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*Il Consigliere generale per la formazione*

## **INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCE IN THE FORMATION OF THE SALESIANS OF DON BOSCO Guidelines of the “Ratio formationis” and experiences**

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"Sequela Christi"**

### **The global multicultural context**

The current global context is becoming increasingly multicultural. Getting in touch with other ways of living, feeling and understanding reality is becoming easier all the time. True, some conflicts between different ethnic groups of the same country or continent are intensifying; but, by and large, the phenomena of globalization and migration have been mainly responsible for transforming the world scene, making it more and more complex and multicultural.

*Globalization* creates processes of economic, cultural, political and technological interdependence whose positive and negative outcomes have a bearing on the planet. The positive aspects include: the speed of communication and information, opportunities for growth in countries that have remained on the margins of the world economy, the contraction of the distance in space and time, and cost-reduction due to an increase in competition. Included among the negative aspects are: environmental degradation, the risk of increasing social inequality, the loss of local identities, the reduction of national sovereignty and the autonomy of local economies, and the loss of privacy.

*Migration* is another contributing factor to the establishment and expansion of multicultural contexts. Among its most visible aspects are: the absorption of migrant workers in various sectors of the economy, the difficulty of integrating them in the social fabric, the uncontrolled influx of illegal immigrants and clandestine entrants, their presence on the margins of social life, the contrasts between foreigners and natives, the increase of minors of foreign origin in schools and their failure to make the grade, and the increase of foreign unaccompanied minors who are at risk of being exploited. In addition to these factors, there is also noticeable: an increased settling down of immigrants in a place; an upsurge in mixed marriages, a higher birth-rate in immigrant families, a reuniting of families, a rise in the number of second generation immigrants, and the growing importance of the labour market.

This multicultural perspective enables us to understand that we are all one human family and that we must avoid ethnocentric conflicts and work for the good of all. We need to launch *integration* processes in multicultural societies. Integration does not mean an annulment of differences nor does it mean submission to a process of acculturation to and incorporation in a dominant culture. To integrate oneself means to find a living space to express one's characteristics within a system of

reference that does not erase differences but acknowledges and repositions them within a rich and varied framework.

## **The multicultural development of the Salesian Congregation**

From the beginning Don Bosco wanted the Salesian Congregation to be marked by a strong missionary commitment. This commitment was continued by the first successor of Don Bosco, Blessed Michael Rua, who launched Salesian presences in all the continents and began a process of globalization of the Congregation that has been followed ever since by successive Rectors Major.

The Africa Project initiated by the Rector Major, Fr. Viganò, in 1980, the new presences in the countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the beginning of our works in the islands of the Pacific have led to the presence of the Congregation today in 132 countries of the world and their arrangement in 8 regions for purposes of animation: 3 in Europe, 2 in America, 1 in Africa and Madagascar, and 2 in Asia. Furthermore, because of the varying growth in vocations in the different geographical areas of the world, a new cultural balance is being created in the Congregation, and attention is paid not only to differences but also to preserving the unity and identity of the Salesian charism.

Project Europe, initiated by the Rector Major, Fr. Pascual Chavez, in 2002 and endorsed officially by the General Chapter in 2008, has brought missionaries from all parts of the world to the Salesian communities of Europe; today there are about 90 Salesian missionaries present in Europe. At the same time, the continuing dispatch of missionaries to other parts of the world has led to the formation of international communities in which previously the missionaries were especially from Europe whereas today they come from the other continents.

Similar processes are also taking place in the Catholic Church, which is becoming increasingly global, thanks also to the theology of mission which has developed, beginning from the conciliar decree “Ad Gentes” up to the encyclical “Redemptoris Missio”.

## **Guidelines and experiences for an intercultural formation of Salesians**

Faced with this new scenario, the Salesian Congregation has realized the need to change focus in its formation: it is not enough to comply with the requirements of inculturation; it is also necessary to meet the new challenges of interculturality. This is the reason why the Congregation has shifted its emphasis from a predominantly Province-based formation to an interprovincial collaboration in formation; or to put it in a better way, the need for establishing a network of formation communities and fostering collaboration in formation has given rise to new multicultural situations and created new challenges in the work of formation.<sup>1</sup>

Those who are formed in our formation communities often come from different ethnic groups; to them we can add the young missionaries who leave for the missions during their stages of formation and therefore have to complete their formation in the countries to which they are sent. Recently yet another factor has led to an emphasis on interculturality in formation communities: the Provinces that have a small number of those in formation or of formation guides have been invited to enter into an interprovincial collaboration with other Provinces to ensure the level of formation which they by themselves are not in a position to offer. In these formation communities there is a good acceptance and interaction among the confreres from different cultures, and they are given ample space to express themselves in their own cultures. Sharing the charism creates a good sense of belonging.

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<sup>1</sup> F.CEREDA, *Interprovincial collaboration in initial formation*, in: AGC 388, 2005.

