

# ENCOUNTER AS A DIMENSION OF CULTURES AND A PATH TO PEACE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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# INTRODUCTION

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The structural injustice characteristic of current sociopolitical relations appears to be a legacy that the preceding historical epoch is leaving to the new one that is beginning. During this change of epoch, we are witnessing situations, like the coronavirus pandemic, that affect all of humanity and that reveal clearly the extent and the depth of structural injustice. Social gaps, poverty, forced migration, and other calamities continue to grow. It seems impossible to halt the environmental deterioration caused by the production models and lavish lifestyles spawned by a globalized consumerist capitalism. Armed conflicts continue and increase, even in places where it seemed that alternatives had been found for resolving conflicts. Global politics has failed to mature enough to govern the world in the common interest of humanity.

This global sociopolitical framework in which we move has already been referred to, during this conference, as an unavoidable point of reference for the reflections we share.

## CULTURE(S) AND MULTICULTURALISM

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Making the "encounter" the essential and permanent dimension of the cultures in which we move is the heart of the reflections I share with you on this occasion. We have recalled how structural injustice generates situations of disagreement or "dis-encounter." The challenge of the mission we have received is to take effective steps towards fraternity and peace. Developing the dimension of encounter within the cultures that give meaning to our lives becomes, therefore, an indispensable requirement for progress. Encounter is that dimension of cultures which serves as an instrument to help overcome injustice, transform society and achieve reconciliation with persons, peoples, and the natural environment in which all life develops.

I prefer to speak of cultures in the plural in order to highlight one of humanity's greatest riches: cultural diversity. Cultural diversity offers one of the most wonderful ways to participate in the creation that is born in God and his Word. Through their cultures human beings are co-creators. Cultural diversity is to humanity what biodiversity is to nature; it is therefore a treasure that must be recognised, defended, conserved and promoted.

Through their cultures, individuals and peoples give meaning to and find meaning in their lives. The Apostolic Constitution *Gaudium Et Spes* of Vatican II offers a clear description of what is meant by the word culture,<sup>1</sup> thereby reaffirming the reality and importance of cultural pluralism in the past, present, and future of humanity.

The good news of Jesus Christ is presented as a light for all human cultures. Jesus was born, raised, and lived in a certain culture, yet his gospel transcends all cultural boundaries. He and his disciples understood, not without difficulty,<sup>2</sup> that the Word of God is addressed to every human being and every culture. The gospel can become incarnate in each and every human culture. Like the leaven that penetrates the dough, the gospel becomes embodied in cultures and opens them to the possibility of meeting with God, with others and with nature. All cultures need this healing encounter to grow in humanity.

Cultures are the fruit of the exercise of human freedom. Human beings freely establish relationships by which they seek to give meaning to existence, to their daily personal and social lives. Cultural relations are born of the human need, first, to bestow a shared meaning on life in common (ideals, values, attitudes, etc.); second, to establish ways of producing, distributing, and consuming the material goods necessary for life (economic relations); and third, to make decisions about the destiny and governance of civil society

(political relations).<sup>3</sup> Religions are an important part of the ideas, symbols and meanings given to the life of human groups through culture.<sup>4</sup>

Human relationships are therefore historical, dynamic, and ever-changing. Cultures are on the move; they do not exist by themselves, nor do they form part of a kind of social genetics that is transmitted unchanged from one generation to another. Culture is at once personal and shared. Each person, unique and unrepeatable, takes on an identity through culture. At the same time, culture bestows on individuals an identity that is socially shared with other human beings, each of them also unique and unrepeatable.

In today's world, multicultural experiences and spaces exist in tension with the trend that favors cultural homogeneity, a trend that is promoted because it supports market dynamics, the dominant structure of relations of production, and consumption. Multiculturalism recognizes cultural diversity as human richness, it favors coexistence among different cultures, and it promotes their preservation. Multiculturalism is a complex and fruitful experience of encounter between culturally diverse human beings. At the same time, it reflects the inevitable tension between the local roots of each human being or social group and the universal vision that generates global identity and universal citizenship.

## ENCOUNTERING HUMANITY THROUGH INTERCULTURALITY

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The mission we have received, of working for the reconciliation of all things in Christ,<sup>5</sup> prevents us from being satisfied with multiculturalism. It confronts us with the challenge of interculturality, which leads to an enriching exchange among all peoples and social groups that meet together and share their cultures. The constant increase of migratory flows in the world reveals the deep wounds that exist, but it also offers the opportunity for cultural exchange on a large scale. We can see in this reality an important sign of the times that calls us to deepen the dimension of encounter. This is a path that leads us to feel that we are members of all humanity, true citizens of the world.

