Education in Multiculturality
Education to Interculturality

In Ecclesiastical Institutions of Higher Education
and in Formation Communities
for Catholic Consecrated Life in Italy

Edited by
Enrica Ottone – Luca Pandolfi

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Front cover
Pavel Égüez, *Grito de los Excluidos*, mural en cerámica.
Cotacachi, Ecuador 2001
(Photograph by Luca Pandolfi, 2007)

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*Diversity always proves a bit
frightening, for it challenges our
securities and the status quo. […]
In the face of cultural, ethnic,
political and religious diversity,
we can either retreat into a rigid
defense of our supposed identity,
or become open to encountering
others and cultivating together
the dream of a fraternal society.*

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<div align="right">

POPE FRANCIS
Speech to the Hungarian Episcopal Conference
Apostolic visit to Budapest, September 12, 2021

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Critical Intercultural Education between Similarities and Differences

Points of no Return, Choices and Strategies for Teaching Intercultural Competences*

❖ Milena Santerini

Abstract

This article aims to identify the fundamental points of the relations between cultures in the face of super-diversity, with the goal of promoting and strengthening the perspective of real dialogue and intercultural exchange within a complex society. Moreover, starting from models of intercultural competence, it will analyze how to cultivate and encourage the intercultural competences of educators, especially those responsible for teaching the young generations, in a context of profound social and ecclesial changes.

Keywords

Diversity – Connection – Education – Formation – Intercultural competence

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① Points of no return

In order to promote and strengthen a perspective of real intercultural dialogue and exchange in a complex and troubled society like ours, it is useful to identify the points of "no return", or better yet, the fundamental points of relations between cultures amid diversity. This need raises another question: How can the intercultural competences of educators, especially those who teach the young generations, be cultivated and encouraged? In fact, we have the need and responsibility to give a name and scientific structure to phenomena concerning cultural pluralism and above all of directing reflection towards the ideal of universal brotherhood, which is fraught with difficulties and adversity, but is not impossible[1]. The point of reference for this vision is the Encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (All Brothers) by Pope Francis[2].

The need for authentic intercultural relations originates from the reality in which we are immersed: A global, mixed, plural world, where different ways of living, thinking, believing, eating and dressing are all intertwined[3]. This "mixed" cultural and social reality is currently magnified by travel and hyper-connectivity, but it has always existed throughout history. Today, the deep desire for unity, present in all human beings, is countered by a "separation mindset" that tends to divide rather than connect[4]. The tendency to differentiate has always been present in human groups and in the world of knowledge; consider for example, the difference between science and myth or between history and memory. However, a vision of the future is emerging where, without false fusions, it is increasingly clear these diversities must meet and dialogue with each other. This relates to Edgar Morin's idea regarding the connectedness of the branches of knowledge or to the discoveries of the neurosciences that demonstrate Descartes' error of separating mind and body, which in reality are inextricably connected[5].

In the culture-world, society is fragmented into many islands and individuals, living in separate contexts, so that each instance of unity when it occurs, such as a religious one, seems weak. A person's identity appears less defined, ever changing, in contrast to the rigid roles of the past, which while protective, were certainly more confining. Of course, these lonely individuals yearn for community, but they are really building new, restrictive boundaries around themselves[6].

While in the global world languages, artistic expressions, trade, technologies and finance intertwine, the *differentialist* mindset, which makes every identity into a mini-fortress and a threat, is on the rise. The temptation to distinguish oneself in order to clash with the opposing side has two faces. On one side, there are the "killer identities" belonging to the fundamentalist and nationalistic school of thought, who are bringing back the ideas of race, peoples, and ethnicities, and building walls and borders, making boundaries sacred and imposing a nationalistic dictatorship on anyone coming from afar. However, there is also the other extreme that exalts "minority" cultures, not only to restore their dignity, and rightly so, but mainly to cancel a past of injustice. Justice, however, is often not served by this cancel culture that tears down all controversial symbols. Instead, it creates new chasms between cultures.

We are faced, therefore, with the need to escape from the grip of differentialist thinking just as we are from the one that imposes uniformity. On this point, the philosopher François Jullien differentiates between the *universal*, a prescribed, constitutive, and pre-established principle inherited from Greek philosophy; and the *uniform,* which means mass-conformity, or that which makes everyone seemingly equal in a consumer society, belonging to blind productivism and a market society. Jullien adds a third category of plurality, which is the *common.* If the term's etymology really does derive from *cum-munus,* meaning exchange and reciprocity, then c*ommunitas* therefore becomes the place where relationships are founded, where sharing occurs[7].