On every continent, we now have *interprovincial and regional communities*, in which those to be formed come from various Provinces. For example, Gbodjome in Togo (at the service of the Vice-Provinces of Western and Tropical Africa), has novices from thirteen African countries; the novices of Argentina, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay come together in the Novitiate of Alta Gracia in Argentina; and the novitiates of Pinerolo and Genzano in Italy have novices from Italy, the Middle East and several countries of Europe. A similar experience is also had for postnovitiates together with their centres of philosophical and pedagogical studies. Interprovincial collaboration is even more marked in the case of the specific formation of candidates for the priesthood and the Salesian brotherhood as, for example, at centres of theological studies like Manila, Bangalore, Shillong, Nairobi, Lubumbashi, Tlaquepaque, Krakow, Turin and Messina.

In addition, we have chosen to increase our *international formation communities* - in Rome for students of theology in the Italian language, and in Jerusalem for those who speak English; there is also an international community for the specific formation of Salesian Brothers at the holy places of Don Bosco at Turin Valdocco. All the Regions of the Congregation are present in these centres, and an effort is made to keep a balanced number from different backgrounds and cultures. There are four other international communities in Rome for Salesian confreres attending the Salesian Pontifical University and other Pontifical Universities.

These communities and study centres play an important role: they provide enriching intercultural experiences. They open those in formation to other cultures and offer a broader vision of the Salesian charism and an appreciation of the different ways of living it; they aid in forming a sense of belonging to the Congregation, whose membership is not monolithic but one in essentials and varied in expressions. All this also contributes to creating a sense of the catholicity and missionary nature of the Church.

Interculturality is a reality found not only in formation communities and study centres; there are also other *regional formation initiatives* in which Salesian participants come from very different places and experiences: for example, in the preparation for perpetual profession, in meetings of practical trainees, in the “quinquennium” of young priests and brothers, and in other such periodical meetings. There is also a collaboration among Provinces for the study of languages, particularly Italian and English. Similar experiences are also available in the field of ongoing formation: the formation of Rectors, refresher courses, seminars...

### **Formation conditions for an intercultural experience**

As mentioned already, we have in the Salesian Congregation many multicultural formation communities for initial formation and university studies; we also have international study centres open to religious of different Congregations, to diocesan priests and lay people. If these centres and communities are to offer a truly intercultural experience, certain conditions are necessary.

*New mentality.* The starting-point lies in creating a new way of thinking about responsibility for formation: an interprovincial formation community or study centre does not “belong” exclusively to the Province in whose territory it is situated, but the formation and academic responsibility pertains to all the Provinces involved. Therefore, a Province does not waive its formation responsibility when it sends its confreres to be formed in international communities; it only changes its way of exercising this responsibility, which it now carries out as a responsibility together with other Provinces. The aim is to ensure in this way an “institutional” way of paying attention to the different contexts and the various cultures represented.

*Continuity of collaboration and experience.* Intercultural experience and collaboration in formation among Provinces have a history of beginning, progressing, slowing down, re-assessing and relaunching. Both experience and cooperation need time to mature and grow; there is no place for a

fragmentation of experiences and improvisation in making decisions. Only when there is a continuity of the process does it become possible to harmonize the variety of formation practices of different Provinces, the multiplicity of lifestyles, and the diversity of the places of origin. Only continuity ensures a real inculturation of formation and a true intercultural experience.

*Interprovincial team.* The teams of the formation community and the study centre have to be interprovincial. This guarantees everyone's solidarity in supporting the community and the study centre, and above all facilitates a knowledge of the different cultural backgrounds of those in formation, thus promoting inculturation. The selection of new formation guides and teachers takes place through a collegial decision of the Provincials; this applies in a particular way to the selection of the Rector of the formation community.

*Organ of shared responsibility.* According to the Salesian "Ratio", interprovincial collaboration concerning a formation community and a study centre "requires the creation and proper functioning of an entity holding shared responsibility, for example, a curatorium." The competence of the curatorium takes in: the project of the formation community, information and opinions about the annual academic programme of the study centre, the annual calendar, criteria for pastoral activities, the style and practice of poverty, the holiday period, revisits to the Province, the budget and the expenditure, the decision concerning the annual boarding expenses, the academic fees...

*Formation of formation personnel.* An important task is the preparation of formation personnel to face the new multicultural situation of formation communities and also pastoral settings. In this connection, the Formation Department of the Congregation organizes annual meetings for the formation of formation personnel, and meetings for the provincial formation delegates of each Region; these are mostly continental meetings and are therefore multicultural. These meetings demonstrate a sensitivity to diverse cultural situations and a quest for solutions to problems, but always with a concern for the unity of the Congregation and fidelity to the charism of the Founder.

*Sense of belonging to the Province.* To increase the sense of belonging to the Province of those in formation in interprovincial communities, the "Ratio" asks that, in addition to the presence in the formation team of formation guides from one's own Province, there be also frequent visits by the Provincial, the exchange of news, meetings to communicate information and foster communion among the members of a Province, a planning of the holiday period in agreement with the Rector of the formation community and the Province of origin, and other forms of communication.

