

## CROSS-CULTURE IN THE COMBONI COMMUNITY

Dear Confreres,

Peace and blessings in the Lord who has come to dwell among us!

1. In the *Guide to the Implementation of the XV Chapter...* which we sent to you last April, we expressed our intention to select a theme for from the Chapter Documents for each of the six years of our term of service of animation of the Institute, and that “*it will be the topic of eventual letters or messages..*” (cf. Guide, p. 48). The first of these letters came with the distribution of the Chapter Documents, Christmas 1997, and bore the same title: *A fresh start from Mission with the courage of blessed Daniel Comboni.*

2. We intend to dedicate 1999 to cross-culture, as a concrete aspect of the Chapter topic: *Mission is Inculturation and Dialogue.* So here we are with a new message, to keep our word with you. We do not want to lose the familiar tone of a letter, while at the same time seeking to offer you sufficient content to foster reflection, both individual and in community. Hence, the document is rather long, though justified by the fact that this is the first document of the Institute that deals expressly with the subject.

3. The topic of cross-culture is closely linked with others, such as the inculturation of a missionary in a given culture (technically known as *acculturation*), the inculturation of the Gospel or of the Comboni charism, which are only artificially separated from one another. However, so as not to range too widely, we wanted to concentrate, on this occasion, on the *living of the cross-cultural aspect in our Comboni communities.* Only brief allusions will be made to the other topics.

4. The General Council took part actively in setting out this document, along with some other confreres from which direct collaboration was sought. We would have liked to involve the whole body of confreres. But we thought that, after all, this could come in the future, since the document, though the fruit of some previous reflection, is a starting point and stimulus for a later development.

### INTRODUCTION

#### The fact of cross-culture

5. Today, our Institute is, more than ever before, an international and intercultural reality. If we stick to percentages, the balance is still inclined decisively on the side of members from Europe. In approximate terms, 75% are Europeans, of which 50% are Italians. Only 25% come from the other continents. But if we take those with temporary Vows, i.e. those in the Scholasticates and IBFCs, the proportions are totally inverted. The non-European members are over 80 percent (43% Africans, 34% Americans, 5% Asians). And this is not a passing or one-off fact, because the low percentage of Europeans is a tendency that is becoming more marked.

6. The phenomenon did not occur suddenly; nor is it limited to just the Comboni Institute. Other Institutes, especially the missionary ones, are living it with the same, or greater, intensity than ourselves. This implies that it has not been imposed on us by “outside factors”, nor that we have “suffered” it passively. On the contrary, it is a sign of the times that has been perceived as a “gift” from God and an encouragement for a series of conscious options, chosen along the path of the history of the Institute, especially in recent Chapters.

7. It is well-known that, in every process of change, there is a group with greater awareness that pushes in a certain direction, while another has to be dragged along. Thus it is normal that not

everyone in the Institute is at the same level. In any case, not even those most alive to the situation could foresee with complete clarity the consequences of the change that was in prospect. There was simply the intuition that the Spirit was driving in this direction, and an act of trust in Him was made. Now is the time to face the challenge.

8. In the replies to the individual questionnaire in preparation for the '97 Chapter, *multi-culturality* is seen as one of the “problems” that are most pressing, and concern confreres most. It is mentioned by 94.5%, and evangelisation got only one-tenth of a point more, reaching 94.6%.

9. We put the word “problem” between quotation marks because cross-culturation is not really a problem, and evangelisation even less so. ‘Problem’ is better understood, in the context, as a task, a challenge to which attention and energies are to be applied. All of us in the Institute are aware, in effect, that cross-culture obliges us to re-state such central questions as: what is the central essence of our Comboni identity that we can never give up; how can it be maintained and re-created in a plurality of cultures; which elements of the charism of our Founder need to be stressed in the missionary reality of the present world.

10. In view of all this, it seems important to us that the topic of cross-culturation be tackled without further ado. We would not like it to be understood, however, as the simple fact of putting members of different nations and cultures together - like someone adding more and more beads to a long rosary - but as the opportunity for both personal enrichment and growth in maturity, and for a better and more evangelical development of our common missionary and Comboni vocation.

### **Development of the Theme**

11. We will divide the central section of our letter into four parts.

In the first two we will try to shed light on the topic:

- *from the viewpoint of the Bible*, to see how it stands in relation to the cross-cultural phenomenon (Part 1) and
- *from our Comboni tradition*, starting from the Founder himself and ending with the most recent documents of the Institute (Part 2).
- We will go on to concentrate on *the living of cross-culture in community*, bringing in - without making any scientific claims - some ideas and observations that might help in finding the right attitude towards living it in a way that is creative and enriching (Part 3), and
- Finally, we will deal with *some concrete points linked to cross-culture in our Institute*, both as regards community life and its wider pastoral implications (Part 4).

### **PART ONE: THE BIBLE PERSPECTIVE**

12. We do not imagine that the Bible talks of cross-culture in the context and with the connotations that we use in talking of it in the present day. But there are certainly many pointers which will inspire us to put the topic into the correct focus. As one progresses through the pages of the Bible, one breathes an increasingly universalistic atmosphere until one reaches Paul, who calls on us constantly to overcome barriers of all kinds: of language or nationality, of sex or social condition... so as to feel that we are members of the New People in which there is no distinction between man and woman, between Greek and Jew... between slave and free man, since we are all called to be everything in Christ (cf. Col.3:11).

