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“That Is Not How We Do It” - Engaging the Culture of the Other

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PRELIMINARIES

With all protocol observed, let me express my sincere gratitude to Fr. Maurizio Pettena and staff at ACMRO, to His Excellency Archbishop Mark Coleridge, Archbishop of Brisbane and President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Australia and all the organizers of this conference. I am delighted and honored to be part of this conference, the first that focuses on the ministry of clergy and religious coming from overseas to Australia.

My presentation is not the usual “keynote”. It draws from my experience as a missionary in diverse contexts on different continents and from the study of missionaries serving in the United States; missionaries who were born outside the United States. In a sense, I am both a researcher and a subject regarding this subject matter. The presentation is punctuated with real life stories. It is intended to demonstrate actual interactions and responses of people to real situations; and is done so in the hope that you might find food for thought as you grapple with the Australian context. I have devoted a significant portion to cultural matters in part two. Although it is more like an appendix, I consider it very relevant since most of the challenges on this subject matter revolve around culture both secular and ecclesial; both mundane and spiritual.

Although the Australian context is different from the United States, there are very close similarities in church matters. Like the United States, most Australians have ancestry outside Australia, mostly from Europe. In modern historical context, Australia like the United States is a country of immigrants. Like the United States, the Catholic Church is the largest of any religious group in Australia. Australia is also witnessing a growing number of Catholics born outside Australia. A 2016 study by the National Center for Pastoral

Research¹ published on the 7th of April 2019 reported that while the number of Catholics in Australia fell by 2.7 percent between 2011 and 2016, Catholics born outside Australia increased significantly during the same period, constituting about 20percent of the Catholic population in Australia.

Like the United States, Australia is welcoming new priests and religious form Asia, Africa, Latin America and other places to minister in the local ecclesial communities. Australia is also ordaining to the priesthood a growing number of persons who were born outside Australia. In the United States, the new sets of missionaries are resembling more and more the people in the pews. As the recent study by the National Center for Pastoral Research,² cited earlier indicates, the same applies to Australia.

Last Sunday, August 4, 2019, I was at Saint Mary's Church South Brisbane for the 9:00am Mass. I was struck by the composition of the ecclesial community. Of the seven-person choir, six were of Asian ancestry. The congregation was very diverse with people of non-European ancestry accounting for about seventy percent, according to my estimates. Like the United States, increasingly, Australia is training lay pastoral ministers to join the pastoral work force. So, there are great similarities between the church in the United States and the church in Australia. These realities call for contextual response.

PART I

With the foregoing in mind, let me begin the first part of my presentation with a personal encounter with an altar server summed up in one sentence: **"That is not how we do it."**³

¹ Thomas D. Williams, "Australia's Catholic Population Drops 2.7% in Five Years" From: <https://www.breitbart.com/faith/2019/04/07/australias-catholic-population-drops-2-7-in-five-years/> accessed July 30, 2019

² *Loc. cit.*

³ Altar server at St. Dominic Church Yaba, Lagos during offertory

I was a guest preacher at St. Dominic's Church and presided at the Eucharistic celebration. During offertory preparations, the altar server, a little boy of about eight or nine years old brought wine and water. I took it from him and proceeded as usual. I poured the wine into the chalice and then took the water and add a little splash to the wine in the chalice. As I handed back the water cruet to him, he said to me in a calm but assertive tone "That is not how we do it." I was for a moment rattled by his apparent rebuke and wondered what I did wrong.

I decided to find out how "they do it" in that parish. So, the next Mass I sneaked into the congregation and watched their pastor who was the presider at that Mass to see how they do it there. During the offertory the pastor took the wine and pouring it into the chalice as usual. But before he took the water from the altar server, he blessed the water, then put his thumb over the water cruet, to ensure that only a drop of water, literally was added to the wine. Since I did not do it the way the pastor normally does, as far as the little altar server was concerned, I had violated some ritual process as he knows it - as "they" do it.

The question remains, was the way I did the wrong way and the pastor's the right way? I will leave that debate to the liturgists. But please keep that story in mind for I will return to it later. For now, let me turn to the background that stimulated the study of newly arrive clergy in the United State that lead to the publication of *International Priests in America* and the lessons learned from the study. I hope that you will find some parallel or some anchor to research and produce *Missionary Clergy in Australia* which I am anxiously waiting to read.

Background to the study

In early 1995, I was invited to serve as Coordinator of Ethnic Ministries in the Office for the Pastoral Care for Migrants and Refugees (PCMR) at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, a position I held for about seven years. Part of my task was to assist dioceses in facilitating the transition of newly arrived pastoral ministers, both clergy and religious into the church. It included providing acculturation workshops for the new ministers, seminars

for diocesan staff on welcoming the newcomer and occasionally serving as a mediator when things did not go quite as expected.

Over the years, we came to see the need for a standardized policy for dioceses to facilitate the smooth transition for both ministers and the receiving communities. The discussions surrounding this need led to the publication by the Bishops Conference of *“Guidelines for Receiving Pastoral Ministers into the Church,”* a guideline I served the staff writer. But what brought about the increase in new pastoral ministers and the need for acculturation workshops?

