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#UISGPlenary2019

Sowers of Prophetic Hope  
*Seminatrici di speranza profetica*  
*Säerinnen Prophetischer Hoffnung*  
*Sembradoras de esperanza profética*  
*Semeuses d'espérance prophétique*  
*Semeadoras de esperança profética*



## Intercultural Life as a Sign of Prophetic Hope

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*Original in Spanish*

Dear Superiors General,

It is an honor for me to be speaking today before you, who are the representatives of so many Congregations and so many Sisters dispersed throughout the whole world. This is certainly a situation and an experience that I never imagined, and I appreciate the confidence that the UISG shown me by inviting me. I, therefore, thank the organizers for granting me this honor, and I thank God for making my adolescent dream of “reaching the ends of the world” a reality. God, sooner or later, fulfills our deepest dreams... though in His own way and in His own time! ... Instead of reaching every corner of the earth, He brings those corners to me, through you and so many other encounters that I have lived because of the theme of intercultural life and mission, which I have been deepening in a special way for a few years now.

As a Missionary Servant of the Holy Spirit, I belong to a Congregation where multicultural and international life and mission are an essential part of our founding history and of our charism. However, my particular interest in this topic was really sparked by my personal experience of joy, frustration, pain, and learning when I was sent to launch a new missionary presence in the Fiji Islands (in the Pacific). We belonged to our Congregation’s Australian province, and I had to live—in a span of 5 years—in community with Sisters from Papua New Guinea, Germany, Indonesia, India, Benin; and I am from Argentina. Most of the time, we were only 2, and only one remained for 2 years. At the same time, we were advancing on our path in a country that, in turn, is composed of the local population and an almost numerically equal group of people who have come from India. Motivated by this experience, full of joy, discoveries, pain, misunderstandings, frustrations, and much learning, I then decided to study the topic of cultures and mission from the academic viewpoint in order to process and learn from the experience that supports me in the present situations and encourages me as I look towards the future.

Contact and exchange between cultures of the most diverse corners of the world are increasing and being imposed on us in a progressively accelerated way. Favored by our globalized era’s means of communication and transportation, today, there are indeed very few groups that remain isolated from contact with others. The

phenomena of migrations and massive displacements that are compulsive or provoked by violence, the climate change, political or religious persecution, poverty, xenophobia or the lack of opportunities, means that every day millions of people are moving from one side of the world to the other.

In the last 20 years, multiculturalism and interculturality have become a cross-cutting issue that is debated in fields as varied as education, health, philosophy, and the business world, among others. At the theological level, we have been concerned for many years with the “inculturation” of the faith, the Gospel, the liturgy, the missionaries, and so on. Inculturation answers the question of how to incarnate the faith, shared by the missionaries coming from the “outside” or “ad-gentes,” in the local culture in such a way that the transmitted faith can become part of the local culture and be expressed through the symbolism, values, and imagination of that culture. This question responded to an ecclesial context where the mission was predominantly one-directional: from the “evangelized” countries to “non-evangelized” countries or pagans (as they were called). Today, the reality is much more complex and multidirectional, so that in missiology we have already begun to speak of the Church’s “inter-gentes” mission (instead of ad-gentes) and of inter-culturation, which, without canceling the still existing challenge of inculturation, incorporates the challenges and opportunities of the new multidirectional context in the world and the Church today.

Through the consecrated life, called to be at the margins of the Church, this reality also reaches us, makes us move, impacts us... within our communities and beyond, in the mission and the apostolates. However, I am convinced that we have a “treasure” of lived experience of which we are not even aware. Many of our Congregations were already at the forefront of multicultural life for nearly a century before the world started talking about it. For others, the experience is more recent. However, it is this capital of experience and knowledge that we are called today to share with one another and to put at the service of humanity and the Church. On the other hand, in order to capitalize on this wealth of experience, we are challenged to open up to the tools that other, more specific fields are developing on the basis of philosophical thought, communication sciences, education, sociology, etc.