### **The theme of the journey**

13. Both the Bible and cultural anthropology see in the symbol of a journey an archetype and a metaphor of the human story. Holy Scripture is full of people on the road. God intervenes in the Story of Salvation by telling the person He has chosen to set out on a journey. "Leave your country and set off..." He says to Abraham. Thus begins the long pilgrimage of a man who leaves the security of what he has to go to an unknown land, to people of a different race, religion and culture. The prize for the submission of this wandering Jew will be a new fatherland and an unsuspected fruitfulness that will make him the father of a multitude of peoples.

14. The Gospel gives us a Jesus who is always on the move, from town to town, from region to region, not letting himself be shackled by the limited interests of a small group; He travels up to Jerusalem, where he offers himself as a sacrifice for "all". And he sends his disciples into the world with the terminology of a journey, a going out. Ever since that first sending, generations of apostles have set out, crossing frontiers and tying bonds between peoples, as bearers of a message of universal love.

15. The starting out - the journey - is an essential element of the missionary vocation. It demands a constant leaving of what is "ours" and of our very selves, to go to the "other", to the one who is not within our horizons, our patterns, our perceptions. It requires a permanent openness, the seeking of an encounter, so as to offer to the other, in a welcoming atmosphere, the treasures of the love of God that one has discovered personally.

### **Babel and Pentecost**

16. The contrast between Babel and Pentecost - two biblical episodes that symbolise two opposing ways of visualising the theme of a multicultural community - is well-known. Babel is the parable of the inability to communicate: no individual or group can understand another, because each is closed in itself, in the affirmation of its own interests. And so the project of constructing something jointly becomes unachievable. Babel is the supremacy of a particular race, language or group, which drives towards rivalry and discord.

17. The community that falls into this mechanism will pass from an initial difficulty in understanding each another to neither speaking nor listening to one another, where each tries to impose his own "language", his personal point of view. What will remain will be the dominance of the victors and the resentful silence of the losers. Or else people will live together, each on a parallel track, carrying out his own initiatives, but condemning any possibility of community witness to total failure.

18. On the other hand, Pentecost is the miracle of unity and mutual understanding, even though "each one speaks in his own tongue", that is, without losing his own identity and the differences that it brings with it. Pentecost is the conviction that the Lord wishes to create a new humanity by integrating and making complementary all that is different.

19. It would be superfluous to ask ourselves which of the two models - Babel or Pentecost - we wish to follow in our communities. But even though the option seems clear in theory, we experience both models at once in the course of our daily lives. We feel the tension between the two extremes, and we have to admit that it is not always Pentecost that triumphs. Indeed, living cross-culture as total communion and with respect for differences, is a long path to be trodden, a journey towards a distant goal.

### **The journey of the Magi, icon of cross-culture**

20. Our letter is date January 6, Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord. We know that Blessed Daniel Comboni had a great devotion to the Three Kings, whom he considered as “the first apostles of pagan lands” (S.2476). In the Rules of 1871 he elected them as patrons of the new-born Institute, before Francis Xavier and Peter Claver (S.2649). Whenever he went to Cologne he would go to pray in the cathedral, where tradition placed the tomb of the Three Kings, to beg from them the miracle of the Epiphany - the manifestation of Jesus - for the peoples of Africa.

21. This is not the place for an exegesis of Matthew’s story of the journey of the Magi. We will simply make an allegorical allusion to the cross-cultural aspects, along the lines of the topic of our reflection. Matthew speaks only of certain persons who came from the East. Later tradition imagines that they came from different countries. A sign drives them to leave home and country - everything familiar to them - to run the risk of a journey to an unknown destination. They meet on the way, and what began as a personal decision becomes a collective project, based on a common aim.

22. Of course, each of the Magi keeps his own identity; each one bears his own gift. They share, according to criteria that are specific to the culture of each, their personal interpretation of the single sign - the star -that they have observed in their respective countries. They share together the darkness and uncertainty when the star disappears. The sign they have followed, even though celestial, does not stop being ambiguous. Lastly, they share in the recognition of the presence of God under the poor and disconcerting forms of “the child with his mother Mary” (Mt.2:11).

23. The Wise Men return home by another route. They return to proclaim the experience of an encounter with God made man, living among men. No community experience of God remains shut in itself, but opens up, necessarily, to proclamation as an essential element. The Gospel episode of the Magi could serve as an *icon* of cross-culture in our community living. We will return to it at the end of this letter.

## **PART TWO: COMBONI TRADITION**

### **Comboni is “catholic”**

24. We Combonis must have no doubts regarding our cross-cultural option, since we were born international. Daniel Comboni envisages us in this way: he wanted his work to be “Catholic, not Spanish, French, German or Italian” (S.944). This is a fact of which we are justly proud.

25. For his intense effort in missionary animation, Comboni deliberately selected a very wide field, travelling freely all over Europe. He made his first foundation in Verona with the intention of opening houses in other countries later. “We consider it absolutely necessary that Europe, and still more, the whole Catholic world, should provide the support needed to keep up and maintain missionary houses for the regeneration of Africa” states Cardinal Canossa in the Decree of erection of the Institute (1 June 1867), taking up some ideas that are found in Comboni’s *Plan*. Twelve years after its foundation, the Institute already had members of 12 nationalities, from 4 continents.

26. Internationality, for Daniel Comboni, did not depend as much on suppositions of a psychological or anthropological nature, as on the concrete needs of the mission, “since a single nation,” he states, “cannot succour the whole African race” (S.944). But these needs are, in their turn, deeply rooted in the logic of the Gospel. The urgency he felt to mobilise the whole Catholic world in favour of Nigrizia was born from a double contemplation: contemplation of “that love kindled by the divine flame (...) that came from the side of the Crucified to embrace the whole

human family” (2nd. edition of the Plan); and contemplation of the “infinite myriad of brethren belonging to the same family, having a common Father in heaven, bowed down under the yoke of Satan” (S.2742).