In the late 1970s into the early 80s new immigrants from Asia and Latin America and Africa arrived in the United States in great numbers. There was a sizable Catholic population among these immigrants, resulting in an uptick of catholic population. At the same time the church was experiencing a decrease in the number of catholic priests, even when matched against the native-born catholic population. The church, though a major player in settling these new immigrants lacked the personnel to provide pastoral care for the new Catholics.

The question became “what do we do?” As the church scrambled to attend to the needs of immigrants, it became clear that the church needed more clergy. But then, getting a person ready for the ordained priesthood takes time. So, there was need to look beyond the shores of the United State of America to the extended family of God elsewhere.

By this time, many parishes had already benefitted from the services of many international priests who resided in American rectories while doing graduate studies in theological institutions and other graduate schools throughout the country. The church gradually resorted to requesting from the bishops overseas to allow these priests stay for some extended time after their graduation to continue serving the needs of the parish communities they had been serving. But this was not enough to solve the problem, so some dioceses decided to formally request for more clergy from abroad to minister not only to

the immigrant communities, but also to the native-born communities as the numbers of new internal ordinations could not keep up with the Catholic population.

However, due to the felt urgency to bring priests to provide sacramental services, many priests were thrown into ministries head on right after arrival. These created challenges on their own, raising further questions about the effectiveness of the process. Questions arose about how the clergy were received by (a) the native-born presbyterate and (b) the parish communities they served. Some dioceses in a hurry to fill positions, and provide the sacrament to the faithful, exposed the new priests to traumatic situations.

I recall a case where a priest from India was invited to serve in a diocese in Texas. He was warmly welcomed by the Vicar for Clergy of the diocese, who took it upon himself to go the airport to personally welcome the new priest and bring him to his new ecclesial community. The new arrival was the only priest in the rectory as there had not been a resident priest there for some time. This was middle of the week and he had settled into his new home by weekend.

Then came time for his first Sunday Mass and the new priest was preparing very hard to make a debut at his first Sunday Vigil Mass. He was in the church early to set up for the Mass. After he thought he had everything in place and was ready for the Mass, an altar server came to the sacristy and after looking around told the priest “Father you have the wrong book.” The priest examined the lectionary and the sacramentary, cross checked with the *Ordo*, and said to the young altar server that everything was okay.

After a few exchanges, the altar server opened the cupboard and brought out another lectionary and sacramentary for the Mass and said “Father, this is the one we are using for this Mass.” Both the lectionary and the sacramentary were in Spanish. That Mass indeed was in Spanish. The priest spoke very little Spanish, and no one had informed the priest that the Mass was in Spanish. Whoops! Someone forgot. This and others like it were the reasons why the publication of the guidelines was urgent.

Even with the publication and dissemination of the *Guidelines for Receiving Ministers Into the Church*, many dioceses continued to bring in new ministers and put them to work soon after they arrived, without preparation; a practice that brought some hardships both to the missionaries and the parish communities they served.

As more cases of missteps came to light, the National Federation of Priests Council (NFPC) commissioned us (Hoge and me) to do a study of the practice of bringing missionary priests for ministry in the United States. We spent over two years researching across the country. We interviewed diocesan chancery personnel, investigated diocesan policies and practices, interviewed leaders of religious institutes, vicars for clergy, and parishioners. We conducted focus group interviews for the newly arrived priests and parish staff and interview bishops as well.

A major focus of the interviews was the international priests themselves. We wanted to hear from them, how they fared in their new environment, what they thought of their ministries, and if they felt at home in their new ecclesial communities. Those included in the study were priests who arrived from 1985 onwards. We assumed that if a person had been in the country for over 15 years, he had undergone significant acculturation, he would have learned the ropes, and would have been familiar with how things are done in the new context, even if he learned it the hard way. So, priests who had been the country for more than 15 years at the time of the research were excluded.

We heard from the diocesan officials, we listened to the voices of missionary priests, and the voices of parish staff. What was revealed through these interviews were in some ways eye opening. There were questions about mission, about who a missionary is, about ministry and vocation, about ecclesiology, and about the understanding of the “catholic” nature of the Catholic Church as family of God’s people and about unity or uniformity in pastoral and liturgical practices.

One item that featured prominently by both the priests and the receiving communities was the question of **orientation**. Many missionary priests lamented that they were “not told”, they were “not shown”, they were “not warned”, they were thrust into ministry with no preparations and “left to find things out the hard way”, all underlying the importance of formal, structured orientation. Among those who were lucky to attend some formal, structure orientation program, ninety-eight percent (ninety-six percent of diocesan and one hundred percent of religious priests) said they found orientation very helpful, that they avoided making certain mistakes because of the formal orientation and they all highly recommended that this be a requirement for all.

The study was conducted from a social science perspective so, the analysis of the issues is to be read that way. Although in the course of the research, issues were raised about (a) theology and mission, (b) ecclesiology, and (c) culture in the light of the Gospel, we did not conduct in-depth analysis of these issues. The focus was on how the priests were faring, from a social analytical standpoint.

Many of the new priests are from very strong communal oriented cultures. We wanted to learn the effectiveness of their ministries in a culture that is different, more individualistic, and sometimes casual in church matters, and to see what could be done to enhance their ministries such that they would bring their talents, experiences and perspectives to enrich their new ecclesial communities.