This combination of life experience, theological reflection, and the indication of possible tools is what I am going to try to present today in the short time that we are going to share. Can intercultural life become one of the seeds of the prophetic hope that we, as consecrated women, want to sow in today’s world? I am convinced that the answer to this question is positive and that it is urgent for each of our Congregations and the entire Church to consider it.

Yet, the most pressing issue, about which most Congregations are concerned, is how to live it and how to do it. I will, therefore, try to present this topic in four steps:

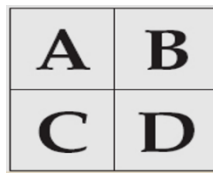
1. Clarification of the concept of interculturality and related concepts
2. How to live in an intercultural key
3. The weakness and power to become a sign
4. The urgency of an intentional choice based on prophecy and for hope

## **1. The Concept of Interculturality and Related Concepts**

We cannot approach the concept of interculturality without clarifying other terms that are related and/or frame what interculturality means and proposes:

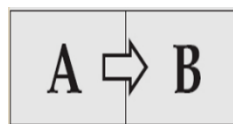
Multiculturalism: When we talk about a multicultural group, event or life, we are highlighting the fact that its participants or members come from different cultures; for example, a parish, a company, a city, and even a country, can be multicultural. To emphasize the fact that people also come from different nationalities, we will say that the group is multicultural and international. However, this fact, in itself, does not imply any relationship or interaction between its members. I can live my whole life in a city inhabited by neighbors of

different cultural origins, but this will not necessarily lead me to want to learn their language, taste their food, understand their values, etc. Using a diagram, we could represent the situation as follows:<sup>1</sup>



Trans-cultural experience: Now, let’s say that a person of culture “A” decides to move to the neighborhood of culture “B.” The person would be going into a cross-cultural experience. Note that we are talking about a “move” for a certain extent in time and not a mere tourist visit. The move, in this example, implies a degree of commitment and risk that is not assumed when we are just passing through and consider ourselves tourists, visitors, explorers or, at worst, conquerors or colonizers...

On a diagram, it would look like this:



This experience of learning and adapting to another culture, different from the one in which we have been socialized, is called acculturation. Acculturation is, in itself, a challenging and enriching experience once we have overcome the stages that normally occur to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the magnitude of the cultural difference and a person’s personality and/or preparation. In general, these stages go from a first idyllic love of the “different,” to a deep rejection of that same “difference,” until a balance is reached between the appreciation for the qualities and the recognition of the shadows of the other culture and of one’s own.

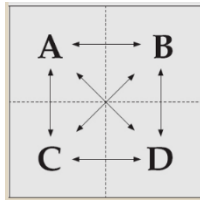
When that balance is not reached, a person risks being stuck in a dream that does not correspond to reality (Sisters who “maternalize” the assumed culture and, then, act and speak of “them” as “poor little ones...” or who are unable to develop relationships with the local people, while all their friends and references continue being, despite the passing of time, those of their place of origin and they maintain excessive contact with them and/or with the news from home). Or, on the contrary, they suffer a cultural shock that plunges them into depression, apathy, hypochondria, excessive concern for their health and/or cleanliness, excessive sleep or food, etc. These are “symptoms” of a cultural shock to which we should pay close attention when they continue in time after a transcultural transfer.

I mention these processes that occur in transculturation because they often coincide with the formation of the multicultural community. It is, therefore, very important to bear in mind that in many cases people are not only adapting to the culture of a new place and perhaps also learning a new language—which, in itself, is already highly demanding—but are also, at the same time, interacting with multiple cultures within and maybe also outside of their community. Sometimes, when forming multicultural communities, we do not take into account or adequately accompany the personal processes of transculturation and inculturation that each of the Sisters is going through, on a personal level in parallel with communitarian and pastoral challenges. In fact, truly intercultural processes can only be initiated with people who have already lived through at least 3 years of transculturation.

Interculturality: Let us now use the diagram of cultures A, B, C, and D to illustrate the difference between multiculturalism and interculturality.

