolic acts, being immersed in and reflecting together on common works, living a common lifestyle."[22]

- Esteem is not a human effort but the result of a vision of faith that entails looking at others as God looks at them, which is the cornerstone of a common understanding. Taking into account that reality is polyhedral and supports different interpretations, community members from different cultures can

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[21] Ibid. 58.
[22] Maloney. Seasons in Spirituality, 144.

overcome foreseeable cultural misunderstandings through an esteem-based dialogue.

- Community living involves friction and disagreements, especially when the culture is not the same. That is why St. Vincent promoted the positive acceptance of the other, which implied both an outstretched hand to overcome disagreements and fraternal correction.

Who does not detect in this threefold set of traits the echo of Romans 15:7, "accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God"? This is our task, and that has to be our commitment.

3. The Necessary Conversion

Since faith does not exist in a vacuum but is embodied in a concrete culture, it will adopt different forms according to the cultural background of each member of the community. Some will be easily accepted, others will create conflict and confusion. It will take much more than goodwill for an international community to become intercultural. In this regard, conversion plays an invaluable role.

The term *conversion* automatically evokes certain images from the Bible: King David confronted by the prophet Nathan after the execution of Uriah (2 Samuel 12), the prodigal son reflecting on his errors (Luke 15:11-32), St. Paul knocked off his horse on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), etc. In these stories, conversion involves breaking with sinful actions, entering into oneself to examine one's life in the light of God's love, or abandoning one path to embrace the one God proposes. It can occur unexpectedly or gradually but in both cases, it implies a radical change of direction in life, a turnaround "with an emphasis on the inner transformation of the convert."[23]

Intercultural living is a faith-based intentional process that demands personal and communitarian conversion, understood as a journey from one's culture to God, to the different one, and to the world. This section will revolve entirely on that journey. First, it will describe the journey from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism. Then, it will contemplate the transition from conflict to acceptance through dialogue. Finally, it will conclude by examining some implications from the point of view of Vincentian spirituality.

3.1. From ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism

To appreciate the transformation that a community and its members undergo when moving from an ethnocentric to an ethnorelative approach, it is necessary to first define the terms.

Ethnocentrism refers to that "cultural or ethnic bias –whether conscious or unconscious– in which a person views the world from the perspective of his or her own group."[24] Ethnocentrism becomes problematic when an individual sees and judges the world only from this subjective perspective, considered as the only valid one to the detriment of other possible ones. In this sense, ethnocentrism would even be a sin against charity since it would prioritize within a community a particular group of members (in-group) and exclude those considered outsiders.

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[23] Gibbs, Philip. "Conversion from Ethnorentrism." In Intercultural Living, ed. Lazar T. Stanislaus (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 14.
[24] Gibss. Conversion from Ethnocentrism. 4.

Ethnorelativism is at the opposite extreme of ethnocentrism. It is understood as "the facility to move from one's own worldview to that of another"[25] or "the experience of one's own beliefs and behaviors as just one organization of reality among many viable possibilities."[26] Thus, ethnocentrism "involves the capability to at least partially take the perspective of one or more cultures… and change behavior in culturally appropriate and authentic ways."[27]

The journey from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism follows the six-stage model designed by social researcher Milton Bennet. The first level would be the most ethnocentric while the sixth would be the most ethnorelational. Moreover, the first three stages range from the crudest to the subtlest degree of ethnocentrism.

- **Denial** is a sort of cultural blindness that "refers to a crude attempt to disregard cultural differences entirely… a way of evading the cultural realities that distinguish *them* from *us*."[28] A person in denial may show an aggressive ignorance that leads to separation within the community because cultural difference does not mean anything.

- **Defense**, or polarization, "is the state in which one's own culture (or adopted culture) is experienced as the only viable one."[29] A person in this stage is not culturally blind, since he/she recognizes the existence of other cultures, but does not value them and judges them negatively.

- **Minimization** "is the level between the more monocultural mindset of denial and defense, and the intercultural orientations such as acceptance,"[30] "the state in which elements of one's own cultural worldview are experienced as universal."[31] A person at this stage "tends to bury difference under the cover of cultural similarities based on our shared humanity."[32] At this stage, there is a deep conviction that any cultural differences can be resolved through dialogue.

