



TABLE FELLOWSHIP FOR THE BREAKING OF THE BREAD

Archetype for Novitiate Formation for
Intercultural Life and Mission for the
Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary

ABSTRACT

Called to live and serve in situations of cultural diversity, the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM) are challenged to develop new methods in novitiate formation. Enjoined to hold the Early Christian community as a model of community life and mission, the researcher explores Luke's use of table fellowship as recorded in Acts 2: 42-47 and their experience of the « breaking of the bread » as an archetype for interculturality which she proposes as the means to which the SMSM can restructure novitiate formation for building prophetic communities for mission in today's globalized world. This article is a presentation of her findings.

Keywords: Consecrated life, interculturality, intercultural living, table fellowship, Early Christian community, novitiate formation, Marist spirituality



INTRODUCTION

Consecrated life has, at its source, the personal encounter with the Risen Christ – one that is present in society’s least and last, with the desire to give the totality of oneself to Him. Lives offered in complete devotion to God and service to the marginalized caused Pope John Paul II to call this lifeform,¹ a gift from God for the Church and the world.² Originally, marginal movements made up of consecrated persons, through contemplative presence or apostolic engagement with the magisterium and the laity, continue the mission entrusted to the Church by Christ. Their public consecration manifests the Christian tension of making the Reign a reality in the here and now through prophetic presence, while conscious that its fulfillment is in God’s time. Prophecy has been one of the hallmarks of this lifeform, with the lives of founding women and men, like the prophets of old, calling the Church to renewal. It is perpetuated by the entrance and consecration of adult Christians. Through a process called novitiate formation, new members are gradually initiated into the community life and mission of a spiritual family which then prepares them to live their Christian discipleship in a new way.

Called to be attentive to the signs of the times, consecrated life today finds itself in a world of paradox. While greater ease of transport and rapid telecommunications facilitated by economic globalization give the impression that there are growing connections between diverse peoples, the rise of religious fundamentalism (e.g. ISIS), national separationist movements (e.g. Brexit), and political movements stressing ethnic or national purity expose the truth of continued fragmentation. Globalization has

¹Sandra Schneiders refers to consecrated life as a “lifeform” rather than a lifestyle which focuses only on the way members of an institute of consecrated life live and work. Lifeform highlights the organic quality of this mode of Christian discipleship. Sandra Schneiders, *Religious Life in a New Millennium: Volume I, Finding the Treasure: Locating Catholic Religious Life in a New Ecclesial and Cultural Context* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 38.

²John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World *Vita Consecrata*, (25 March, 1996), no. 1.

exacerbated the inequalities between nations and peoples and has led to the mass migration of people either in search of economic stability or seeking to escape political instability. Growing ethnic diversity challenges the hospitality and acceptance of nation-states. Conflicts over scarce resources are quickly labeled as cultural misunderstandings and political solutions swing between the assimilation of immigrants and thwarting their entry.

Since Vatican II, the faith communities of Africa, Asia, and Latin America find themselves playing a greater role in the life and mission of the Church. With the increased membership into consecrated life, institutes are not exempt from the present cultural phenomenon as the Church continues to become more polycentric.³ Some institutes are new to the experience of ethnic diversity that has been brought by changes in their national demographic. As they branch out internationally, they respond to new charismatic intuitions and inquiries received from online media. Similarly, the mission is multi-directional, with evangelizers being sent from North to South, East to West and vice versa.⁴ Thus, there is growing consciousness of the role that culture plays in the life and faith praxis of a person. Novitiate formation aims to guide new members into a deeper appreciation of their uniqueness, even as they are challenged by the Gospel and the constitutions of their institute to embark on a life spent in dialogue with others. There must be participation in the birthing of a new creation – a religious community that will mirror the Trinity. Living joyfully together amid cultural diversity permits consecrated persons to act as prophetic signs in our fragmented global context, one that has previously assumed that harmony is only possible when there is uniformity.

³Antonio M. Pernia, “Challenges to and Opportunities for Religious Life from the World and the Church of Today” *USIG Bulletin Number 146* (2011),36.

⁴Antonio M. Pernia, “Challenges to and Opportunities for Religious Life,” *Ibid.*

Interculturality and intercultural living are offered up by missiologists to aid the process. Anthony J. Gittins,⁵ describes intercultural living as a faith-based way of fostering unity between culturally diverse peoples. Led by the Gospel and their constitutions, members of an institute engage in a process of reciprocity and dialogue which leads to greater cultural appreciation and conversion. Consecrated life can look to the early Christian community, for whom table fellowship and the breaking of the bread⁶ had healed their struggle, creating communion between members of Jewish and Gentile origin. Their experience can be an archetype for increasingly culturally diverse institutes of consecrated life to change not only their lives together, but also their presence and service to the world.