In the process we discovered that many Americans were of the mentality that they were a self-sufficient church, unaware that the United States had always relied on ministers from overseas to serve the pastoral needs of the Catholic faithful. Except for the 1940s & 50s the United States always received more priests from overseas into their communities than they sent out. We discovered also enduring tensions between missionary clergy and the native ecclesial community then and now.

A century earlier, the tensions were between missionaries from European, mostly Irish and French, Germans and Polish. These priests preferred a more structured church and could not understand the separation of church and state policy in the United States. Tension featured prominently regarding the casual United States approach vs. the formal European approach, about pastoral issues, ministry styles and culture. Interestingly, there were complaints about the diction of some of the European priests. Some Americans complained they had difficulties understanding them.

A century later, the same tensions and issues (culture, language, ministry style, casual vs. formal, ecclesiological perspectives and diction) featured between the new missionary priests and the local ecclesial communities. But the new clergy cohort are completely different from the earlier ones. They are Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, not Europeans, except East Europeans, more specifically priests from Poland.

This enduring tension made us stop to think: Is the current tension an issue of the priests being from non-European cultures or is there something else? Underlying this question is the fact that the priests in the earlier cohort share the same cultural traits with the American ecclesial communities they served, while the new cohort of missionaries come from places with a wide cultural distance with Americans.

So, what is it? Is it the question of “exceptionalism” that makes the receiving community perceive the missionary priests as “other”, having to conform necessarily to our ways? Is it a case of individualistic culture vs. communal culture? Or is it that of “high culture vs. low culture” mentality? We discovered that it was a matter of perception, albeit erroneous, that flows from the social, economic, political and military might of the United States. The public strength of the United States in these areas undoubtedly have insinuated themselves into the church, into pastoral practices, ecclesiology, theological perspective and the liturgy.

The sense of superiority especially vis-à-vis the places where the new missionaries originate, is transferred into the areas of theology and superior ways of being church, and

an imperial attitude towards the pastoral and liturgical practices originating from countries with low technology. There is a feeling that “they” have nothing to offer to us, a mentality that Catholics are not immune.

Perceptions matter. It impacts our relationships, how we hear, what we hear, and what we see. It has been proven that if one attaches some great importance to a speaker, the person makes efforts to understand the speaker. For example, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI speaks English with a distinctive German accent BUT people hear and understand him. Why? He is the Pope. If some other person with no high standing as the Pope speaks in the same fashion, with the same diction, the person might likely have trouble being understood by the same people. That’s perception. We need to examine our “perceptions” and to ensure orientation for both the new missionary and the receiving ecclesial community. This is a two-way relationship.

I recall a story told by a priest participant at the cultural orientation program for international ministers (COPIM) at Loyola Marymount University in California. A group of influential parishioners where he served as Associate Pastor complained repeatedly to the American pastor that they had difficulties understanding the priest. The American pastor who had no difficulties understanding the new priest dismissed the complaint so, after several months, the influential parishioners took the complaint to the chancery. The diocese decided to transfer the priest to another parish and informed the pastor. The American pastor who really liked the missionary priest was suspicious and decided to tell the priest the reason for his impending transfer. The missionary priest was not happy and decided to bare it all at the weekend Mass, his frustrations and disapproval of “the actions of some influential people in the parish” but without mentioning names.

After Mass, the same group of people went to the pastor to lodge a complaint that they were insulted by the missionary priest during Mass. The pastor asked what the priest said to insult them. The provided the details. It was then that the American pastor asked: “Are you sure he said those things?” To which they responded, “Father we heard everything. He

actually said those things to insult us.” The pastor then wondered, if they heard and understood everything about the presumed insult, how come they do not understand him when he preaches the Gospel. To cut the story short, that was the end of the transfer.

Significance of orientation

We heard time and time again from the missionary priests, from vicars for clergy and from parish staff the need for acculturation. Why is orientation and acculturation so important? There are different layers to orientation and acculturation – social, cultural, legal and ecclesial, and all are vital for a smooth transition of the missionary to the new context.

Initial orientation

The Society: There are some basics of ordinary everyday things people do and take for granted but which the newcomer is not acquainted with or does not possess such as driver’s license, credit card, bank account, local identification card, cell phone. On what side of the road does one drive, how does one negotiate at a turn, a roundabout, etc. the light switch, which direction is “on” and which is “off”, etc. These might seem tangential, but they are essential for a successful transition and inclusion for ministry. Is there a structured process to attend to these things?

The Church: What about the Chancery? Where is it located, who is the Vicar for Clergy, the Vicar for Religious? How about meeting with the Local Ordinary? Where is the Bishop’s residence? Who is the Dean of the Deanery? When and how often does the deanery meet, what are the expectations of members of the deanery? What are the expectations within the parish community of the pastor, parish staff, parishioners, etc.

These two-prong basic orientations are crucial and should be followed up as soon as the new missionary arrives, and before assuming pastoral ministry. They form the initial building blocks that

- Prepares the missionary priests to enter appropriately into the new context and to facilitate the ministry of the priests in a different culture.

