

CYOF 2024-2025

INTERCULTURALITY WEEK

Intercultural communities at the service of the mission of God

We have received this reflection written by the 18 confrères who are taking part in the Comboni Year of Ongoing Formation (ACFP) 2024-2025, and by the two animators of the Centre for Ongoing Formation (CFP), at the end of an entire week spent reflecting and discussing together on interculturality. “A more than appropriate theme – in the sense that it ‘hits the mark’, given that we come from 13 nations and as many – and perhaps more – cultures.” This is the ‘SUBJECT’ of the email with which the text was sent to us. We feel that publishing what they wrote will be appreciated.

It is a grace for us to have been able to live together this time of reflection, accompaniment and spirituality, rereading ourselves, the reality in which we live, the Comboni charism and our mission at the service of the Kingdom of God.

In the week dedicated to the theme of *interculturality* – appreciated and enjoyed by all – we had the opportunity to reflect on this important reality – today more than ever present in our Institute and perceived as the establishment and maintenance of cultural relationships in the form of dialogue, comparison and mutual exchange of knowledge between people from different cultures – starting from our missionary experience and our own multicultural reality.

In the recent past, we have perceived how there are still preconceptions and stereotypes that mark our coexistence in the countries where we operate (feelings of inferiority or superiority of some cultures over others, episodes of racism or undue generalisations around chastity, the use of goods, the management of time and things). We recognise that we have managed to overcome some prejudices, thanks both to an increase in spirituality and human maturity due to increasing age and lived experiences, and by virtue of simply coexisting among ourselves, always accompanied by the search for God and his will. Other prejudices, however, persist and still hurt us. We try to hide or

camouflage them, but, from time to time, they resurface and distance us from each other. Sometimes, they come back to the surface with force – even more than we would like – especially when the internal politics of the Institute or economic issues are involved.

We recognise, however, that various aspects that we define as ‘cultural’ are often also – if not above all – due to the character of people, their greater or lesser flexibility, their age, their history, and the wounds that each of us has suffered and whose scars remain and still cause us suffering. Let us be honest: it is not always merely a matter of culture! In some cases, we use the ‘excuse of culture’ to avoid dialogue or confrontation, and we close ourselves in a self-referential individualism.

It makes us happy to see among us the efforts made to welcome the different, wounded, tired or frustrated confrères. We have lived these ‘community dynamics’ with great human and Christian charity, and this has made us better people.

On the other hand, we are always on a path of growth towards community sanctity. If we lived our vocation with serenity and depth, and if Jesus Christ were truly the centre of our personal and community life, there would be no problems of multicultural coexistence. Jesus teaches us to adopt some values that are indispensable for living together and that we have identified in our group work: sincere dialogue, honesty, respect for others, responsibility, tolerance, attentive listening, and a sense of being a family understood as a ‘Cenacle of Apostles’. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus helps us to live together the conviviality of differences.

However, there are conflicts, difficulties, communities that divide, confrères who ignore each other, experiences that fail... There are confrères who have left the Institute because our life together no longer lived up to their dreams (and we who remain in the Institute, are we really better than them?).

It is above all in the concreteness and ordinariness of everyday life that conflicts are most felt. And it is precisely in this ‘*weekday*’ of our life that we are called to make common choices that help us live together.

At the end of the ‘week on interculturality’, we would like to list some points that we believe can help us live interculturality as a treasure, a gift and a tool for evangelisation.

1. To live interculturality, we need a common base: *the country that hosts us*. When we arrive in a country different from our own, it is important to speak the local language, eat the local food, and adopt the values and idiosyncrasies of the people who welcome us. As people, we have the right and duty to attend good language courses and have an introduction to the reality of the country that hosts us, as well as to understand and deepen the path taken by the Comboni missionaries already present, the history of the province that welcomes us, the choices made in the past and those made in the mission today – choices that we must make with fidelity and, at the same time, with creativity, respect and boldness. For this reason, it is very appropriate for each province to have a clear community and pastoral action plan that those who arrive can welcome, appreciate and make their own.
2. On the common basis of the culture that welcomes us, it is important to create community spaces in which we can share our way of being, our culture of origin and our mutual knowledge, starting from the simplest things, such as our family, our history, the most significant aspects of our life and the traditions that have marked it. It is not enough to leave everything to free initiative. We must schedule spaces for prayer, dialogue, shared cooking, celebration...
3. There are provinces that struggle to be intercultural and want to build their history only on decisions made by their own original members – who, among other things, are ageing, with the risk of not renewing themselves and not looking to the future with optimism and freshness. There is still a long way to go! But we know that the future will lead us to have only intercultural provinces, called to dialogue and plan with all the members that compose them.
4. It is important to choose a style of mission together. The path taken by the province and the continental policies of the Comboni mission can be of great help. But it is ‘locally’ that we must translate

both of these into practice. Having chosen a mission style, we commit ourselves to living it ‘all together’! However, if in the same community there are different styles or models, we will be ‘individuals’, ‘islands’, people who live next to each other but do not communicate. To truly be a ‘community’ it is not enough to celebrate the same mass, pray the Liturgy of the Hours in choir, meet together at the table or watch the same television programme. What will make us a true ‘Comboni community’ will have to be our ‘pastoral harmony’ and our desire to evangelise together with one heart.

5. We have said that we are called to assume the local culture. But it is good to underline that we must first live the Good News of Jesus of Nazareth within the culture that welcomes us. Jesus and Saint Daniel Comboni challenge us to come down from our pedestals to approach with love the “poorest and most abandoned”. This choice must make us simpler, more genuine, attentive to the wounds of humanity and ready to heal them. Sometimes, large structures do not help us to be a community, and having a lot of service personnel makes us live a comfortable and expensive life, with the risk of losing the beauty of sharing, of sobriety, of slow rhythms, of living and moving like the people around us.

We wanted to share with you these reflections, the fruit of prayer, group work and community syntheses. We love our Comboni family, our charism, our particular way of being Church. Sometimes, however, we run aground and lose depth and beauty, due to selfishness, narcissism, or because we allow ourselves to be dazzled by the false certainties of a bourgeois lifestyle and the current individualistic mentality. At the heart of each of our cultures of origin are the values of the Kingdom: dialogue, respect, attention to the weakest, group solidarity, the search for the common good, and a deep sense of God. While remaining faithful to our roots, Jesus of Nazareth asks us to build a ‘new’ world, together, as an intercultural Comboni family.

We wish you all the best and a fruitful journey towards Christmas and an even better New Year 2025.