27. Illuminated by the “pure beam of faith”, the Founder read the signs of the times in a way that differed significantly from the political outlook then in vogue, marked by growing nationalism in Europe. It differed also from the attitude of the Church at the time, which was turned mainly towards internal problems. Comboni made the utmost effort to bring the Church to realise that its crown was missing the “black pearl of Nigrizia”, with its culture and its people.

28. The perspective of Faith also marked his relationship with his collaborators, priests and laity, men and women, called to share the responsibility of mission with him. Differentiated by age, social status, level of education, nationality, they seemed at first sight to be a random grouping, rather than a missionary family. Comboni strove to make of them a ‘cenacle of apostles’, creating unity on the basis of passion for the mission.

### **A story of light and shadows**

29. Throughout the history of the Institute, we have not always been faithful to the precious heritage of our Founder. Moving away from the “pure beam of faith”, our gaze at “the other” lost some of the lucidity and broadness of its vision at times, leading to the rise of family conflicts which, in some cases, ended up by becoming insurmountable.

30. On June 22 this year, it will be 22 years since the two Comboni branches (the ‘German’ MFSC and the ‘Italian’ FSCJ) were reunited in the one Institute of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus. The reunion was a triumph of love over the discord which, in 1923, had led to separation. If it is our duty to understand - so as not to repeat them - the steps that led to the breakdown, it will be an even greater obligation to remember those that brought about reunion, to continue to draw inspiration from the spirit that guided them. Before the leading actors in the process of reunion disappear from among us, let us encourage any initiative that aims at gathering together the details of a rare page that heals more completely the wound of the previous division.

### **A renewed option for cross-culture**

31. When the reunion of the two main original groups took place in 1979, it had been preceded by a long process of internationality, and many other cultures had come in to share the Comboni charism. And since then, the process has done nothing more than accelerate. Starting especially from the 1975 Chapter, all provinces, even those considered up to then as areas of ‘first evangelisation’, were urged to intensify missionary animation and vocation promotion, and to set up formation structures, even if in a very simple form. We did not have to wait long for results: at present, almost every circumscription has a postulancy and some members with Perpetual Vows.

32. Our option for internationality - we can already speak of ‘intercontinentality’ - is understood in a more radical manner than in many other Institutes, which accept members of many nationalities, but each one remains normally within his own nation and familiar cultural surroundings. Our internationality affects not only the Institute as a whole, but also the provinces and the local communities.

33. For this reason, even when Provinces come to have sufficient local personnel to cover all their needs, they must continue to receive members from other nations and cultures. Even more, the exchange of personnel among provinces must be fostered positively (CA’91, 33.1). Only thus will

we be able to be effectively “an expression of brotherly friendship and solidarity, and a sign of the catholicity of the Church” (RL,18).

34. Opting for international communities means accepting the challenge of cross-culture. It becomes an essential characteristic of our concrete living of our missionary vocation, to the extent that “the ability to live in international communities, trained and tested from the early stages of formation ... will be a criterion for discernment in the admission of candidates to vows” (CA’97,148;cf. RF 160 & 164).

35. That is why the ’97 Chapter, though aware that a cross-cultural “leap” that was too early and too radical for some candidates could cause problems in our formation houses, did not relinquish the principle of intercontinental Scholasticates and IBFCs. It simply advised that more attention be given to the individual personality of each candidate, that is, “to his ability to absorb the cultural shock that his assignment would involve” (cf. CA’97,164).

### **PART THREE: LIVING CROSS-CULTURE IN COMMUNITY**

36. Culture, inculturation, cross-culturation, are all concepts which have attracted the attention of fields of knowledge as diverse as anthropology and psychology, sociology and political sciences, philosophy and theology, besides being linked to topics which concern everyone today, such as fundamentalism, pluralism, globalisation. Here, as in the previous parts, we will restrict ourselves to touching on points that can help in our personal reflection and dialogue. We call on all to fill them out by reading some of the many books and articles published on the matter.

#### **Culture**

37. Let us start by recalling one of the many definitions of culture. It is described as an interdependent complex of cognitions, codes, representations, rules, values, aspirations, religious beliefs, myths... which appear in all daily behaviour, from the manner of dressing to the way of exercising authority or organising religious rites.

38. A culture totally impregnates the lives of its members, conditioning the judgements and attitudes of each individual much more profoundly than can be observed at the conscious level. His identity is forged within a culture, and it is only by starting from this identification that it is possible to open to other cultures later on, to understand them and enrich them by what he can contribute.

39. No culture is perfect. Each has its values and its limitations. It is the result of experience, matured by certain conditioning and certain concrete necessities, to which it gives a reply that is not always the best of those available. This is the basis for knowing how to relativise one’s own culture and that of others - understanding, of course, that to relativise does not mean devaluing or despising them, but seeing them in their right dimensions, which is an essential requisite for all cross-cultural dialogue or being together.

40. Fifty years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the principle that “we are all equal” is accepted, at least in theory, as a deeply human and Christian principle. Nevertheless, in order to avoid false interpretations, it has to be completed as follows: we are all equal in dignity and rights, but we are all distinct in character, history, culture and many other elements which make each person unique and unrepeatable. To ignore differences in the name of an equality that makes everything uniform is a way of doing violence to persons and groups.