- Ensure that they are not strangers and aliens in their new context, left to fend for themselves and reduced to feeling like second-class citizens.
- Serves to diminish cultural misunderstandings for both the missionary priests and the receiving ecclesial community. Cultural differences can make or break a faith community. But when properly reconciled, they have the power of enrichment.
- Also ensures that the gifts, talents and contribution of missionary priests for enriching the church is not lost.
- Makes international priests feel a sense of belonging such that they contribute to bring about an exciting, vibrant church that enriches and makes the church truly catholic and alive.
- Facilitates the reconciliation of cultural traditions. When cultural traditions aren't reconciled, it breeds misunderstanding, confusion and angry backlashes. It can be an occasion that threatens the health of the missionary priest.

Orientation and acculturation equip the new minister with an understanding of the culture and makes him an effective minister. For anyone to confront culture with the values of the Gospel, one must first understand the intricacies and the underlying assumptions that guide cultural norms. So, acculturation equips the missionary priest to better activate a prophetic voice in the community.

Orientation to pastoral practices

There are pastoral practices that are particular to a given ecclesial community. As a matter of fact, the same practice in one context can mean the opposite in another context.

Without trying to enumerate them, let me illustrate this with one case. In the United States, if a person feels he or she is not “in a state” to receive holy communion and just wants a blessing, they approach the priest with arms crossed over their chest. The priest gives them a blessing and they move on. In some cultures, doing so is a sign of reverence before receiving holy communion.

During a focused interview in California, one of the international priests was so distraught as he narrated his experience. In his home diocese, approaching the altar for communion

with arms crossed over the chest is a sign of reverence and the person is looking forward to receiving communion. Unbeknownst to the priest, he had been giving communion to people who otherwise thought they were not worthy to receive communion at that moment. They only wanted a blessing from the priest. But rather than call him and explain what the gesture meant or say as my little altar server “That is not how we do it,” they talked behind him within the presbyterate that he was too liberal and disrespectful of pastoral practices in the diocese. He had to find this out from a priest friend who heard the story about him.

Language and diction

When addressing language issues, we need to bear in mind that the missionary comes with a set of skills, he or she has mastered a language, is master of a cultural script, has served as leader of a community and *de facto* an opinion leader. So, the acculturation process should take the approach of “dealing with someone with expertise.” In the medical field, when a new staff, even the distinguished specialist comes into a new hospital facility, she or he is given orientation, no matter the level of specialization. But the orientation is focused on “**how** we do it here” rather on **what** she or he knows. She or he is the specialist after all.

During our study, cultural misunderstandings, language and shyness about mixing with other priests came up frequently. A command of the contextual vocabulary and idiomatic expressions is essential for proclaiming the gospel to people of a given culture. Even when one speaks the language – English for example (British English, Australian English, American English, South African English, Nigerian English) that originates from a different cultural context, there is need to understand the nuances in the context of another English-speaking culture since language carries with it cultural norms and values. An English word in one context might have a very different meaning in another culture. For example, saying “I am gay” in one context simply means I am very happy. In another context it means a very different thing.

The differences apply even within the same cultural contexts. Cohorts might attach different meanings to the same expression. Young people are inventing their own language and expressions. So, there is youth language within a given culture. The lack of contextual language skills can impact the effectiveness of the priest's ministry, his personal self-esteem, and can lead to withdrawal. It can lead to unnecessary caution on the part of the priest, thus depriving the community of the spontaneous response to situations that could have been otherwise.

Theological and ecclesiological points of view

A growing phenomenon in western societies albeit in the political arena is polarization of viewpoints. Incidentally, this phenomenon is insinuating itself into the church and into theological and ecclesiological viewpoints and liturgical practices. This too must be noted. From the very beginning, there has been more than one way of being Catholic. Jews and non-Jews circumcised or not. The church is one, but many. It is also this diversity that has enriched the church over the centuries. Diversity within the church and in the society must be coordinated, celebrated and ordered for enrich the church. God created a world that is truly diverse. Let's celebrate it.

Forming a fraternal presbyterate

We heard time after time that international priests have a problem mixing with priests of other cultures, with native born priests. Cardinal Roger Mahoney, Archbishop Emeritus of Los Angeles wrote a pastoral letter to his priests on priestly fraternity. He raised questions about the growing isolation and loneliness of priests and called for affective fraternity among priests. This isolation was very pronounced between priests born outside and native-born priests. The Cardinal noted that "No parish exists or thrives spiritually and pastorally in isolation from all other parishes and no priest exists or thrives spiritually and pastorally in isolation from other priests." so we must be proactive in fostering fraternity among priests.

Intentional efforts at inclusion

Affective priestly fraternity must be intentional. It must be worked at and never taken for granted by both the native born and those born outside. We cannot take it for granted that it will happen simply because we are all Catholics and priests and therefore share communalities. Communalities as priests, yes, but there is a caveat. Here is the scenario. By virtue of sharing common social and cultural experience, attending the same school, and going through the same theological formation in the same institution, there is a natural taken for granted bonding, friendship so to speak, even if loosely that develops in the course of those settings and interactions.