After all, the intercultural route aims to develop precisely this idea of *common*. The purpose is to help make coexistence both possible and peaceful in a non-irenic society, and to develop a deep understanding, which is put to the test by differences. I

stress the words, "put to the test". Although intercultural programs do not exist without a desire for unity, they only work *by way of* differences.

Can there be a future for coexistence if not through an "eschatological" struggle towards being-together, which recognizes differences while resisting the temptation of melting them down, but not ignoring or ghettoizing diversity either? The best way to respect a contemporary culture is to dialogue with it, metaphorically or not. And this is only possible based on a common search for universal values, when meanings are questioned and compared, as Emmanuel Lévinas suggests, on the basis of Sense. A careful and confident anthropological eye is needed that does not disdain, cover up or block out differences, but that does not idolize or freeze them in an immutable otherness either. While "too much familiar sameness" impoverishes and an extreme relativism creates a breakdown in communication, we need to think about differences by becoming involved in exchanges and dialogue, entering into the unique and singular cultural universe of each group, and allow the encounters with them to change our minds.

2 | What kind of training in the intercultural field

Some suggestions can therefore be made to indicate the foundations and strategies for *critical* intercultural training. On one hand it "deconstructs" an idea of culture that is too abstract, reduced to an "object" that can be delineated on a map. On the other hand, it builds on the *common*[8]

- Education, with its meager tools, above all rejects the differentialist and culturalist way of thinking, even when it pretends to defend minorities. At the same time, it does not trust the overbearing universal mindset, nor the uniform, which makes everyone equal as a consumer.
- Instruction always aims for the middle ground between *cultural zero* and *cultural all;* or rather, between two opposing risks: the destruction of the cultural dimension or the opposite extreme, *culturalism*.
- It bases itself on a subjective and dynamic vision of culture, so that socio-economic standing, gender, and personal and family history; i.e., the elements that make up *super-diversity,* profoundly influence a person's personality and their relationships[9].
- Anyone who chooses the route of intercultural education knows that cultures are not pure, and that they never have been, not even from their beginnings. For this reason, it does not go looking for primordial elements which have supposedly been corrupted during the course of history. In other words, it does not believe that cultures exist outside of the irreducible subjectivity of people, who in turn are continuously changing with age, experience, migrations and relationships.
- Above all, this approach promotes a perspective of reciprocal transformation and not merely pure tolerance or relativism, let alone moral relativism, because the *common* demands giving things up, sacrifice, striving to understand and reciprocal transformation.
- This theoretical and conceptual framework should profoundly transform all educational training systems, including both in formal education (at all school levels, university and other courses) and informal (programs promoting peaceful coexistence and intercultural dialogue in the social arena, conflict resolution, etc.). Actually, this dynamic vision of culture and education is not always taken into consideration. After all, this resistance can be explained by the fact that educational programs based on a static idea of culture make them "easier" (but not more effective)[10].

A culturalist style of education tends to *teach the other's culture* by inevitably simplifying it, and risks reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices instead of combatting them. An experiential type of training, on the other hand, should endeavor to *encounter the other,* aiming to cause a deeper change in the character and world view of the participants. This type of training, in fact, presents particular difficulty due to the resistance against questioning traditional roles and assuming a critical eye towards intercultural relations.

3 Models describing competence in pluralism

When reflecting on intercultural education in light of the aspects listed here so far, the concept of competence inevitably emerges as a dynamic set of knowledge and skills, which usually indicate a proficiency acquired in specific professional fields. In this sense, cross-cultural dialogue can also be considered a highly-developed internalized skill, which is connected to the ability to read, analyze and interpret unusual and complex situations.

Competence is needed to avoid creating tension in the social, cultural and personal elements at play in relationships, by understanding similarities and differences, modifications and overlapping elements. Many academic studies and research projects have focused on this concept, mainly in the form of "inventories"[11]. Among the most well-known are from the experts of the Council of Europe, those by Byram Bennett or Darla Deardorff's checklists, where the following points are listed:

– *attitude* (open-mindedness, respect, curiosity, tolerance of ambiguity);
– *knowledge and skills* (cultural awareness, knowledge of one's own and other cultures, observation, ability to assess);
– *internal outcome* (adaptability, flexibility, empathy, decentralization);
– *external outcome* (behavior and communication appropriate to the situation).

In addition, research in the field has identified various other elements as components of intercultural competence, including:

– adaptability
– flexibility
– empathy
– respect
– openness
– tolerance of ambiguity[12].

In all of these examples, we are faced with *inventories and checklists.* In fact, many of these models are classifiable mainly as *Compositional Models;* that is, they show the components of an organized list, but without identifying how the items interact with each other. Consequently, in some lists the presentation of the various aspects or stages seems static and rigid; whereas cultural competence is, by its nature, contextual and dynamic. The *Developmental Models*, on the other hand, are more complex. They trace the development of competences on a continuum, where the elements influence each other reciprocally and where each impacts the others[13].