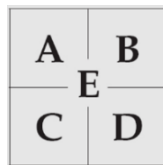
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<sup>1</sup> The following diagrams and the general way of presenting them are taken from Anthony J. Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*, Liturgical Press, 2015, 621–746 [Kindle].



While the first diagram outlined the coexistence of different cultures in clearly demarcated compartments, in this second diagram we see arrows coming out of each group or person in the direction of the other groups or people, thus illustrating the interrelation between them. At the same time, the arrows do not indicate a single direction but rather a round trip. Going to meet the other person and the other's welcome. Moreover, the dividing lines are not continuous but punctuated, thus indicating that the boundaries between some cultures and others are no longer sharp and clear.

However, this diagram does not yet illustrate the intercultural community. Good relations, communication, and good coexistence—although very important and necessary—are not enough. The intercultural community is called to take a step beyond the tolerance of differences and to live a process of transformation or conversion that challenges it to create, as a result of this interrelation, a new culture.



In this diagram, we will call “E” the new culture that is the fruit of intercultural living. The “E” culture will be made up of a new and unique combination of some elements from each of the participating cultures, making each person feel at the same time “at home” while facing something “new.”

This combination will emerge as an always dynamic result of the process of interaction and of agreements reached between the parties. In this process, each community enriches itself with the values and lights brought by the other culture, but both also take on the challenges and face their respective shadows and blind spots (e.g., victimization, superiority or inferiority complexes, imperialist mentality, racism, historical prejudices, and so on). This model of community interaction between cultures, on a level of symmetry and equality, is diametrically opposed to the assimilationist model that prevailed (and still survives?!!) in groups where minority or presumably underdeveloped, uncivilized, cultures or “pagans” had to adapt, conform, and assume the superior or majority culture while abandoning their own. This assimilationist model is what governed most of our Congregations in the “recruitment” of vocations in the so-called “mission countries.” This assimilationist model is framed in an approach that implies integration as a hegemonic affirmation of the host country’s culture. According to this model, it is expected that the immigrant or the trained person, in our case, behaves and assumes the culture of the receiving society or community, putting aside or nullifying his/her culture of origin.

On the contrary, instead of seeking the “assimilation” that denies and wants to erase the differences, the model presented by interculturality seeks to know, value, deepen, and integrate these differences. As a result of the interrelation and encounter between cultures, we are invited to create a new “E” culture, in which we can all give the best of ourselves, share our gifts, and let ourselves be challenged by the encounter and the relationship with the “different,” so that our obscurities may be converted in the light of the Gospel. Humanly speaking, interculturality is a counter-cultural movement in which few people would feel comfortable or for which they would have to be prepared. Our cultures “program” us in such a way that we tend to relate to “ours” to defend ourselves from “the others,” “those who are different,” and their potential threats. On the basis of the faith and the power of grace, however, inclusion in equality is the Project of the Kingdom that Jesus preached and, as such, it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

Cultures: The terms just presented, in turn, lead us to briefly deepen our understanding of the term “culture.” This concept of anthropological origin does not have, as such, just one definition; it has been evolving over

time and can be analyzed from hundreds of different perspectives. However, for our purposes, we are going to take the definition that presents “culture” as

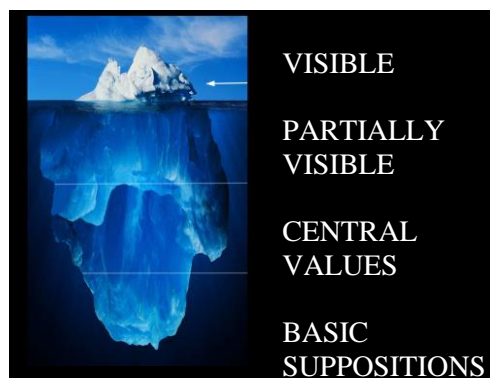
a way of life of a group of people—the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

Culture, as such, does not exist; but there are people who embody a certain culture or use certain “cultural lenses” that give meaning to their lives and allow them to communicate with each other and to organize themselves. My culture is the best way that “my” people found to survive and develop in the context and place where we live. Therefore, no culture can claim the right to become the universal “norm” of other cultures. Our challenge, in the Church, is that, for centuries, our faith has been confused with the culture that mediated its transmission (both the cultures that mediated the writing of our Sacred Texts and the Western culture that later extended the implantation of the Church).