Inculturation is the first stage of this path, and it requires an encounter with one's own culture that produces critical awareness. The second stage is what we have called multiculturalism. This consists in experiencing a joyous encounter with other human beings and their cultures and being able to happily share with them a life in peace. Interculturality is a still further stage, one that requires a deeper and more complex encounter. It involves relating to other human beings and their cultures, sharing with them the value of one's own (critically examined) culture, and being enriched by the contributions of cultural diversity. Intercultural encounter thus becomes a driving force toward social justice, fraternity, and peace.

Intercultural encounter goes beyond what we have called multiculturalism. The latter recognizes the existence of many, many cultures throughout human history and across the wide geography where peoples have lived, and it fosters peaceful coexistence among them. Intercultural encounter seeks to build bridges and promote fluid exchange among all cultures in a complex process that involves confirming and enriching one's own identity while also enriching the identity of others. Encounter always runs the risk of provoking conflicts.

Interculturality is not just an "encounter between cultures" that avoids the need to acquire a critical view of one's own culture, nor does it allow one to be satisfied with simple respect for cultural diversity, as if it were somehow possible to produce a meta-cultural or supra-cultural sphere or space.<sup>6</sup> We encourage encounter among people from different cultures as a means of mutual enrichment. Interculturality enriches those who engage in the process, and it is possible to achieve because all cultures have the dimension of encounter.

Intercultural encounter is a “reciprocal exchange between cultures that leads to the transformation and enrichment of all those involved.”<sup>7</sup> It is therefore a participatory, interactive encounter with the historical, social, economic, and political context in which it unfolds. Through intercultural encounter, cultures develop more dynamically, undergoing internal changes that lead them to grow in the universal dimension of humanity.

## ENCOUNTER AT THE BREAKING OF BREAD

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In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis describes the encounter of the Samaritan with the wounded man abandoned on the road to show how fraternity is created.<sup>8</sup> The Samaritan is not ensnared in a way of living his culture that prevents him from reaching out to encounter the person who needs his help. On the contrary, the dimension of encounter opens his eyes to human needs without making distinctions. The cultural dimension of encounter makes it possible to care for other wounded persons, peoples, and cultures. It makes it possible to embrace them and to offer every means to heal wounds, build bridges, and foster fraternity.

Another scene from the Gospel of Luke<sup>9</sup> can help us understand encounter as a dimension of our human cultures in search of a just and fraternal world. The story is well known: having experienced the crucifixion of Jesus as a failure, two disciples feel disillusioned and want to return to Emmaus and their previous life. The Teacher in whom they had placed all their messianic hope was sentenced to death. The scandal of the cross provokes in them a dis-encounter. While they are on their way, mulling over their disappointment, Jesus, the resurrected one who is the crucified one, goes forth to meet them. He engages them in a conversation that leads them to invite him to share a meal, during which they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. With great haste they return to an encounter with the companions who had remained in Jerusalem.

The so-called “disciples of Emmaus” had been following Jesus of Nazareth while still trapped in the fixed views of their culture. Since they had not achieved a critical vision of their own culture, they could not truly encounter the Teacher whose message did not fit into the cultural categories that had given meaning to their lives. Those categories interpreted the arrest, passion, and death of Jesus as a complete failure of the mission to liberate Israel. As a result, unable to comprehend, they returned to the life they had always led.

Jesus takes the initiative. He begins by walking alongside the disillusioned disciples. For a good while he accompanies them and listens attentively to their story. He is trying to build bridges with the disciples and understand the cultural categories by which they interpret what happened. This is the dynamic of inculturation to which I referred above. Jesus creates the conditions that will enrich the vision and the sensibility of the disciples. Using the disciples’ own language and their cultural categories, Jesus proposes another way of understanding what happened. He does this by sharing his own experience of the events, using fresh cultural categories that throw new light on the experience of his disciples.

What then takes place is what we have called intercultural encounter. Not content with rational discourse put into comprehensible words, Jesus has provoked a personal encounter. That is why the disciples urge him to stay with them. They feel enriched by this experience and want Jesus to share their home and their table. Finally, they cross the bridge that Jesus has built, and they open themselves to the encounter: “they recognize him in the breaking of the bread.” Intercultural encounter has brought about deep communion in these human beings who were previously limited in their understanding of the reality by cultural categories that had not yet incorporated the dimension of encounter.

Intercultural communion makes the encounter contagious. The disciples cannot remain calmly in their home, around a table by themselves. They must go forth to encounter others and share the new light they received from their encounter with Jesus. The road to Emmaus is a round trip, back and forth across the bridge built on the foundations of the dimension of intercultural encounter that enriches and transforms.