- The first, albeit the weakest, of the three stages that constitute the ethnorelational framework is **Acceptance**. In this stage, "one's own culture is experienced as just one of any number of equally complex ways of seeing reality and interacting with others."[33] A person in acceptance, without renouncing his or her own culture as the lens through which to perceive reality, manifests an open and tolerant attitude towards other equally valid cultures.

- The next stage is **adaptation**. People at this stage of the journey "are able to shift their frame of reference, and to see reality through the eyes of the other culture, and thus are able to act culturally appropriately in a natural way."[34] Here, people just add "different cultural perspectives to that of one's native culture."[35]

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[25] Ibid, 8.
[26] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally, 101.
[27] Gibss. Conversion from Ethnocentrism. 8.
[28] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally. 102.
[29] Ibid. 103.
[30] Gibss. Conversion from Ethnocentrism. 7.
[31] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally. 105.
[32] Gibss. Conversion from Ethnocentrism. 7.
[33] Kisala, Robert. "Ethnocentrism and Ethnorelativism." In Intercultural Mission, ed. Stanislaus, Lazar T., SVD, Martin, SVD Ueffing, Stephen B. Bevans, and Roger Schroeder (Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 6.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

- The final stage is **integration**, "not so much a further development in intercultural competence... [*but a new*] self-identity of the subject."[36] Identity is never lost but "broadened and enriched by an increasing repertoire of culturally appropriate insights and behaviors."[37]

"Not everyone begins from the first stage; however, not everyone progresses to the sixth,"[38] but this summary shows the blueprint for getting from one corner to the other, building an intercultural community, spotting potential pitfalls, and cultivating the competencies needed in community living to make intercultural living a dream come true.

3.2. From Conflict to Acceptance through Dialogue

Conflicts due to differences are the bread and butter of community living. While most of them derive from the different personalities of each individual, others are the result of different cultural backgrounds. And have in mind that, in an international community, anything can be potentially problematic. In the chapel, the Polish confrere may like an austere style of celebration, which makes the African confreres uncomfortable, since they prefer a participative, festive celebration. They do not protest but are often absent from the community prayer. In the dining room, the French confrere in charge of breakfast offers what he thinks is normal, *caffè au lait* and bread, which annoys the Chinese confrere, who remains silent and leaves the dining room day after day. And the list could go on with community meetings, recreation time, finances, manners at the table, domestic chores, missionary work, etc.

Although personality traits might be also involved, these conflicts have much to do with different cultural approaches. "When the conflict starts to dominate people's energies in such a way that they can no longer function properly, then the urgency for a solution is obvious."[39] Turning a blind eye, ignoring the issue, or hoping it will sort itself out are invalid options. Intercultural living emerges when the community boldly acknowledges those cultural differences and engages in a long but fruitful-at-the-end dialogue.

Unless the whole community gets involved in such dialogue, that new culture where all can be respected and thrive will be impossible. If dialogue is necessary for any community setting, it is even more essential in a community that aspires to interculturality, since cultural differences are never a problem but an opportunity, a challenge that demands sitting down, investing time, attentive listening, suppressing judgmental behaviors, and opening to others.

3.3. Implications from Vincentian spirituality

Intercultural living requires the practice of certain competencies such as awareness of, knowledge about, and sensitivity to the dignity of others.[40] In the face of

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[36] Ibid. 7. Italics are mine.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally. 101.

[39] Hüfner-Kemper, B. and Kemper, T. "Interculturality and Conflict." In Intercultural Mission, ed. Stanislaus, Lazar T., SVD, Martin, SVD Ueffing, Stephen B. Bevans, and Roger Schroeder (Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 106.

[40] See Ortiz, Fernando A, and Gerard J McGlone. "Model for Intercultural Competencies in Formation and Ministry: Awareness, Knowledge, Skills and Sensitivity." 27.

changing times, these cultural competencies are a challenge to turn to the original spiritual tradition of our Congregation.