## **Cross-culture**

41. Cultures are not static realities, closed in on themselves, but are in constant change and evolution, both through their own internal dynamics and through contact with others. The cultural identity of an individual or a social group is not an immutable essence, but goes on building itself all through life and through history. It is possible, at the same time, to cross the gap into another culture, ‘inculturating’ oneself in it, that is, adopting it through a process of identification which, however, can never blot out the radical identity with one’s own culture.

42. There have always been changes and cultural cross-overs. What characterises the present is that they have accelerated considerably, and contacts are so many and so heterogeneous that there is a risk of creating persons who have no roots in any kind of integrating culture, and are exposed to a virtual culture, created artificially by some power-centres and transmitted by the media controlled by them. The so-called “global culture” is for the most part a culture of consumption, with no roots and no concrete society, which interferes with single cultures, corrupting many of their values and leading them to disintegration.

43. However, not everything is negative in this process. Even while it spreads certain counter-values, global culture brings with it some ideals which are being converted into a patrimony that is common to all cultures and act as a platform for understanding and dialogue. Present-day theology and recent Church documents have taken advantage of this ‘super-cultural’ material, and at the same time, have contributed to forming and developing it. Just think of themes such as liberation, integral development, the dignity of women, minority rights, respect for nature, etc.

44. The very sociologists and pedagogues who warn us against the danger of confusing cultural identities, look with hope on the coming of a completely new reality: ‘world-wideness’. It is not understood as juxtaposition and mixing in which everything is confused, but as a much wider pertinence. One starts from one’s own identity, but goes along picking up new content and values through a relationship of dialogue and inter-dependence. Some call it a ‘conviviality’ of differences, a concept that calls to mind the Gospel image of the banquet (convivium) at which all are called, whatever their background, to sit down together. Is this not perhaps a symbol of the Kingdom of God that we dream of, and which is already in our midst?

45. Nobody is permitted to make of his own culture a dogma or an absolute, from which to combat against, despise or simply judge others. But while excluding this extreme, various degrees of cultural involvement are allowable. There are those who live such a deep identification with their culture that they come to take its promotion and the fight for its legitimate rights as a priority. There are those, on the other hand, who feel openness and a commitment to solidarity between cultures as a vocation.

46. It goes without saying that a missionary vocation presupposes a certain initial disposition towards a cross-cultural attitude. It is difficult for anyone who is absorbed by the affirmation of his own culture to reach a sufficient “empathy” to put him in tune with other cultures. Of course, even an initial cross-cultural disposition does not dispense anyone from an apprenticeship that will require important and painful sacrifices. Nobody is born cross-cultural; we are born ‘culturated’ and we become ‘cross-cultural’.

## **Difficulties and Challenges**

47. It is important to know some of the main attitudes that are obstacles to living cross-culture. One of them is a *superiority complex*, which sometimes takes the form of contempt, and sometimes of

compassion. For someone with a cultural superiority complex, other cultures will be more or less good, according to how much they are similar to his own, or are in the process of becoming more like it. It is possible that he may know - even perfectly - other cultures, but it is an objective knowledge, lacking empathy.

48. Often a superior attitude is unconscious. It is shown by “non-attention to” the opinions and needs of others, in not feeling the need to change or even to question any of one’s own ways, even when living in community with others from quite different cultures.

49. Another attitude, the opposite of the above, is an *inferiority complex*. It, too, is shown in different ways. It can take the form of *self-defence* when one’s reaction is always on the defensive or else aggressive, seeing an attack or oppression of his rights where there is none, and sticking rigidly to positions he considers to be dictated by his cultural identity. Or it could take the form of *dependence*. In this case he tends to abandon or hide everything that identifies him with his original culture, so as to ‘be assimilated’ into a culture he considers superior, and to copy its forms blindly.

50. The healthy position, equidistant from both complexes, is that of *cultural self-esteem* that is realistic and balanced. The ‘renunciations’ required in cross-cultural living, to which we referred above, never call for a radical renunciation of one’s own culture. On the contrary, it is indispensable to retain and love it as it is, in its positive and negative aspects, with neither arrogance nor shame. The objective and open evaluation of one’s culture is the best tool for evaluating others without raising them too high or throwing them down.

### **Overcoming prejudices**

51. The correct evaluation of what is different has its own mechanisms and its own challenges. The first difficulty to overcome are prejudices. There are clichés and commonplaces surrounding every culture and every nation, on topics that range widely, from language to eating habits, from dress to behaviour. Just as an example, who has not heard: “These people are impossible to live with; they are slaves of the clock!” or: “It is impossible to work with them, because they have no sense of time!”?

52. Prejudices are labels and generalisations that are almost always unjust, applying to the whole and to each member of a group what is applicable only to a part. Not only do we pick up prejudices from our surroundings, but we all tend to put new ones into circulation. One negative experience, with one or two individuals, can easily lead to extending a judgement to the whole of the group to which they belong.

53. Prejudices act as distorting lenses that impede a real knowledge of people. It is necessary to be fully aware of one’s own mechanisms to be able to put aside these lenses and look at others objectively. Each individual is an absolute, to be approached in an original manner, free from preconceived patterns. They must be understood in themselves and seen with their own eyes to be able to get in tune with them and perceive the deep reasons behind their way of being and acting. We must be able to “look the other in the face” and, at the same time, leave ourselves open to his scrutiny.

### **How to live the differences**

54. To reject superficial and gratuitous prejudices does not mean to be blind to cultural differences and peculiarities. They are very real, and it becomes necessary to know them, if for no other reason

than to avoid living as a personal problem something that can be attributed to cultural differences and, on the other hand, to avoid attributing to culture what is a personal problem.