When someone else with a different upbringing comes into the circle of friends, there are challenges that come with it. While being Catholic and a priest, the person is in reality an “outside” in relation to the circle of friends. He is also an outsider regarding the shared experiences, norms, communalities and bonding indicated above. There is so to speak and “exclusion” that happens unintentionally. But we want a fraternal inclusive presbyterate and a welcoming Christian community, so we must intentionally work at bridging the gap of experience and bonding to form new inclusive communities. We must intentionally work at inclusion to bridge this anomaly. This takes some effort, structured programs and persistence.

Relevance to Australia

How is the study in the United States and its findings relevant for the church in Australia in terms of bringing a pastoral care that is outside the box to address the situation at hand? I would say, given the similarities I pointed out earlier, that it is very relevant. Following the publication of *International Priests in America*, bishops in the United States have seen the importance of formal-structured orientation, although some have arrived at this decision the hard way.

Bishops understand that it is much more beneficial for the ecclesial community to spend very little money and time to allow the new missionary to undergo initial acculturation for some three months prior to ministry before being thrust into pastoral ministry. They

understand the need for a follow up orientation after beginning ministry. Acculturations centers especially Cultural Orientation for International Ministers (COPIM) at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, and the acculturation program at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas receive candidates regularly.

Bishops now have the facts of what is happening in their dioceses, what the experiences of the missionary priests are, and how the ecclesial community is responding to the new missionaries

Recommendations

- I strongly encourage you to do a similar study for Australia. At the end, you would be delighted that you did it. You would have, in the course of the study discover things you did not know
- You would separate facts from fiction and found some ways forward that is rooted in the Australian context.
- Such a study would pave the way for some guidelines for the ecclesial community, for pastors and parishioners, for chancery personnel
- Like it has helped the bishops in the United States in generating pastoral planning that responds to the new and real context, such a study is a win for the church, that would serve an effective tool for bishops in Australia.
- Have specific centers for acculturation and ensure that everyone participates
- Give time for the new missionary to adjust before the beginning of ministry, three months is minimum to avoid trauma for the missionary and the community
- Such a study is necessary so that you do not take people for granted
- It helps in pastoral planning and allows the church to begin to respond to the reality on the ground rather than continue to put new wine in old wine skin (Matthew 9:14-17, Mark 2:18-22 and Luke 5:33-39). The three synoptic Gospels highlight as not a good idea

- Like in the United States, the new sets of missionaries are resembling the people in the pews. We must make efforts to live out what we profess, namely the church as FAMILY of God's people
- There are consequences in this new dynamic. We must rethink our terminologies – international priests, foreign born priests, priests from overseas, etc. While it is true that one born outside Australia is, in fact, foreign-born, the question is: what do we mean when we use those terms? A Catholic priest in a Catholic Church is a **family member**. He may have been raised in a different culture, but he **is not foreign in the Church family of God's people**.
- The church is a family. For three consecutive times the Bishop of Rome was raised outside of Italy, much less the Diocese of Rome. But regardless of where he was raised, he is a family member, an integral part of the Church; a reason he is qualified to be Bishop of Rome. There is need for us to re-thing the vocabularies, the terminologies we use in our everyday church life and ministry.
- Those of you from religious communities should relate more to this understanding of a global family. The Dominicans for example just had their General Chapter in Vietnam. They elected a Filipino as the new Master of the Order who will be residing at Santa Sabina in Rome. We do not see him as Filipino, but as Dominican and head of the Dominican Family.
- We need to stop and think how we describe our family members that were born outside of our countries. Words matter. They convey a message. Words impact how we relate to each other.
- We found in the course of our study that people would readily refer to an American priest or nun who goes to the Caribbean or Latin America for only one year, sometimes six months, as missionary but the same people have difficulty seeing priests and nuns from Africa, Asia or Latin America who have been serving them in the United States for ten or more years as missionaries. This highlights a lack of understanding of the church as family of God's people and as missionary community. For them, a missionary is one who goes from a Western to non-Western

countries for ministry; from the materially rich to the materially not so rich countries.

Part II – CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

Let me at this point return to the calm but assertive admonition from my little altar server: **“That is not how we do it”** and engage further issues surrounding culture.

Culture as an ordered parameter for relationships

Life would be very chaotic if there were no rules of engagement, commonly agreed upon criteria for relationships, established set of common reference points for meanings and no acceptable ways of doing things in a communal setting. Imagine for example that there were no traffic rules; that no one stops at the red light, and no one stops at the stop sign or at a zebra crossing when there is a pedestrian. Imagine how chaotic that would be. It will result in a state of insecurity full of angst.

To order life together, each collectivity, each group of people must necessarily establish some parameters to make social and communal life possible, meaningful and reciprocal. These parameters however are never stagnant. With the passage of years, with the coming of new generations, with the advent of events, with encounters from within and from without, with the invention of new technologies, with changing weather and other natural patterns, the parameters for ordering social life are modified, adapted, or even abolished when they are no longer necessary or become obsolete and new ones are established.

Culture then, is the building blocks created by a collectivity that sets the criteria for behavior, so as to make communal life, communication, social life and social relationships possible without descending into a kind of situation that Thomas Hobbes described in the *Leviathan*⁴ as the war of all against all.