## **Challenges facing intercultural experiences**

Besides the positive considerations which encourage the promotion of intercultural experiences, one finds in the Congregation some uncertainties based on opinions, even if they are gradually diminishing. This is why it is important to address the formation questions arising in connection with intercultural experiences, particularly with reference to contextualization and inculturation.

### *Contextualization of formation*

Formation is a contextualized reality. In fact, it takes place in a particular context, which is determined by several factors: the social condition of the area, the culture and lifestyles of people, the situation of the Church and the praxis of the Province. The context, with its emphases or weaknesses, exerts a significant influence or constraint on the formation process.

The Salesian Constitutions say that "it is the duty of the provincial community, through the various organs of animation and government, to lay down the method of formation according to the needs of its own cultural context" (C 101). The "Ratio" adds that "this responsibility requires a permanent

attitude of reflection and dialogue between Salesian identity and the cultural context. Collaboration in this field is to be encouraged among Provinces in similar circumstances”.(17)

Now, when an interprovincial formation community is chosen, there sometimes arises a doubt that the context is being neglected; it is thought that those in formation find themselves in a situation which is not helpful for their maturing process since they are inserted in a context “different” from that of their own Province. This emphasis on “contextual formation” is all right, but it needs closer examination.

There is a growing realization today that formation cannot be limited to the provincial context only, but must have a wider reach. The immediate or local context, in fact, is not the only context in which we live. There are often several contexts within a Province. In addition, we belong simultaneously to *a number of contexts*: we live in the context of the local Salesian community, but also in that of the provincial community and of the Congregation; we are inserted in the reality of the area, but also in that of the country, the continent and the world; we are part of a parish, but also of a particular Church and the universal Church. The fact is that we often live in several contexts in which there is a marked diversity, as happens in contexts that are multicultural, multi-ethnic and inter-religious. Globalization and migration are the processes responsible for producing this “contamination” of contexts.

However, despite the diversity of contexts, we can find a homogeneous context, if we are discerning. When two contexts are compared, we come across similarities and differences, positive aspects to be used to advantage and negative aspects to be purified. Besides, contexts are not static but evolving. It is therefore possible to find a homogeneous context in a group of Provinces of the same country, conference or region. Today, for example, one can say that Europe is becoming an increasingly homogeneous context; similar situations exist in other regions of the Congregation as well.

And so, in an interprovincial formation community, especially when it forms part of the same region, contextualization is not rejected. But, the interprovincial community exposes those who are in formation to an encounter with different situations, thus creating an openness of mind and heart. It fosters an ability to fit into different contexts by opening oneself to the outside world, by analyzing the situation, and by discerning and responding to needs. There is certainly a need for experiences to be introduced gradually, but it is necessary to form persons who are open and can insert themselves in any context.

### *Inculturation and interculturality of formation*

*Inculturation* during initial formation is a process of personalization; it is realized when vocational values are assumed in the first place by the culture of a person in formation and in such a way that he changes his mentality, attitudes, lifestyle and behaviour. In this sense, then, formation must always be inculturated; in fact, without a personal identification with the values of the Salesian charism there can be no formation. It is to facilitate this process that the first formation phases usually take place in the cultural context of the one who is in formation or in a homogeneous context.

On the other hand, inculturation during initial formation is a community process, or we might say, a process of socialization. The formation community is the main subject that begins, accompanies, and verifies this process. For this reason, the community must know, understand and experience the charism; it must be aware of its history, identity and manifestations. In addition, the community must know the culture of the context and the mentality of those who are in formation, so that they can be helped to assume the values of the charism into their own culture. It is therefore the community that communicates, interprets and expresses the charism in a particular culture and in a given context.

Furthermore, inculturation must always be accompanied by a process of *interculturality*. It must open the one in formation to other cultures, lead him to appreciate their positive aspects and recognize their limitations, prompt him to assess his own culture without absolutizing it, and then invite him to assimilate and integrate some of the valid elements of other cultures into his own. This dialogue or exchange between cultures is an enriching experience and complementary to the process of inculturation. Interprovincial communities serve to create an openness to a broader view of the Salesian charism; they help to form a sense of belonging to the Congregation, a concern for the needs of the youth of the world, and a global vision of the urgent needs of evangelization - all realities that lie beyond the horizon of one's own Province.

Inculturation and interculturality during initial formation are closely linked with the charism, at whose service they are. Ordinarily in the first phases of formation up till the postnovitiate and practical training, close attention is paid to the processes of inculturation, that is, to effecting a change in the culture of the person in formation. Instead, from the stage of his specific formation onwards, more attention is paid to the processes of interculturality. In this period those in formation demonstrate that they have reached a certain maturity in their culture and faith, and that they possess sufficient openness and critical sense; they are therefore in a position to deal positively with an intercultural experience.

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In conclusion, we can say that today's varied and multicultural contexts ask us to provide intercultural experiences in formation and to prepare our charges to live these new situations, opportunities and challenges in their pastoral work. The new "multicultural" situations require of us new "intercultural" responses in formation, otherwise we are not helping our confreres to live in the present-day context.