Let us look at some characteristics of culture: culture is learned and transmitted through socialization in the primary and secondary groups in which we have grown up (the family, the clan, the neighborhood, the school, the city or the countryside, social class, religion, profession, and the different groups of identification and belonging in which we have been formed). Culture is stable and dynamic, it changes very slowly, but it is so much a part of ourselves that we do not know it until we “leave” it.

Only in contact with the “other,” with what is “different” do we begin to know our own culture and that of others... this knowledge is, then, given by comparison with the “others,” those who are “outside” our group. This division between “us” (women, Catholics, religious, professionals, Latin Americans, Argentines, southern, northern, etc.) and “them” (those who are not like “us”) protects us and gives us a sense of identity and belonging, but it also isolates us, challenges us, and fills us with fear in the face of the “unknown.” There are no higher or more developed cultures and less developed or inferior cultures, but different cultures. And each culture believes that it is the best because it is the best form that has allowed its group to adapt to the context in which it developed.

Getting to know a culture is very difficult. To illustrate this difficulty, it is compared to an iceberg of which we can only see the protruding surface, i.e. 10%, while 90% is below water. In the same way, the material elements of each culture (like clothes and typical foods, traditional artifacts, dances, etc.) constitute only the 10% that we can see, feel, hear, smell and name with ease. In the remaining 90%, which corresponds to the immaterial elements, we can distinguish in turn 3 levels: the first, partially visible, level to which we can access when we seek it intentionally (what is behind the language, communication styles, leadership, conflict resolution, etc.); the second level (one of the central values) is much more difficult to reach and examine; and the third level (that of the basic suppositions) is so deep and unconscious that we cannot really get to know it: this is what we take as “normal,” “given.”



From this brief terminological framework, I will strive to make it clear to us that living interculturally is a vocation and a counter-cultural option, and that, as such, it appeals to the faith and to the life of grace. Humanly, we all tend to seek and interact with those with whom we feel identified and, therefore, understood,

included, accepted. Conversely, what is “different” tends to scare us, challenge us, and make us distrustful. This distrust, especially for cultures that suffered the experience of the colonization or the invasion of their nations, is not unjustified or minor; on the contrary, it is a collective wound that lasts for generations and must be healed personally before engaging in a project of intercultural life and mission. Intercultural life is not automatically the result of the mere coexistence of people of different cultures; on the contrary, it must be intentionally constructed and assumed as a process of personal and community conversion. Unlike transnational companies that seek to use interculturality as a tool for improving their sales, we are invited to transform it into a way of life that makes us more faithful in following Jesus and building the Kingdom.

## **2. How to Live in an Intercultural Key?**

Culture, as we have been able to outline it, is something that goes beyond all the areas, aspects, and facets of our life. It is the very medium through which we organize our perception of reality, build a collective sense of the world that surrounds us (material and immaterial), and communicate. Hence, culture is compared to the lenses through which we look. At the same time, it is also compared to an iceberg, because culture permeates our life so intimately that it becomes impossible to know it objectively and to reach the deepest tones that give our lenses their color. Our values, moral codes, preferences, sense of respect, sense of authority, sense of order, our management of time, etc. ... everything is crossed by the culture and the cultures of the groups of belonging in which we have been socialized. For me, this was a fascinating discovery that I was only able to recognize when I found myself in Fiji, in a culture so different from own.

How, then, can we open ourselves to this reality of multiculturalism and start living in the key of interculturality? How can fear or the dangerous mere tolerance of “different” be overcome so that we can begin to go out to meet other men and women? Interculturality, more than a topic, is a process; it is a new paradigm that wants to respond to the reality that surrounds us and imposes itself on us; it is a key from which to re-read our life and mission as consecrated persons in today’s world.