⁴ Hobbes, Thomas (1994[1651/1668]) *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley, Hackett, Indianapolis

The parameters embrace also certain criteria for beliefs and practices about the transcendent. The transcendent here does not necessarily mean “God” in the traditional sense of religious consciousness and faith, but in the sense the sacred⁵ or which the sociologist, Emile Durkheim described as the “collective consciousness⁶”; something that stands over and above any given individual in the collectivity. In a similar context, Berger and Luckmann describe this transcendent as something belonging to “infinite province of meaning”⁷ which we do not generally spend time analyzing or questioning. They are sacred, set apart and violations surrounding these often receive severe consequences.

Cultural parameters set rules of interaction with others, proper and improper behavior, roles within the society among age cohorts; they define gender roles, the rights and responsibilities of persons within the group, modes of hospitality, and transactional terms of reference. They impinge upon ceremonial requirements ranging from attire to body decorations, food and drink for special occasions. Cultures establish even ways of furnishing the home, etiquettes, and beauty standards.

From this standpoint, the universally most beautiful or most handsome person does not exist. So, for a group or collectivity to gather around and decide on a “Miss or Mr. Universe”, understood as the world’s most beautiful or most handsome person is to violate the standards of many other cultures who are missing from the table of judges. Even we sometimes find that people within the same collectivity differ on this point. So culturally speaking, “Miss Universe” (unless you mean the Blessed Mother or my mother) does not exist. In the end, the adage “Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder” is a culturally valid point.

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, (1957) Trans. Willard R. Trask (1968) Mariner Books

⁶ Emile Durkheim (1912/1995) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; Trans. Karen E. Fields, Free Press; Reprint edition

⁷ Berger and Luckmann (1967), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Anchor Books

Over time, members of a given collectivity are socialized into these ordered parameters of behavior such that they go about living it out effortlessly, without having to think of it. It becomes so to speak, part of their “genetic makeup”, a kind “**cultural DNA.**” New members born into the collectivity, unaware of how some of these practices were constructed⁸, are even less aware that these were “created” by their forebears. They imbibe it as a matter of fact and take them for granted as a fish takes water for granted. Pope Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, describes culture as “mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life.”⁹ To activate a prophetic voice in a culture it is critical that one understands the culture and the intricate “criteria” that Pope Paul VI describes.

Hidden from the stranger

Most elements of culture are not obvious, even to the people raised in the culture. They are certainly hidden from the outsiders. Social science analysts compare the observable parts of culture to the tip of the iceberg and maintain that what is observable in a cultural context is only about 10%. We see gestures, symbols, artifacts, arts, etc. But the deeper meanings, the underlying assumptions: attitudes, norms, core values, morals, of cultural elements lie underneath – but known “**intuitively**” to the initiates, to the in-group. Think of a high rise building whose total height from the foundation to the top is about 100 meters but ninety percent (90 meters) of the “high rise” is the foundation, the basement; hidden from view. What a deep foundation! And that is culture.

The core values, taken for granted assumptions, attitudes, that shape and guide behavior, correct and incorrect ways of doing things, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable, etiquette, courtesies, and jurisprudence are like the foundation of a high-rise building. However, because these were instituted before we were born and socialized into it, we live

⁸ Berger and Luckmann, *op. cit.*

⁹ Paul VI (1975) *Evangelii Nuntiandi, On Evangelization in the Modern World*, #19

and interact along effortlessly without thinking of it. We breathe and move along like everyone else without questioning.¹⁰

Here is a quotation that I find appropriate in describing the foregoing dynamics:

A fish only discovers its need for water when it is no longer in it. Our own culture is like water to a fish. It sustains us. We live and breathe through it¹¹

Language as a vehicle of culture

We have all the core values, symbols, gestures, assumptions, attitudes, etc. The question then is: How do we share and mutually understand all of these? Language! Language is more than syntax. It is a carrier of heritage, a vehicle for communicating culture in a mutually shared, give-and-take fashion. In learning a language then, one learns also elements of culture. As one gets to know a language, what seemed in the first place an ordered cacophony, turns to be a thing of joy, and symphony music to the ears and something that puts one at ease with others.

There are some languages that do not even employ a vocal syntax; the sign language is the chief of them. No sound; just signs. Yet it functions just like the spoken language. It carries meanings, expresses emotions, displeasure, gratitude, etc. all in a mutually agreed upon and standardized criteria of meanings. To the non-initiates, this might look totally an absurd gesticulation.

Not always what it looks like or even sound like

Sometime last year, a friend called me to share some pleasantries. He could hardly contain himself while telling the story. His mother who is new to the United States, and never 'saw'

¹⁰ I am not discounting the cultural deviant. Of course, the deviant by that very designation means that he or she does not toe the line.

¹¹ Fons Trompenaars & Charles Hampden-Turner (2006) *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Business*, London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing

a sign language, had accompanied him to Sunday Mass. The liturgy was signed by a man standing in front of the congregation.

The second time around, the liturgy was signed by a woman. After the second visit to the Church, his mother, visibly distraught asked him; “Why can’t this church help those people? He was taken aback and asked, “Mom, which people?” To which the mother replied, “Those people that stand in front of the church and make all kinds of gesticulations!” Unbeknownst to him, the mother had been greatly distressed that the people were asking for help, but the parishioners who listen to the Gospel and celebrate Mass would not even care about the needy right before them. She had mistaken the sign language interpreters for beggars.