## GUIDING OUR STEPS ALONG THE PATH OF PEACE<sup>10</sup>

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The longing for peace has been present in human cultures throughout a long history filled with violence and wars. Now, in the midst of a “piecemeal third world war,” as Pope Francis describes it, we aspire to a lasting peace that goes beyond the silence of arms. Peace is founded on social justice.

As long as there is no transformation of the socioeconomic structure that generates poverty and sustains the scandalous differences between some peoples and others, between a few very rich people and the poor majorities; and as long as religious fundamentalist justifications and smokescreen ideologies do not disappear, violence will not end, nor will the flow of forced migrations and the trafficking of people be diminished. The aggression against the natural environment will not cease either, even though it threatens life on planet Earth.

The permanent presence of the Lord in history is aimed at guiding the steps of humanity along the path of peace through human encounters that gladly accept diversity, appreciate freedom, encourage dialogue, and build fraternity.<sup>11</sup>

Peace requires walking together along the complex path of reconciliation that leads us from tragic dis-encounter and fractured human relations toward genuine fraternal encounter. Peace requires walking together in the same direction in order to create the conditions for dialogue. It involves accompanying personal and group processes that are both complex in nature and asynchronous; that is, they advance at different rates and can be harmonized only by the patient, unconditional presence of those who accompany them.

Intercultural encounter is possible when there is collaboration among many people, not only from diverse cultures, but also of different characteristics and complementary capacities. Collaboration involves sharing responsibility for the process and is therefore an indispensable condition for intercultural encounter.

Engaging in intercultural encounter means increasing and refining the capacity for dialogue, a key dimension of the process. Dialogue should be intercultural and at the same time intracultural, as we have tried to explain above. The resistances and the obstacles will be clear to all.

Intercultural encounter occurs in the sphere of politics, that is, in those social relations by which human groups define their *raison d'être*, their objectives, and the means they use to achieve them.<sup>12</sup> In recent months the media have repeated like parrots the false statement that war is “politics by other means.” Rather, war replaces politics with violence and force of arms. War is the discontinuity of politics; even worse, it is a renunciation of politics that takes us in the opposite direction from the goal of peace.<sup>13</sup>

Intercultural encounter takes place in the midst of conflicts of all kinds. It is impossible to imagine intracultural or intercultural political processes without conflict. The path toward justice and peace, through intercultural encounter, is a complex process of reconciliation among human beings, and its culmination is forgiveness, without which peace lacks a solid foundation.<sup>14</sup> The reconciliation that leads to social justice includes reestablishing a harmonious relationship with nature and the entire environment in which life develops.

True peace is the reconciliation of all things in Christ,<sup>15</sup> the final goal of intercultural encounter.

## Endnotes

- 1 “The word ‘culture’ in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family.  
Thence it follows that human culture has necessarily a historical and social aspect and the word ‘culture’ also often assumes a sociological and ethnological sense. According to this sense we speak of a plurality of cultures. Different styles of life and multiple scales of values arise from the diverse manner of using things, of laboring, of expressing oneself, of practicing religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridical institutions, of cultivating the sciences, the arts and beauty. Thus the customs handed down to it form the patrimony proper to each human community. It is also in this way that there is formed the definite, historical milieu which enfold the man of every nation and age and from which he draws the values which permit him to promote civilization.”  
(*Gaudium Et Spes*, 53)
- 2 Acts 10:1-11, 18; Acts 15:1-35.
- 3 By affirming the relational character of culture and recognizing the equality of cultures (there are no superior and inferior cultures), we do not mean to propose a cultural relativism that gives way to moral relativism. The false principle that everything is valid, which leads to naive tolerance, is not assumed.
- 4 Cf. L. Stanislaus and M. Ueffing (eds.), *Interculturalidad* (Estella, Spain: 2017) Ed. Verbo Divino, pp. 18-22, as an interesting synthesis of the elements of culture.
- 5 The Society of Jesus, in the words of the XXXVI General Congregation (2016), is "on mission with Christ the reconciler" (Decree 1, nos. 21-30).
- 6 Cf. Stanislaus and Ueffing, op. cit., p. 586.
- 7 Stanislaus and Ueffing, op. cit., p. 23.
- 8 Second Chapter. See: Luke 10:25-37.
- 9 Luke 24:13-35.
- 10 Luke 1:79b.
- 11 During the long road to freedom crossing the desert, the Israelites placed on the outskirts of their camps the "tent of meeting" in which Moses spoke "face to face" with Yahweh and anyone who wanted to consult the Lord approached it (Exodus 33:7-11).
- 12 "The best politics" is the phrase Pope Francis uses in the chapter dedicated to this topic in *Fratelli Tutti*.
- 13 See *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 255-263.
- 14 See *Fratelli Tutti*, nos. 236-245.
- 15 Colossians 1:20; 2 Corinthians 5:18; Romans 5.

## About the Author

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