Within the time at our disposal, I would like to highlight at least three elements that, according to my experience, are essential when it comes to finding ways to begin to introduce this new paradigm in our communities:

1. **Preparation:** since it is a counter-cultural option, intercultural life requires dedicating time and effort to the preparation of the Sisters. This preparation includes:

- Basic knowledge of the traits and salient characteristics of the interacting cultures (nationality, ethnicity, generation, education, socio-economic origin, etc.). Instead of focusing only on what unites us (which is very good, and it is very good to nurture it), interculturality also challenges us to explore, value, and capitalize what differentiates us.
- The creation of a “safe space” of trust and mutual care, where one can express oneself freely without fear of being judged and/or labeled.
- The use of various strategies that help to maintain the motivation that leads to going out to meet and to welcome the “difference” by overcoming the difficulties that will occur in communication.

2. **Intentionality:** prior motivation is an element that must lead us to sustain, over time, the intentional effort to build on the basis of the differences. Intentionality requires growth in intercultural sensitivity by looking for:

- tools that favor
  - communication (verbal and non-verbal) and
  - the resolution of both expressed and latent conflicts.
- personal and community work that strengthens and develops
  - resilience capacity and
  - detects in time the dangerous conformist attitude that is content with a simple “tolerance” of the difference.

3. **Spirituality:** intercultural life, as a proposal that emerges from our “Catholic” (i.e., “universal”) faith, is a life-long personal and communitarian process of conversion. Ethnocentrism (taking our culture as the center of the world and the norm for measuring other cultures), cultural stereotypes and their consequent prejudices

are present in the world, in the Church and in each of us. Recognizing this and opening, ourselves personally and as a community, to deconstruct them implies setting out on a path of transformation or conversion. As a spiritual path, intercultural life and mission is not so much a goal but rather a search and a process. There are no recipes, nor are there quick solutions to the conflicts that it entails. Rather, interculturality challenges us to live with the paradoxes and the gray zones of the liminal spaces that open us to transformation and growth. This is precisely why intercultural life has the fragility and power of a “sign.”

### **3. The Fragility and Power to Become a Sign**

Signs give us clues, call our attention and point us to something that goes beyond themselves. They are concrete, they are temporary, and they must be correctly interpreted and decoded. Now, for all these reasons, signs are fragile and limited... but they also have an extraordinary symbolic power that can capture our imagination and connect us with the transcendent, with the unseen values, the meaning of life, utopia, hope, and faith.

In this sense, the contribution that the consecrated life can make to the reflection and praxis of interculturality in today’s world is unique and urgently needed. In fact, interculturality, devoid of its symbolic potential and its horizon of a Project that transcends it (the Project of the Kingdom), runs the risk of becoming a new colonialism, a new form of manipulation in the hands of the most powerful of the day. It can be used as an instrument in the service of the logic of an economic and political system that is inherently exclusive and imposes itself without measuring costs or consequences for the most vulnerable, broken, and humiliated cultures of millions of people who are “crying out” to survive.

On the contrary, interculturality, as a spiritual path, can give us and the world a totally different alternative. Today, religious life, immersed as it is in an increasingly globalized world, is called to respond to the signs of the times, by becoming a cross-cultural and intercultural sign of the radically inclusive and egalitarian Project of the Kingdom of God:

<sup>26</sup> for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. <sup>27</sup> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26–28)

This was the founding and revolutionary experience of the first communities and of the first disciples of Jesus! The radical and egalitarian inclusiveness of Jesus’ proclamation and praxis was the characteristic identity of the first communities that gradually separated them from Judaism. However, this path was and remains a path of progress and setbacks made of key moments of personal and communitarian conversion. Let us remember, as one of the paradigmatic cases, for example, Peter’s “conversion” in the text known as the “Conversion of Cornelius” (Acts 10:1–48). In this extraordinary account, preceded by the vision of the cloth in which Peter is “challenged” by God to eat animals that, for him, are culturally and religiously impure, he ends up breaking a whole series of taboos (receiving and lodging pagans, eating and fraternizing with them, entering their home and baptizing people who have not been previously circumcised) to state, to their total amazement and awe, the fact—which he himself had just grasped—that God shows no partiality:

<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (Acts 10:34–35)

In Jesus himself we can trace his personal “conversion” from ethnocentrism, which he humanly shared with us, in his encounter with the Canaanite or Syro-Phoenician woman where Jesus lets himself be challenged and interpellated by her until he accepts to abandon a first, clearly excluding position. In this account, we see how Jesus lets her teach him that the Good News of God and of the Kingdom that he came to inaugurate was not limited only to the people of Israel (cf Mt 15:21–28; Mk 7:24–30).