I had my own awakening regarding cultural practice in America when receiving gifts¹². As a recently arrive clergy in my first American home in Boston Massachusetts. The parishioners at St. Ambrose Parish, Dorchester where I served were very welcoming and extra hospitable and regularly invited me to their homes. In their homes, I soon learned that what was “hot dog” in one home was “franks” in another. But that was not the major learning. In the course of my visits and during major feasts especially Christmas and Easter I received gifts from the parishioners, most of them well wrapped with bows.

Unbeknownst to me, I was violating some basic expectations surrounding the receiving gifts in American culture. Once given, I held my gift tight and thanked my friends profusely for their thoughtfulness and generosity. I observed however that each time I held to my gift and thank them, there were some exchange of glances by the American friends around me. I could not figure out what that meant.

One day while visiting a family, I received a well wrapped gift and, according to my primary cultural norm, thanked them profusely with smiles of appreciation. Despite my delight-

¹² A full version of this story appears in Aniedi Okure (2015) “intercultural competencies: Engaging African Born Clergy and Religious in the United States” in F. Ortiz and G McGlone, ed. *To Be One in Christ: Intercultural Formation and Ministry*, Liturgical Press

filled appreciation, I noticed “the glance”. I had enough of that and needed to know why, so I asked, “What’s the matter?” And almost in unison, my host family, parents and children responded in chorus “You are supposed to open it.”

What? I thought to myself. I should open the neatly well wrapped gift in your presence! What a shock! In the culture I was brought up, if someone takes the pains to wrap a gift for you with ribbons and bows, it is a taboo to rip-open the gift in the presence of the person. But there it was; exactly the opposite. So, I quickly realized that one culture’s taboo is another’s accepted, demanded and celebrated practice. And I, by upholding the ethics and courtesies of one culture, had unknowingly violated the ethics and courtesies another culture.

Culture taken for granted by in-group

Most of culture is taken for granted by the in-group. They go along with the attitude “everyone knows” or at least should. They take it for granted. Should you ask for explanation as to why certain things are done a certain way, most cannot come up with explanation. In fact, they can get irritated that the question was asked in the first place.

Reach out to beyond the surface

To truly understand culture and what underlies cultural practices, one must go beyond the surface. We must reach out to the deep to understand. We recall Simon Peter’s first encounter with Jesus at the Lake of Gennesaret and the life changing advice from Jesus to Peter: **“Reach out to the deep”** (Luke 5:4). We recall that Peter referenced his prior knowledge as a seasoned fisherman and the experience of the previous night. Nonetheless, Peter reached out to the deep, and what a find! What a catch of a lifetime!

So, to understand another culture without having to draw conclusions about an insensitive church community one must adopt the mindset that suspend judgment and let the data of culture speak for itself. One must bracket out what one knows and holds on from wrongful interpretations.

Concede to the uniqueness of culture

Conceding to the uniqueness of culture is fundamental, even if only as an intellectual disposition. Such a disposition is useful for understanding (another) culture. It disposes us to learn what informs the culture, how a given practice came about, how one practice is intertwined with others, and what the history behind a given practice is. Conceding creates the right frame of mind to communicate meaningfully.

Adopt, as an intellectual tool, the mentality that **culture is what it is**. It is neither superior nor inferior. This kind of disposition is particularly useful for ministers. Without this mentality, it is difficult to communicate **meaningfully**. So, let what you observe **speak to you first**, that is, do not immediately impose judgement. This approach disposes one to discover deeper meanings, enables one to detect elements of culture that are different from ours, values that are contrary to the Gospel, and allows one to critique like a native sage, without being judgmental. Such disposition opens one to receive from others and to “avoid every form of provincialism.”¹³

Our humanity is grounded in culture

Saint John Paul II notes that “The humanity of the priest is the **bridge** to Christ.” In the same vein, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI also pointed out that “The priest's mission is to be the ‘bridge’ between God and the world.”¹⁴

Bridge – component and function

A bridge is made of cement, iron, steel, sometimes wood, pillars. Whatever it is made of, a bridge **connects** one side a river, a valley or whatever the divide is, to the other side. Evangelization is to connect people, to provide the grounds for bridging cultures, and provides the arena to cultivate the Gospel and challenge values that are contrary to Gospel.

¹³ John Paul II (1990) *Redemptoris Missio*, On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate, #85

¹⁴ Benedict XVI - ‘*lectio divina*’ with Rome's priests ·Feb. 23, 2010

A question is pertinent here. **What is your Human Bridge made of?** To correctly address this question, each one of us needs to keep an indispensable fact uppermost in mind: **our humanity is shaped by culture**. Our encounters with culture shape and reshape us. We must bear in mind that what we have encountered along life's journey is central to who we are and shapes our ministry.

What we have encountered impacts how we respond to present encounter; it informs our spiritual life and shapes how we relate to God and to others. An African proverb teaches that there are two great moments in a person's life; the first is the day you were born, the second is the day you discovered who you are – the stuff you are made of. In this wise, the adage: "Man know thyself" is right on target.

