



mission

Conversation: A Brave New Way of Mission

Ensnarled in traffic on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, I began to listen to a radio talk program more intently than usual. I was searching for words of consolation on a long and tedious drive. What I found was a fascinating—and stirring—discussion about reconciliation. The topic was abortion, but the focus of the discussion was the search for “common ground.”

The hour-long program was a recapitulation of meetings that occurred during the past year. The meetings were organized by women who had opposing positions on the issue of abortion. Representatives of both groups described themselves as feminists. The participants in the year-long discussion were women accustomed to the public forum. That is, they were intelligent and articulate spokespersons

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James P. McCloskey CSSp writes from Congregazione dello Spirito Santo; Clivo di Cinna, 195; Roma 00136; Italy.

for “pro-life” and “pro-choice” positions. During the year there had been unsuccessful attempts by some to cancel the series of meetings, angry leaks to the press about the discussions, and genuine fearfulness on both sides. But the meetings took place. And the result was extraordinary.

Women who did not accept the position of other women who, in their opinion, allowed the law to regulate their bodies listened nevertheless with compassion as their colleagues recounted their religious-faith convictions, their differing understandings of the human person, and their simple—and different—biological beliefs. Other women, who could not theretofore abide the notion that females could terminate what they believed to be a human life within them, responded with empathy towards women whose scientific and humanistic principles were simply different from their own. In the end, members of neither group changed their positions. But also, in the end, members of both groups grew in respect and compassion for their “opponents.” They achieved a form of “common ground” that will serve as the basis for future relationship and conversation between them.

Not for discussion of abortion do I raise this example, but as a way of envisioning and creating a similar experience of “common ground” among people of goodwill within religious congregations that were founded for mission and for service to the poor. The existence of multiple cultures within congregations, mirroring the multiple cultures within the Catholic Church, is evident. These cultures are related to the different languages, tribes, national identities, and ages within the congregations, but they are not confined to them. The social scientist Edgar Schein defines culture as “the deeper

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level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic ‘taken-for-granted’ fashion an organization’s view of itself and its environment.”¹ In Schein’s view the most useful way to think about culture is to imagine it as “the accumulated shared learning of a given group, covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of the group members’ total psychological functioning.”²

Since the publication of Schein’s work, the understanding and perception that most members of an organization share the same cultural viewpoint has moved toward an awareness that many organizations contain multiple cultures or subcultures. Noting that some organizations may have only fragmented, disjointed cultures, Joanne Martin has asked whether culture needs to be something internally consistent, or whether it can be inconsistent and expressive of difference. Can it incorporate confusion, ignorance, paradox, and fragmentation? What are the boundaries around culture, and how do cultures change?³

By multiple cultures within a religious congregation, I mean the presence of differing and sometimes opposing worldviews under the umbrella of having been founded for a single purpose and with a single Rule of Life. Similarly, among Catholics in general, some define themselves as God’s “pilgrim people,” a term that implies moving towards the kingdom of God but not yet achieving it. Others think of the church as the kingdom of God here on earth. These different understandings translate into different understandings of morality, sacramental life, liturgy, and hierarchy. They are sometimes called differences of “style,” but they are more profound than that.

In religious missionary congregations, founded for “the spread of the gospel to those who have not yet heard it,” it is no wonder that multiple cultures are the order of the day. On a large scale, those differences are racial, linguistic, ideological, generational, and ecclesiastical. We make national and tribal attempts at “enculturation” of the life of our congregation and its values within a particular setting, translating ideals into practice—often with success but not always. Within our congregation’s American subculture, multiple differences

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of culture are often experienced just as acutely and intensely as in international subcultures. Even in the “real life” of persons in one community, such as the same parish or school, different worldviews emerge that challenge common living. Recently, in a community-room conversation, a priest said, “It is impossible to be both Republican and Spiritan.” He said it with the force of true conviction, and the Republican Spiritans in the room grew silent and began to seethe. In one province there are celebrations of the Tridentine liturgy, and there are those who question whether the celebration of daily Eucharist is ideal—or even spiritually healthy.