55. Living in a multi-cultural community means dealing on a daily basis with different ways of approaching the realities that make up the fabric of community life. Such fundamental aspects as:

- the very sense of community
- relationship with authority
- the decision-making process
- the meaning of the Vows
- attitude towards money
- links with family
- hospitality
- vital space and the rights of the individual vis-à-vis the demands of the community
- sexuality
- way of communication
- way of working, etc.,

are all lived differently, and can become the object of serious misunderstandings, if the cultural outlook of the other person is not borne in mind.

56. It is in this area of concrete and daily relationships that all the beauty and also all the difficulty of cross-culture are found. Multi-cultural communities will have to set up a model and a style of brotherly communication in what can be called “enacting the truth in love”, in an atmosphere of mutual esteem and trust. Sometimes good will alone is not enough, and it would be advisable, in cases of weariness or of apparently insurmountable conflict, to turn to techniques or to experts who can give guidance.

57. The way of celebrating the Liturgy or family events, of organising the time-table, the decoration of the house, food, etc., should all reflect the multi-cultural character of the community. What is asked of the resident confreres is to show a genuine interest in getting to know and appreciate the culture of the others, as well as the history and traditions of their countries. He could be useful to mark, in community, the dates that are important for each one.

### **Majorities and Minorities**

58. The historical origins and the development of an Institute bring with them the inevitable predominance of the culture of the original group, which is frequently also the majority. This creates a particular evolution in cross-cultural dialogue. On the one hand the predominant group tends to perpetuate its hegemony, judging - sometimes through simple inertia - that the minority groups have not yet sufficiently assimilated the spirit of the charism, or are not yet ready to take on the necessary responsibilities. The consequence is the survival of a single model, which is perpetuated “democratically” by weight of numbers, and without due attention to the feelings of the minorities, who remain consigned to a more or less resigned silence. On the other hand it might happen that a particularly combative minority, by manipulating the image of the victim of unjust oppression, manages to impose its own views. It is thus a passage from the dictatorship of the majority to that of a minority.

59. The correct solution is not the logic of “winners and losers”, and not even the silence of one side or the other “pro bono pacis”, as this leaves everyone dissatisfied, and generates a mute climate of tension and mutual mistrust. The only way forward is open and generous dialogue in a spirit of sharing and communion and in respect for the truth. The effort of each group is towards concessions to the sensitivity and aspirations of the other, rather than victory for itself.

## **Prophets of “catholicity”**

60. From all that has been said, it can be deduced that to build up positive and enriching cross-cultural relationships requires an ongoing process of conversion. ‘Kenosis’ (ridding oneself) and ‘metànoia’ (conversion) are the cornerstones of cross-culture. Virtues need to be acquired: trust in oneself and in the other, recognition of one’s limitations, the permanent acceptance of the Cross as the other face of the “hundred-fold received in brothers, sisters, houses...” (Mt.10:30).

61. Entering a multi-cultural Institute and community certainly does not mean losing one’s own identity, but it means being able to make the leap from it up to another level that transcends it. It means being ‘catholic’ in the way Daniel Comboni used the word. Basically, it is a matter of a very ancient novelty! Describing the life-style of Christians in the second century, the Letter of Diognetus states: “They live in their homelands like foreigners: every country is their homeland and every homeland is a foreign country”. In much more recent times, Charles de Foucauld felt an irresistible calling to become a “universal brother”.

62. The life of a multi-cultural community thus becomes witness and prophecy. It is a counter-sign in a society torn between economic and cultural globalisation and a violent resurgence of fanatical nationalisms and fundamentalisms. It is the living proof that that a different humanity is possible, constructed on foundations that are deeper than bonds of blood, race or culture: the foundations of the Spirit of Love that makes all brothers (cf. Rm.5:5; 1Jn.1:3).

63. For the missionary, cross-cultural life within a community is a help and a preparation for fitting better into the culture of the people he has been - or will be - called to evangelise, and also for his work of inculturating the Gospel in that culture. Multi-cultural communities, the acculturation of the missionary and the inculturation of the Gospel, are all correlated and inter-connected realities.

## **PART FOUR: PARTICULAR ASPECTS IN OUR INSTITUTE**

64. In this final section we will tackle some very concrete points in the daily life together in our Institute. We will do it with more realism and simplicity, hoping to be impartial and to help towards a constructive revision of cross-cultural life.

### **Starting point of our cross-culture**

65. The experience of cross-culture in our Institute does not take place “on neutral ground”, where persons from different cultures meet in equal circumstances to start a new venture together. We start out from the existence of an original group that is still a majority (Italian), and, to a lesser extent, the German-speaking group: these have ‘incarnated’ the Comboni charism for many years, and have transmitted, both in community living and in pastoral method, a definite style and imprint. The groups from other countries have been added later, some in very recent times.

66. There is no question of “original sin”; it is simply a logical fact, that has taken shape as the Institute developed. But it has posed some very concrete challenges to the way in which we tackle our cross-cultural life. For instance, when in the past young members became part of the province to which they were assigned, they were from the same country, or at least from the same continent (Europe) as the missionaries who received them, the possible differences being the age-gap and the fact of being “new”, and having to “keep quiet and learn” from those who had the experience. Thus, fitting in was relatively easy.

67. But when those that join the community come from Africa, America or Asia, on top of the age gap - itself already more acute than in the past - one has to add the greater cultural diversity; and besides, a cultural diversity that has to be faced from the minority position, both in the Institute and in the context of North-South political and social relationships.