"The Stranger"¹⁵

In a famous social science classic on the integration and assimilation of the newcomer into the society titled, "The Stranger", Alfred Schutz explains that people raised in a specific society (the in-group) **subjectively** live through their taken for granted cultural patterns. The newcomer (stranger) on the other hand finds that his or her taken for granted world, cultural script and standardized situations are effectively nullified by the new context. He or she is therefore constrained to be an **objective** critic of the new culture.

We recall here the wise saying: "You think of water when the well is empty."¹⁶ If we run out of water, or we are out in a desert place, and thirst for water, we begin to realize how

¹⁵ Alfred Schutz (1944), The Stranger: An Essay in Social Psychology, *America Journal of Sociology*, Volume 49, Issue 6 (May 1944) 499-507, The University of Chicago Press

¹⁶ African (Ethiopian) Proverb. The point here is that until we are "deprived" of what we usually take for granted, we do not sit back to objectively analyze its significance. We experience "culture shock" when we are out of "taken-for-granted" primary culture. The shock increases with cultural distance between our primary culture and the new context.

important water is, and the different uses we make of water. This is the situation with the newcomer into a different social and cultural environment. He or she can become unconsciously critical of the new context, as he or she struggles to establish an identity in the new context. This struggle correlates with the degree one has mastered the primary culture and cultural script, had leadership position or was considered a resource person in that context.

However, with the passage of time, openness to the new context and getting to master the new environment, this wears off gradually till a time when the newcomer can understand jokes and tells culturally appropriate jokes to the delight of the in-group. Or as Schutz puts it, until a time when the newcomer is able “to pronounce a blessing and a curse in the same breath.” When one lets down the guards and allows a true encounter with the culture of the new context, the process of acculturation is faster, less traumatic and enriching.

True encounter triggers change

I return to Peter the prince of the apostles; this time at Cornelius'. We recall the encounter that is often referred to as the “conversion of Cornelius.” The true question is: Who really was converted? The **real convert was Peter**. Peter the Apostle was converted from his ritualistic observances; he is the one who was freed from the yoke of religious purity and liberated from the prison of cultural segregation.

Peter crossed over and changed to truly understand what the truth was. Peter himself admitted to his conversion: “The **truth I have now come to understand** is that God has no favorites” (Acts 10:34). So, in effect, referring to the encounter as the **conversion of Cornelius is a misnomer**. To truly understand, we must reach out to the deep and to the margins. We must go outside our normal circle of understanding and assumptions to encounter the reality before us, so we can be change first in order to change.

The person as cultural phenomenon

The human person is a cultural phenomenon. She or he has been and is shaped by elements that are integral part of culture. Each person bears within a stamp of **primal** cultural heritage that shapes who we are and impacts our worldview. That is; the human person is a being with an experience and ways of understanding that is grounded in a cultural heritage and yet, also a being that is “happening” in a context and in an ongoing encounter.

How do we approach and understand this being that though already shaped in a different context, is unfolding in the present context? Again, we turn to the suggestion that we suspend judgment when we encounter other cultures to allow for greater insights and understanding without imposing a prejudged understanding of what we think it is. How does this work in practical terms?

Tips for approaching the other person's and culture

Each culture is unique, that is different. There are things from the surface that might look the same but might have totally different usage or meaning. As a safeguard, when in doubt, err on the side of uniqueness. Assume difference rather than similarity.

Secondly, ask for explanation when in doubt about the meanings. But ask in the manner of one seeking to learn and understand and not from the standpoint of one demanding an explanation.

Seek to understand when “taken for granted” expectations are repeatedly violated; better at the beginning of encounter than much later in the process. It is not necessarily that the other would have a ready and satisfactory answer.

Remember, the deeper meanings of our own culture are hidden even to us. We live and breathe it effortlessly. It should therefore not be surprising if we find ourselves short of words explaining elements in our culture that we think and adamantly maintain that “everyone knows” what it is.

Respect the other person's culture

Remember that a person is a cultural phenomenon. An attack on a given culture invariably translates to an attack on persons of that culture – it is a part of who they are and what informs their social interaction. So, approaching the other person's culture with respect is important. When there are situations to critique another cultural practice; one should not do so from a position of "mine is better" but from a Christian perspective of the Gospel. Since the Gospel stands over and above any and all cultures, any cultural value that is contrary to the Gospel¹⁷ needs to be critiqued through the lens of the Gospel.

Regarding socializing an adult from another culture into "our own" culture, we need to realize that the new adult already mastered a different cultural script. That means, he or she is approaching the new culture with a high degree of objectivity, and most likely critical of what is "different."

Remember then that a culture (your culture) is just **one model** of ordered parameters of a human community and their collective spirit. Different models of doing the same thing exist across the spectrum of the human communities. These spectrums are impacted by their collective experience, the environment, natural occurrence, and even weather patterns. They are all organized and systematized to order a world that is commonly shared by the members. It can be summed up thus: How many human collectivities; so many distinct cultures. Wade Davis, a strong proponent of diversity in nature puts it succinctly thus:

*"The culture in which you were raised is just **one model** of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you; they are unique expression of the human spirit."¹⁸*

¹⁷ Cf. Paul VI (1975), *Evangelii Nuntiandi, On Evangelization in the Modern World*

¹⁸ Wade Davis (2009) *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World*