When confronted with the challenge of interculturality, group dynamics, sociocultural studies, and psychological skills are often invoked and applied, yet the richness of one's own spiritual tradition is frequently overlooked. Some dynamics will help to recognize the presence of others, sociocultural studies will help to acknowledge their richness, and psychological skills will facilitate openness and acceptance. And yet, I argue that it is necessary to search in one's own spiritual tradition to find that competence that worked in the founder's milieu and can be today the adequate tool to live interculturally. In the case of the Vincentian tradition, that competence is the virtue of meekness, or *gentleness*, according to a more contemporary sensibility.

As you know, conflicts are inevitable in community life. Some will admit their existence and others will tend to ignore them, some will react with frustration and others with anger, some will know how to talk them through and others will remain silent. The virtue of gentleness can help them all.

Gentleness will help community members handle anger and frustration positively, always providing ways to express those emotions appropriately according to each cultural setting. Gentleness will help to moderate the choleric temperament that drives confreres away, making approachability easier. Gentleness is rooted in respect for others, especially those whose personality makes living together challenging. When dealing with these difficult people, gentleness, which is not contrary to a firm reaction to the offense, will help to practice forgiveness to make reconciliation possible. Many conflicts in international communities originate from prejudices, misunderstandings, or misinterpretations. People are quick to judge (misjudge) and jump to hasty conclusions without considering the cultural factor. According to St. Vincent, gentleness will help stop the tongue before condemning, stop thinking before judging, speak with kindness, forgive quickly, and accept the other in his or her uniqueness.

Referring to the conversion, "Intercultural living requires for all of us a process of patience toward everything that is unsolved in our hearts. It requires our moving back from assumptions to questions. It asks us not to look for quick answers, which cannot be given to us because we would not be able to embrace or to live them. And the point in intercultural living is to 'live' everything."[41] None of this could be achieved without gentleness.

4. The Necessary Incarnation

St. Paul was very clear about the goal of his missionary work: to win many to Christ, to bring Christ to his brothers and sisters (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19-23). And for this, he shared their lives, became like them, and was incarnated into their reality. Although his faith in Christ had freed him from the obligation to fulfill the hundreds of precepts of the Mosaic Law, Paul did not hesitate to respect and fulfill them in order to gain the sympathy and trust of the Jews and thus be able to preach the Gospel. He used the same method with the Gentiles and became so much one of them that he rabidly contended against the Judaizing Christians who tried to impose the Mosaic Law on the Gentiles, knowing that obedience to Christ was above all else. The principle of incarnation that St.

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[41]Hüfner-Kemper, B. and Kemper, T. Interculturality and Conflict. 112.

Paul practiced with everyone (the *how*) was animated by his missionary zeal to bring everyone to Christ (the *what*).

4.1. The Required Personal Adjustments

It is easy to agree on the ultimate goal when envisioning a religious community made up of members of different ages, nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures: to become an intercultural community. While the *what* is clear, the same is not true for the *how* since it requires a leap of faith in the purest Abrahamic style –leaving a familiar land for another that is not–, and certain personal adjustments that can be scary as they are new and unfamiliar. However, I argue that commitment to those personal adjustments will pave the way to the final goal.

Small steps cover great distances, and the journey toward interculturality is no exception. The first of those personal adjustments will require that each member of the community "**become a cross-cultural person** [*something*] that inevitably entails being 'displaced' from one's own culture of origin and no longer to be living in one's 'natural' environment."[42] Jesus, who despite being God emptied himself of his rank and became man, even adopting the condition of a servant, is the perfect example (cf. Philippians 2:6-7). Jesus was born and grew up in a culture that shaped his mentality, way of speaking, food, clothing, family obligations, rituals, and relationships with others. He was a Jew, but he was able to go beyond and break the narrow limits of his Jewishness in the encounter with the different others, like the Canaanite woman (Mathew 15:21-28), or the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42). As Gittins rightly points out, "the eyes of the other broaden our vision and enable us to see what our cultural lenses… hide from us."[43]

Adriana Carla Milmanda[44] argues that, by their very nature, cultures "are at the same time both a source of unity and division, of inclusion and exclusion, providing values which both enrich and delimit." In Milmanda's view, and from a spirituality of incarnation, a community that aspires to be intercultural must intentionally take on this paradox, as Jesus did. His cultural transformation in the encounter with the 'different other' was so exceptional that in front of a teacher of the law he set as an example of charity a Samaritan, the natural enemy of the Jews, to the detriment of Levites and priests (Luke 10:25-37).