68. It is not to be wondered at if the difficulty of insertion into local communities and into the pastoral tasks is greater, leading to not infrequent cases where one is forced to return to his home Province, and even to leave the Institute. The Chapter itself noted the difficulty (cf. CA'97,139). It would be too simplistic to think that the only cause of present defections is cultural difference, even though it is quite a weighty factor.

69. The particular mechanism that appears in cross-cultural dialogue in the presence of majority and minority groups, to which we referred earlier, applies to us in full. On the one hand, the "dominant majority" might think, more or less consciously, that "what has always been done" possesses the guarantee and the seal of "being valid", and that the newcomers should therefore assimilate and continue with it, exactly as they learn it from their seniors. When they see that the young ones find it difficult to fit into this process, they are easily tempted to put it down to incapacity or lack of preparation, or even to lack of good will.

70. On the part of the "minority" there might be a certain hypersensitivity, a predisposition to not letting themselves be "absorbed", which brings them to affirm their own identity, rigidly grasping at details which become the ensign of what is different. It may happen where those who are now companions in community were, in the past, "fathers in the faith": that is, the very ones who baptised them, followed them in the development of their vocation, formed them. This fact does not always make relationships easier; on the contrary, it can make problems more acute, reinforcing motives of dependence and of consequent rejection.

71. Only a vote of confidence and a permanent will to dialogue, along with the Lord's grace, will permit us to overcome the mutual prejudices and the play of reactions that are often instinctive. By the very nature of things, it will be up to the "old majority" to be more attentive and, possibly, make the greater sacrifices to ensure that life moves forward into the future. Of course, the new generations too must be very careful to be open-minded towards whatever is transmitted to them through word and example. It is in these transitory and very often questionable shapes - as in vessels of clay - that the precious charism of the Founder is contained; and they will tend to "re-create" and "re-live" it on the basis of the values of their respective cultures.

### **Missionary service and structures**

72. To make our missionary service effective, we have set up and used structures and devised social works and human development activities. This required a notable organisational effort and the use of abundant material means - made possible by the generous financial support on the part of many benefactors, especially in Europe and the USA.

73. Sadly, the step-by-step approach has often been neglected in implementing these initiatives, as also a sense of proportion, respecting the rhythms of the people and future self-sufficiency, etc. At times we have embraced efficiency over effectiveness: this is the fruit of a mentality that is accustomed to measure results by the number of projects carried out or the structures erected.

74. Confreres coming from other mentalities and cultures, apart from the fact that they cannot count, in general, on the same financial backing, do not normally feel inclined to run structures that

are too complex. Many of our parishes and social initiatives are destined to suffer a drastic reduction in size, because neither the local Church nor the younger generations of the Institute will be in a position - or will not see the need or the suitability- to keep them going.

75. Consequently, pastoral and community planning is one of the fields in which we are called to alter emphases, within a context of mutual understanding and enrichment. Some - and not solely and necessarily the young - will take the opportunity to become accustomed to planning which will help to establish pastoral priorities and avoid the danger of dispersal. Others - and not solely and necessarily the majority group - will have to allow themselves to be taken over by a more human sense of time and of structures.

76. The last two Chapters perceived the need for a change of methodological accent, and made repeated calls to be “closer to and in solidarity with the people”, to “respect their rhythms”, to “use simpler means and structures” (cf. CA’97,23).

Development projects will undergo inevitable reductions, and slow down. Any promotion commitment will be marked by closeness to the people, by working ‘with them’, allowing them to be active in and, indeed, the principal agents of, their own advancement.

### **Use of money**

77. This field, which we sometimes call - ironically - ‘delicate’, is frequently the subject of susceptibilities and misunderstandings among the different cultural groups. It is neither necessary nor useful here to try to formulate specific accusations and mutual prejudices which generalise very particular experiences.

78. However, we do permit ourselves to recall some attitudes and practices that are openly against the spirit of the Institute. It would be against this spirit to hold against a confrere in community the fact that he makes no financial contribution, above all when it is known that he does not have the opportunities to obtain funds that other have. Equally contrary would be the abstention of a confrere from the effort to contribute, even if what he can bring in is not much. It would be unjust for someone in a community to have personal income, and to make his own plans for its use; and equally unjust for someone who had brought in nothing to spend the money on commodities that those who bring it in would never dream of.

79. Money belongs to the community, and it is the community that makes use of it, as it is the community that does pastoral planning., and that sets out a community life-style of living evangelical poverty that is a sign of the Kingdom. And it is in the context of community dialogue that growth in the virtues of austerity and of generosity takes place. That this seems an ideal that is far from reality as lived in some communities, does not exempt us from the obligation to try it.

80. The last Chapter urged the setting up of a Provincial Common Fund (CA’97, 181). It makes very good sense to recall it here, because of its implications for cross-cultural living. The expenses the Province as such has to face (formation, missionary animation, assemblies...) will always increase, while it is foreseen that income will diminish. Soon there will be communities unable to cover their ordinary annual budget, and will need support from the Province. We have no doubt that confreres who can bring in financial support will be ready to do it for the common fund with the same spirit of faith with which they would do it for their community or for projects for which they are personally responsible.

81. Progress towards a common fund is much more than a question of accounting; it is a process of conversion of heart, that obliges all of us to be completely detached, and to share material goods

ever-increasingly. It is a process of transparency and shared responsibility, that touches on the *acquisition* as well as on the *use* of goods, and on *presenting accounts*. Lastly, it is also a process of community discernment regarding the life-style and community and apostolic priorities in which the money of all deserves to be used.