At this point, some characteristics of cultural competence can be outlined, and above all contextualized, and its evolution over time can be studied; even though reversibility or regression is sometimes a risk. In fact, the competences are not acquired once and for all. They may be lost and remain unused in the case of unfavorable experiences or contexts that have a negative impact (the influence of mass-media, political and/or social conflict, competition among ethnic groups, etc.). On the

other hand, the capacity and the ability to be open-minded can emerge or reemerge through encountering the other. All the research clearly demonstrates, in fact, the importance of the environment for building and maintaining (or losing) attitudes of acceptance, openness, flexibility and empathy.

Again, the competence to deal with diversity is like a system in which all the different elements are interdependent. In a dynamic and multidimensional view, the elements that make up competence (empathy, flexibility, capacity to deal with prejudice…) all interact with each other.

Finally, intercultural competence cannot be built on an ethnorelative worldview that accepts all the elements of a culture in toto, without exercising the judgement necessary to search for common ground starting from discordant positions. The "nonjudgmental" attitude, connected to being open-minded and understanding towards others, which is found for the most part in all the inventories discussed here, sometimes appears to be incongruent. As previously stated, intercultural relations cannot refrain from judging or expressing disapproval for certain attitudes or behaviors that create discord, when these do not merely involve customs, but regard different values.

Training Strategies for developing intercultural sensitivity

Training that develops these skills requires reflection on the intercultural experience through interacting and encountering others instead of merely through a description. So that competence does not only come from *knowledge*, but also from *knowing how to be* and *knowing what to do.* Becoming adept does not depend so much on being exposed to content, but on having the opportunity to experiment and reflect on interactions with people from other cultures, which activates the necessary skills and capabilities.

An essential model of intercultural competence training that contributes to raising what can be defined as intercultural sensitivity should be based on an anthropological interpretation of reality rather than on the knowledge of predetermined notions. Aspects of personality and reflection should be central, making affectivity the basis of successful communication. In this sense, training needs to be directed towards the personalities of the workers and teachers, who in turn must mediate or facilitate understanding across diverse cultures.

The different elements of this model, as previously stated, all interact with each other. Interest and respect, for example, both condition the ability to communicate, and once learned, can create empathy. Analyzing one's own stereotypes and prejudices creates openness, but this is likewise a condition for self-reflexivity. Training does not stop at promoting tolerance skills and mere acceptance, leaving people in separate spaces that never intersect. In order to achieve the training goals and overcome prejudices and misunderstanding, it is not enough to distance oneself from one's own or other cultures. Instead, *a third space* of trust and reciprocal transformation must be built, where each person can change. Finally, intercultural competence contains an ethical-political dimension because it promotes a non-nationalist idea of citizenship that is global and based on the interdependence and peaceful understanding between peoples.

My personal experience in intercultural training with adults, teachers, educators, social workers, and missionary societies is inspired by these goals: To deconstruct the rigid idea of culture, immerse ourselves in the global, get used to a new sensibility and together build the common[14]. It is therefore based on real life stories, which are at times experienced with great suffering by people. They are discussed as a group and deciphered. Through work on these cases, on the stories, on the accidental mistakes and intercultural shock, a new sensitivity is acquired by following three key points:

- Deeply understanding the cultural expressions of people as tied up with their being men and woman, well-off or not, educated or ignorant, foreigner or native;
- Dealing with prejudices together;
- Nourishing the capacity to find a common horizon, one that unites and not divides.

A very interesting example comes from the training experience which took place at the Pontifical Universities, Theological Faculties, Missionary congregations and families, often people who proclaim the Gospel and are part of permanent missions that have a centuries-old experience of enculturation, especially from Europe towards the Americas, Africa and Asia. For further information on these themes, see the work of Luca Pandolfi and Enrica Ottone in this volume[15].

Cultural and intercultural issues, especially in mission families, are changing. A major challenge that concerns the entire universal Church has arisen, especially in this post-Covid era[16]. The shift from the paternalistic European culture of the past – if not outright Western colonialism – to respecting "other" cultures, has been of fundamental importance and in part is the "merit" of missionaries. Although the era of paternalism is over, a new form of dialogue must be built, avoiding the mechanisms that would lead to a sort of generational turnover; i.e., the West's turn has ended, now it is the turn of new countries.

Misunderstood relativism (every cultural environment has the right to express itself as it sees fit) would risk dividing not only Europeans/Westerners from the rest of the world, but also create chasms between people within the same country. Culture can provide a sense of belonging and affiliation, conferring identity in a complex world, but even in not so large communities people can divide themselves into groups. Nationality can be chosen as the easiest criterion for belonging, but conflicts can also arise between young and old, women against men, or even with respect to views on food or the environment.