The next personal adjustment requires a deeper commitment as entails being open to newness. Today, our religious communities reflect an increasing generational and cultural diversity. No matter how much some individuals may try to project what they consider to be the 'dominant culture' onto others, there is no homogeneous culture in which to be born. Rather, the efforts and energies of the members of any religious community must aim to **shape a new culture** that may embrace all. Indeed, that new culture "must be shaped and formed from the constituent cultures of the various group members; this requires a daily and never-ending commitment… The new culture will be a living evolving reality that is continuously contested… as its members work to claim their individual core identity"[45] together with the rest of the community members.

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[42] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally. 131-132. Italics and bolds are mine.
[43] Ibid. 75.
[44] Milmanda, Adriana Carla. "Inserted Life. The Radical Nature of an Incarnated Spirituality." In Intercultural Living, ed. Lazar T. Stanislaus (Sankt Augustin: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, 2015), 40.
[45] Gittins. Living Mission Interculturally. 132-133.

The birth of this new culture is not exempt from the birth pangs that St. Paul spoke of. The excitement at the dawn of something new goes hand in hand with a certain degree of caution and fear because this new community culture "might require a loss of order, power, and independence –letting go of the old ways and bravely inviting new ones [*and*] by nature, human beings seek stable meanings of the self, the world, and God, although no such stable meanings exist."[46] However, caution and fear cannot be stronger than the desire to face and overcome the challenges of this newness.

4.2. Challenges for Intercultural Living

To speak of the necessary incarnation of intercultural living means to speak of the challenges of this new community lifestyle. Milmanda[47] talks about three: the challenge to live from the difference, the challenge to create spaces, and the challenge to experiment with alternative models.

"Living from the difference" assumes that the encounter with the other "is always mediated by the culture(s) and by the contexts which have shaped us."[48] A spirituality of incarnation, rather than ignoring differences, assumes them as potentially enriching experiences with the capacity to generate a new community culture. **"Creating spaces"** highlights the need for ongoing conversion to Christ (assuming the values of the Kingdom), to culture (accepting the social and cultural diversity of the members of the community in a given time and space), and to the world (missionary commitment); a process mediated through daily confrontation with the other and with the different. **"Experimenting with alternative models"** presupposes that no culture "can claim the right to establish what is particular to their own way of life as a 'universal' norm for others."[49] Although every culture has seeds and weeds, they are all valid as bearers of meaning. Community life, which is an expression of the cultural diversity of its members, must ensure that everyone has their place by promoting an "empathetic attitude towards any kind of exclusion, division, and boundaries."[50] The mere fact of accepting this simple premise already creates spaces for newness.

In my opinion, there is a fourth challenge in intercultural community living: making the three previous challenges possible. To succeed in each one of them, community members must be interculturally competent, which is to say, they must be able to develop certain competencies such as emotional resilience –or "the ability to maintain a positive emotional state regardless of the many obstacles faced in the intercultural relating process,"[51]–flexibility and openness –"characterized by accepting the other's way of doing things, a lack of rigidity, and an ethnorelative perspective,"[52] – verbal and non-verbal dialogue with the different other based on mutual respect, forthrightness, and humility.

In intercultural living, "the challenges and the possibilities are endless. Learning is a lifelong experience. Glimpses of glory abound. Potholes of perplexity are aplenty.