### **Governance structures**

82. The multi-cultural character of the Institute has to be reflected in the structures of government at all levels. Sharing in the responsibility of the guidance of the family is a duty and a right of all the members. In the particular situation of emerging minorities, the criterion of representation based on numbers is not sufficient. It is necessary to make a conscious and positive effort - a sacrifice for some - so that the minorities may enjoy a significant presence.

83. Good progress has been made in our Institute. For some, it is satisfactory; for others, still not enough. Rather than looking back on what has been done so far, it is important to tackle the way forward, and make an effort to bring into being, in all areas of responsibility (General and Provincial Administrations, Formation...) an international make-up that reflects the increasing plurality of the grassroots.

84. Obviously, the criterion of internationalisation has to coincide with the suitability of individuals. If this is not sufficiently guaranteed, the damaging repercussions will affect everyone, starting with the minority itself.

### **Use of languages**

85. The susceptibilities that the theme of language has always aroused justify an explicit consideration of it. Language, which is supposed to be a simple means of communication is, as experience tells us, a very complex instrument, and with many collateral connotations. Hence the right insistence in our communities that the language spoken should be the one considered official (or common) in the country where they are situated. We know, of course, that this norm resolves the matter only in general terms, and does not cover many concrete situations in which it is necessary, at least temporarily, to look for intermediate solutions.

86. There are two complementary principles which must be kept in mind. The first is the commitment to learning the language commonly used locally, and to use it habitually in community, so that everyone becomes able to express themselves in it clearly and fluently. This will be to the advantage not only of good communication inside the community, but also of the quality of our missionary service. The second principle is flexibility and realism in particular situations, not making of language a tool for cultural claims.

87. In this context, we do not think it redundant to call once more for the study of the languages and cultures of the countries where we carry out direct pastoral work. The last Chapter noted that the good tradition of commitment to language studies is being maintained, but the study of cultures is slacking (cf. CA'97,37). Doubtless, in both areas there is still plenty of room for improvement.

88. At the same time, we urge an intensification in the learning of the three official languages of the Institute (cf. CA'97,174), starting from the first stages of formation. Good communication is the basis of communion in the Comboni Family.

### **Cross-culture and basic formation**

89. We have highlighted both the need for each individual to feel identified with his own culture, and the need for him to be open to cross-culture. At what point in the formation of our candidates must we insist on the one or the other? It seems to us that the direction already followed in the Institute is valid, and we will remark on it briefly.

90. The Postulancy is considered a suitable time for identification with one's own culture. Therefore it is preferable that this take place in one's home Province. The presence of foreign personnel around or within the formation team does not go against this identification; on the contrary, it stimulates it, since one is made more conscious of one's culture and the values it contains through this first contact with other cultures. Unfortunately, the lack of candidates sometimes makes it necessary to set up inter-provincial Postulancies, when the time for a cross-cultural experience is not yet ripe.

91. The period of the Noviciate is centred mainly on familiarisation with what we can call the 'Comboni culture', that is, our spirituality and identification with the charism of the Founder. Of course, the process of opening towards and contact with other cultures must still go on.

92. The "strong" time for cross-cultural life during basic formation is in the Scholasticate or IBFC. During this period, the newly-professed members is exposed to a double cross-cultural challenge: one in the surroundings in which the centre is situated, and the other within the community of which he is part. In both areas he will have to be able to open out to the appreciation and assimilation of the values of others without imposing his own views, though also without giving them up inconsiderately.

93. The SC/IBFC is a period of initiation and learning which does not call for full maturity. However, some candidates may show a clear inability to carry on a cross-cultural dialogue with serenity, either because of their intolerance of everything that is alien, or because they let themselves be influenced too much by what is new, without sticking to a set of firm convictions they have personally assimilated.

94. The Rule of Life states that "the missionary acquires an international disposition and outlook only gradually" (RL,18.1), not limiting the process to initial formation. What it means is that education towards cross-culture continues throughout a lifetime, and must be taken into account in Ongoing Formation programmes.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Mission, the means and the end of cross-culture**

95. The reason for the whole process of cross-cultural life, both in formation communities and in communities active in the mission, is far from being exhausted in them. The final aim of education for cross-culture is neither the enrichment of the person nor the creation of a community that is varied and humanly attractive (though this is important), but the service of the Kingdom.

96. In the first place, cross-cultural living in a missionary community is a direct preparation for a greater understanding of the culture in which we are called to proclaim the Gospel, and to allow us to distinguish better between what is cultural conditioning and what is permanent in the message.

97. Secondly, if every community united in the name of Jesus is the proclamation and sign of the arrival of the Kingdom, the cross-cultural community is so even more, making more obviously

visible the “gathering together of God’s scattered children” in a world characterised by ethnic conflicts, nationalistic claims and outbursts of xenophobia.

### **Return to the icon of the Magi**

98. Let us return to the Wise Men, since it is not difficult to recognise in their journey the *icon* of our own missionary journey. Though different through homeland, language and culture, each of us has followed a “star”, a personal vocation that is common to all of us, but which each lives in a personal way, based on one’s personal feelings. We have met on the way, each one bearing his ‘gift’, and we have decided to travel on together, living in communities which help us to be faithful to the common call without renouncing our particular characteristics.

99. The ‘gift’ we present to Jesus is converted into the gift of each to the others. It drives us beyond what we are and what we know, towards the discovery of new and complementary aspects of a truth which is much richer than the idols which we find we are constantly tempted to create through making an absolute of our views, whether personal or of our group.