The good news of the Spirit is that the historical conjuncture in which we find ourselves today invites us to assume the multiculturalism of our communities, societies, and pastoral services as a possibility for conversion and transformation instead of seeing it as a problem to be solved. It is not and will not be easy; it

will not give us the security and stability that we have lost and long for. There are no recipes to ensure success. However, if interculturality, as a radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated, captures our imagination, it will have the extraordinary power to make our communities into the sign that today's divided, fragmented, and conflictual world needs and is calling for.

Let us imagine how our charisms can be re-founded through the encounter with the values of other cultures. Let us perceive the multifaceted wealth that they would acquire. Yet, this Easter will not come without a cross. Giving a real place to the intercultural implies "letting go" of that for which we, as an institution, have perhaps given our life and our passion for many years, in order to make room for the newness that is emerging. The "E" culture is the fruit of a process of synergy, where the result is greater than the simple sum of the parts.

#### **4. The Urgency of an Intentional Choice Based on Prophecy and for Hope**

Like any vocational process of call and conversion, interculturality is not only destined to our personal and/or communitarian growth, which only leads us to seek a more peaceful, comfortable, and tolerant life. Today, intercultural life and mission will become a sign of prophetic hope, if they are constructed as a new alternative lifestyle. The re-foundation of religious life today is impossible without interculturality as a sign of the times of the contemporary world.

Because humanity has become so scandalously divided and conflictual, we (individually and corporately) must make a choice. Either we prefer to continue sinning—through exclusion, separation, and the maintenance of limits—, daily eating and drinking our own trials... or we resolve to accept, today, God's radical option for humanity and, with His help and our firmness, change our lives. There is no third way. Both, the future of humanity and the Church depend on this. (Anthony Gittins)

Intercultural life as an intentional option for religious communities that cross borders and open up to the "different," deconstructing the "pretended" and anti-evangelical superiority of some over others, by becoming a "workshop" where, through life itself, different relationships between cultures are tested: relationships of service characterized by equality and not domination, mutual empowerment without hierarchies that belittle or stifle life, dialogue and not assimilation, encounter and not colonization, inculturation and inter-culturation.

Yet, embracing interculturality based on the Project of the Kingdom is not just an intra-community exercise. The true fruitfulness of this praxis, which is daily at stake in the ad-intra life, is the potential prophetic impact that will turn it into hope for today's world. Interculturality will be a sign of prophetic hope for humanity, if our own experience of living together, valuing and giving a mutually transforming place to "difference," with the doors opening inwards, puts us on the path to go out to meet those who are different, marginalized, invisible, and exploited today.

Only those who have gone through the personal conversion from ethnocentrism to intercultural sensitivity will have eyes to see and care about the suffering of those who are invisible and excluded from the contemporary world. As in the parable of the "Good Samaritan," only the "foreigner," from whom nothing was expected, was the first to be able to see and then help the man lying on the road-side, renewing his hope and denouncing—implicitly and prophetically—the blindness of the Levite and the priest who had passed by... (cf Lk 10, 25-37).

We, too, if we let ourselves be challenged and enriched by the "foreign" and culturally "different" gaze, we will allow the re-foundation of our charisms, broadening the vision of our founders in a way that we cannot even perceive today. This is not an easy path nor will it be free of challenges, but if we respond to the signs of the times, confident that the Spirit is at work, then we can announce the good news of interculturality and denounce everything that denies it, with the strength and the richness of the radically inclusive Project of the Kingdom that Jesus inaugurated.