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[46] Jung Eun Sophia Park. "An Intercultural Spirituality. Dancing to the Rhythm of the Spirit." In Engaging our Diversity. Interculturality and Consecrated Life Today, ed. Maria Cimperman and Roger P. Schroeder (New York: ORBIS, 2020), 82. Italics are mine.
[47] Cf. Milmanda. "Inserted Life." 42-48.
[48] Ibid. 43.
[49] Ibid. 46.
[50] Ibid. 48.
[51] Webb. "Multiculturalism: A Challenging Necessity." 51.
[52] Ibid.

Misunderstandings are normal and necessary. Humility and sensitivity are indispensable. Hope and faith are absolute necessities."[53]

4.3. Implications from Vincentian spirituality: True Community

Intercultural living is the perfect image of the Kingdom of God, an inclusive community in which all are welcome and have a place since in Christ all the dividing walls of humanity have been broken down and no longer "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[54] St. Vincent de Paul insisted on this way of community living when he exhorted his confreres, "be united with one another, and God will bless you. But let it be by the charity of Jesus Christ, for any union which is not sealed by the blood of Our Savior cannot perdure. It is therefore in Jesus Christ, by Jesus Christ, and for Jesus Christ that you ought to be united with one another. The Spirit of Jesus Christ is a spirit of union and of peace. How can you attract people to Christ if you are not united with one another and with Him?"[55]

From a pedagogy of incarnation, interculturality cannot exist disconnected from community experience, which is to say, community building. Vincentian spirituality underlines a basic principle, that although "community is a gift of God, it is at the same time a human creation"[56] under constant construction, a work in progress with not a few imperfections that can be painful and frustrating. Some of these imperfections have their origin in the personal and cultural differences of every community member. It is then necessary to remember that a true Vincentian community "does not stifle diversity; on the contrary, it sees itself as enriched by the varied gifts of different members… Diversity is not the enemy of community. It is part of its richness. The Rule for a New Brother puts this rather beautifully: *Be thankful for the variety of gifts and difference of personality. When you put your own potential and insights at the service of your community your unity will grow stronger and richer, and together you will create that spaciousness which finds room for everyone.*"[57]

Marty Haugen talks in his song *All Are Welcome* about building a community where everyone's hopes, dreams, and visions have a place and where the love of Christ puts an end to any division. It is something that does not happen spontaneously but after much work and effort. From a Vincentian point of view, "this means that true community involves initiative, to get things going. It involves forgiveness, to heal what has gone wrong… It is always being created. We make a great mistake when we think of community as an abstract reality… True community is concrete, dynamic. It consists of real people who work at building it up rather than the imaginary people we dream of."[58]

Let us be those real people who roll up their sleeves and get to work (on ourselves first) to achieve the ultimate goal of living in an intercultural community, with its seeds and weeds.

5. Conclusion: We do not Happen to Have Dreams, We Make Dreams Happen

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[53] Ibid. 58.
[54] Galatians 3:28. NIV.
[55] Abelly. "Saint Vincent de Paul." Vol. II. 145.
[56] Maloney. "The Way of Vincent de Paul." 131.
[57] Ibid. 132-133.
[58] Ibid. 134.

The intercultural community is a fragile entity characterized by the cultural diversity of its members, often the cause of conflicts and misunderstandings that test the option to live in humble and respectful openness to and acceptance of others. It requires ongoing conversion, sustained commitment, and continuous engagement of all its members to make it possible, playing a deaf ear to the siren songs that invite to look at reality from one's own lens and to judge others from the bias that one believes to be unique and normative. As a unifying factor of different sensibilities and a catalyst for community life and ministry over and above cultural differences, I have emphasized the importance of the spirituality specific to the institution I belong to, the Vincentian spirituality. Our Constitutions and Bylaws call to certain behaviors and lifestyles, but it is the Vincentian spirituality that shapes us internally and paves the way we live with and accept those who are different. Today, we face the challenge of being spaces in which different cultures coexist in a dynamic of mutual enrichment. An incarnated spirituality will help to overcome individualistic tendencies, will promote the transition from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, and will facilitate understanding by focusing on what unites and not on what divides. Thus, the community, image of the Trinity, will be able to be a prophetic denunciation and proposal of the Reign of God. If that community happens to be a dream, it is not anymore; an incarnated spirituality can make that dream happen.

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