100. We will continue our journey then, facing together both the dark moments when the star is hidden, and the times when it shines brightly in a serene sky. We will proclaim the God who became present (epiphany) in “a mother with her Child” - that is, in the concrete, ordinary face of every man and woman we meet on the way. We will start anew “with the courage of Blessed Daniel Comboni”, with our identity enriched by the encounter with our companion on the journey, in fidelity to our common missionary and Comboni vocation, and supported by the grace of the Lord and by his love, which the Spirit pours out into our hearts.

Rome, 6th January 1999

*150th anniversary of the missionary oath of Daniel Comboni.*

Fr. Manuel Augusto Lopes Ferreira

Fr. Venanzio Milani

Fr. Juan González Núñez

Fr. Rafael González Ponce

Bro. Umberto Martinuzzo

## APPENDIX I

### TYPICAL CULTURAL VALUES OF OVER WIDE GEOGRAPHICAL AREAS

#### A. *Cultural values of Africa*

Central place of community (tribe, clan, family)  
High esteem of fecundity  
Collective ownership of land and the means of production  
Marriage as a community happening  
Absence of religious intolerance  
Innate sense of the divinity  
Sense of hospitality  
Spirit of communion with nature  
Active function of symbolism (rites, dances, masks...)  
Rites of passage as change of status  
“*Negritude*” as the soul of African culture  
Close linkage between human life and cosmic order  
Strong sense of friendship (going as far as “blood-brotherhood”)  
Great respect for the dead (cult of ancestors)

#### B. *Cultural values of Latin America*

Powerful sense of equality  
Collective ownership  
Central place of “the child”  
Endurance of adversity  
Sense of celebration (songs, dances...)  
Deep sense of hospitality  
Trusting the word of another  
Life-style marked by simplicity  
Solidarity in the sense of sharing of poverty  
Sense of humour even in critical moments  
Hope in a better future  
Religious sense permeating all daily life

#### C. *Cultural values of Asia*

Ascetical and contemplative powers  
Acceptance of suffering (risk of fatalism)  
Detachment from worldly goods  
Non-violence and tolerance  
Great respect for nature  
Seeking for liberty  
Sense of community (collectivity)  
Central role of work  
No tension between theory and practice  
Effort to achieve socialism with a human face

#### D. *Cultural values of Western Europe and North America*

Ready to struggle for values (tenacity)  
Confidence in humanity and in progress  
Strong national sense  
Balance between faith and politics  
Dignity of the person  
Democracy as the political model  
Fundamental role of scientific knowledge  
Technology as the source of progress  
Desire for “well-being”

## APPENDIX II

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR COMMUNITY REFLECTION

#### *First Part:*

- Taken in its overall complex of Old and New Testaments, is the Bible “particularist” or universalist?
- Which quotations, besides those in the letter, are relevant to the topic of cross-culture?

#### *Second Part:*

- Which motivations have inspired cross-culture in our history, and which have been the main obstacles and difficulties?
- Should the process of internationalisation be accelerated, or has it already been too rapid?
- Do you think that the option for an intercontinental make-up in the Scholasticates is right as practised now, or should it be more restricted?

#### *Third Part:*

To what extent can the missionary vocation and personal commitment to pushing one’s cultural rights be reconciled?

Are possible conflicts in community life due basically to cultural differences, or to other factors such as the age-gap, character, formation, etc.?

What impact have attitudes based on cultural complexes of inferiority or superiority had on community life?

#### *Fourth Part*

Is the weight of the “hegemonic majority” still felt, or is it a thing of the past? Are there any remaining tensions?

Are there direct links between the “new geography of the Institute” and certain changes in pastoral method?

Do you think that a new mentality, more community-based, is developing regarding the use of money, or do you consider the tendency to be in the opposite direction? Does money help pastoral planning to be more of a community process?

#### *Appendix I: “Cultural values”*

Does the list of typical values really highlight the cultural differences of the various continents?

Which items should be removed, and which added to the list?

Which positive or negative effects do they have on community life and pastoral praxis?

### **APPENDIX III**

References to the Rule of Life and to Chapter Acts 1997

#### **RULE OF LIFE**

nn. 8; 8.4; 18; 18,1; 32.1; 36; 37; 38; 38.1; 38.4; 38.5; 38.7; 42; 97.1; 97.2.

#### **CHAPTER ACTS**

nn. 34; 35; 37; 39; 40 - 42; 48 - 59; 119; 122; 125; 125.1; 125.2; 138; 148; 164.

## CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

- The fact of cross-culture
- Division of the Theme

### PART ONE: THE BIBLE PERSPECTIVE

- The theme of the journey
- Babel and Pentecost
- The journey of the Magi, icon of cross-culture

### PART TWO: COMBONI TRADITION

- Comboni is “catholic”
- A story of light and shadows
- A renewed option for cross-culture

### PART THREE: LIVING CROSS-CULTURE IN COMMUNITY

- Culture
- Cross-culture
- Difficulties and challenges
- Overcoming prejudices
- How to live the differences
- Majorities and minorities
- Prophets of “catholicity”

### PART FOUR: PARTICULAR ASPECTS IN OUR INSTITUTE

- Starting point of our cross-culture
- Pastoral method
- Use of money
- Governance structures
- Use of languages
- Cross-culture and basic formation

### CONCLUSION

- Mission, the means and the end of cross-culture
- Return to the icon of the Magi

APPENDIX I: typical cultural values...

APPENDIX II questionnaire

APPENDIX III: references