Education can help decipher a new type of enculturation: No longer belonging to a "Culture" that corresponds to a country or an ethnic group, which by now has been deconstructed, fragmented and almost dissolved in globalization. Interculturality in religious and missionary life means becoming close to people who are themselves multi-cultural who live in the global world, and are conditioned by age, or their roles or their sex more than by cultural affiliation.

We therefore need to remove cultural implications within communities, and not fall into identity traps. We must distinguish between cultural dynamics and the dynamics of power. The distinction between social convention and moral significance is fundamental. The former is transitory and tied to context; the latter, even if it can vary over time, is founded in natural law. Social conventions can be relativized, but not respect for another person's human dignity and rights.

In conclusion, our lodestar remains the question of meaning in light of the Gospels. Although they are placed in the cultural and linguistic universe of the era in which they were written, they cannot be compared in the same way with cultures of today. The Gospel remains a meta-cultural yardstick that converts us to overcome all bonds of identity and calls us to a greater sense of belonging. It gathers us together in universal brotherhood. It obligates us to understand others and ourselves more deeply, refining our sensitivity and building the "common" together.

Endnotes

1. Cf. M. Santerini, *La mente ostile. Forme dell'odio contemporaneo*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2021; Ead., *Pedagogia socio-culturale*, Mondadori, Milano 2019; Ead., *Intercultura*, La Scuola Editrice, Brescia 2014.

2. Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti (All Brothers)* (3 October 2020), (https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html; https://archive.is/PASxf).

3. On the theme of globalization there is a vast bibliography. Only some are given here for reference: Z. Bauman, *Dentro la globalizzazione. Le conseguenze sulle persone*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1999; U. Beck, *Che cos'è la globalizzazione. Rischi e prospettive della società planetaria*, Carocci, Roma 1999; A. Sen, *Globalizzazione e libertà*, Mondadori, Milano 2002.

4. Cf. F. Laplantine – A. Nouss, *Il pensiero meticcio*, Eleuthera, Milano 2015.

5. Cf. E. Morin – A.B. Kern, *Terra-Patria, Raffaello Cortina*, Milano 1994; A. Damasio, *L'errore di Cartesio*, Adelphi, Milano 1994.

6. Cf. C. Taylor, *Il disagio della modernità,* Laterza, Roma-Bari 1999; Z. Bauman, *La solitudine del cittadino globale*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2000.

7. Cf. F. Jullien, *L'universale e il comune. Il dialogo tra culture*, Laterza, Roma – Bari 2010.

8. Cf. M. Santerini, *Per una pedagogia interculturale critica: la ricerca tra "emergenza" e integrazione,* in G. Cappuccio – S. Compagno – S. Polenghi (eds.), *30 anni dopo la Convenzione ONU sui diritti dell'infanzia. Quale pedagogia per i minori?,* Pensa Multimedia Editore, Lecce 2020, 1231-1241.

9. Cf. S. Vertovec, *Super-diversity and Its Implications*, "Ethnic and Racial Studies" 30 (2007) 6, 1024-1054.

10. Cf. C. Allemann Ghionda – C. Perregaux – C. De Goumoens, *Pluralité linguistique et culturelle dans la formation des enseignants*, Editions Universitaire, Fribourg 1999.

11. A summary of the debate is found in C. Balloi*, La diversità nei luoghi di lavoro. Modelli, approcci e competenza pedagogica interculturale per il Diversity Management*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2021.

12. The various models are discussed in M. Santerini, *Intercultural Competence Teacher-training Models: The Italian Experience* in OECD (Ed.), *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Meeting the Challenge*, Center for Educational Research and Innovation – OECD Publishing, Paris 2010, 185-201.

13. Cf. Balloi, *La diversità*.

14. Cf. P. Reggio – M. Santerini (Eds.), *Le competenze interculturali nel lavoro educativo*, Carocci, Roma 2014.

15. Cf. E. Ottone – L. Pandolfi, *Interculturality in Multicultural Learning Communities: An Educational Action-Research Project in Italy*, in Iid. (eds.), *Education in Multiculturality, Education to Interculturality in Ecclesiastical Institutions of Higher Education and in Formation Communities for Catholic Consecrated Life in Italy*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2023, 33-68.

16. See the changes described by A. Riccardi, *La Chiesa brucia? Crisi e futuro del cristianesimo*, Laterza, Roma – Bari 2021 or by P. Jenkins *Chiesa globale, la nuova mappa. Cristianesimi di domani: realtà e scenari,* EMI, Bologna 2014.