There are liberals, conservatives, social activists, philosophers, and papists. A motley—and graced—crew!

Undercurrents of cultural difference emerge in quiet discussions concerning the role of lay associates in the congregation; concerning the rising influence of the “southern” provinces, where candidates are many and new energy and vitality overshadow the elders of the “north”; and concerning members who choose to live and work in “untraditional” settings, interpreting “mission” in a different way. Undercurrents rise to the surface during provincial elections or national assemblies, when stakes are high and the level of well-being is at risk. Sometimes an “elephant in the room” is studiously ignored during discussion of clergy sexual abuse, sexual orientation, financial accountability, or institutional assessments.

In congregations with a missionary orientation and an international membership, the formal “cultural” training of members tends to be thorough and highly professional. Degrees in cross-cultural communication, missiology, and anthropology abound. Experts in interreligious dialogue, ecumenism, and international development are fairly commonplace. Candidates in formation spend a period of ministry in another cultural context before definitive commitment, and most new members are assigned to countries not their own. It is usual for members to achieve fluency in a second or even a third language.

Why, then, do we often find it difficult to talk among ourselves? Is it simply the human condition that the “traditionalists” will oppose the “progressives,” that tribal alliances will win out over competence in choosing leadership, and that “turf wars” will decide who controls property and finance? We opted for more.

And we know that the divisions are sinful reminders of our weakness.

And so what is the solution to the dissolution? The solution is a simple one—a commitment to sustained and deliberate conversation for the purpose of achieving “common ground.” Following the model employed by the pro-life and pro-choice advocates, it is imperative to establish “rules” for discussion. It is urgent to listen with care and real empathy. It is important to proceed with respect and humility. No one person fully embodies the congregation’s ideal member. Together, the members bear worldwide witness to the values espoused by its founders. No one perspective is to be eliminated or misjudged. The effort to engage in this conversation is fearful and intimidating. But it is the only way that differences can be respected—and, ultimately, that the persons expressing those different opinions will be respected and loved.

The meaning of “mission” has changed since the foundation of the Spiritan congregation in the 18th century. Far from an imposition of a foreign culture upon a people, mission is no less than sustained, purposeful, and respectful dialogue. It is a commitment to remain at the table, conversing honestly until the Spirit speaks. What greater witness to the “mind of Christ” is possible than the example of a community determined to “linger at the table” and fully invest itself in genuine, honest conversation—for mission?

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Notes

¹ Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1985), p. 6.

² Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), p. 10.

³ Joanne Martin, *Cultures in Organizations: Three Perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 4.



Personal/Group Reflection Questions

1. Where does my sense of mission come from—directly from God, from superiors, from the community in which I live?
2. What give me a continuing sense of confirmation and support for my mission?
3. When do we talk about our mission—our individual ministries or our corporate ministry together? What makes this conversation helpful? What makes it painful and contentious?

An “Asian” Meditation on the Gift of Mission

Why mission? This perennial, persistent question admits of a variety of valid responses. Asking *why* is fundamentally a question of “mission motivation.” Why evangelize? Why be Jesus’ disciple? Why concern yourself? What ends does mission really serve?

The bishops of Asia continually grapple with these questions as they explore the evangelizing mission of the church on this vast continent of four billion people, where less than three percent of the burgeoning masses are Christian. Although these leaders of the church in Asia have elucidated several reasons for engaging in mission, what is striking is the “mission motive” they

James H. Kroeger MM has since 1970 served mission in the Philippines and Bangladesh. Currently he is professor of Mission Studies and Islamics at the Loyola School of Theology; Ateneo de Manila University; Katipunan Avenue, Loyola Heights; Quezon City 1108; Philippines. jkroeger@admu.edu.ph