What follows are the results of an investigation into the experience of the Missionary Sisters of the Society of Mary (SMSM), the institute to which the researcher belongs. The SMSMs have embraced multicultural community living and availability to the Church's universal mission. They believe that the implementation of new methods into their novitiate formation processes will support their endeavor to build joyful communities; the prophetic leaven needed to respond to their current global context.

Cultural diversity is a historical fact and a constitutive dimension of SMSM life and mission.

A revisiting of the SMSM experience in intercultural exchange and dialogue in community life and novitiate formation was revealed to be one of struggle, discernment, and growth. A letter published in 1843 from the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith was the catalyst for its birth. Addressed to the people of Lyons,

⁵Anthony J. Gittins was born in Manchester, England and is a member of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit and currently Professor Emeritus of Theology and Culture at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago where he has taught Theology and Cultural Anthropology since 1984. He is the researcher of fifteen books on theological and anthropological topics, and on mission and spirituality. Information sourced from Catholic Theological Union website: <http://www.ctu.edu/academics/anthony-gittins-cssp>, Accessed November 13, 2017.

⁶Acts 2:46, NAB.

France, the women of the Pacific island of Ouvéa (Wallis)⁷ appealed for “some devout women (some sisters)” to teach them the faith.

The letter caught the attention of a middle-aged, French housekeeper named Marie Françoise Perroton. She contacted the priests of the Society of Mary,⁸ known as the Marist Fathers, who were charged with the island’s pastoral care. The Marist provincial Fr. Julien Eymard gave her no guarantee of support, but it was on his initiative that she was then enrolled as a member of their Third Order of Mary (TOM). Perroton arrived in Wallis in 1846, but it would be 12 years before other women enrolled in the TOM came to Oceania.

Perroton launched the movement but never regarded herself its foundress. With the ten women who later joined her, she became part of the Pioneers that the SMSMs consider as the foundation of their institute. At the time, the missionary vocation was part of the ordained ministry, but the Pioneers began what became a missionary branch of the Society of Mary.

The Pioneers left France for Oceania armed only with the Third Order Manual and Rules, which had been written by the different Marist priests. They lived as consecrated women but lacked novitiate formation specified for community life and missionary service. They intuited that proper spiritual and human formation was needed before embarking for the mission fields. Perroton, writing to a young sister, described novitiate formation as being “*well-equipped, with good arms*

⁷Dated November 1842, the signatories were Suzanne Pukega and Romaine Tui, on behalf of the Catholic women of *Ouvéa*, the indigenous name of the island of Wallis located in the West-Central Pacific Ocean. Paired with the neighboring Horn Islands (Futuna and Alofi), it is a French self-governing overseas collectivity. Encountered by British explorer Capt. Samuel Wallis in 1767, its original population are Polynesian. Sophie Foster and Robert C. Kiste, *Wallis and Futuna: French Overseas Collectivity, Pacific Ocean*, Last Update December 7, 2016. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Wallis-and-Futuna>, (Accessed November 18, 2017).

⁸Founded in 1812 by a group of twelve seminarians in Fourvière, France, by 1845 it had developed into four branches. The Marist Fathers and Brothers founded by Fr. Jean Claude Colin, Little Brothers of the Schools founded by St. Marcellin Champagnat in 1817. The Marist Sisters founded by Jeanne Marie Chavion in 1817, and the Third Order of Mary in 1845 under the direction of Fr. Julien Eymard, a Marist from 1840-1856. Cecile de Mijolla, *Origins in Oceania*, 31.

for the struggle.”⁹ Despite their lack, their sharing in the reality of the people whom they served drew the attention of Oceanian women who also offered their lives for mission. Today the institute is composed of sisters from 39 nationalities, not to mention cultures, serving in 25 countries.

SMSM congregational documents attest to the institute’s embrace of cultural diversity, a position ratified in 1931 with its canonical approbation. In its first constitutions, the sisters were reminded that they “*form[ed] one and the same family*” and contrary to colonialism, they were urged to “*try to put aside differences of age, education, nationality, and race.*” This exhortation continued to prevail in later revisions of their constitutions until 1971 saw the introduction of a new articulation of SMSM life and mission: internationality. They expressed this as the openness to receive women from all peoples and nations and availability for mission to all nations and cultures, manifesting that God is [parent] of all, humanity is family and the Church is universal.¹⁰ SMSM Novitiate formation has evolved into a cross-cultural and multicultural experience and today’s vocational trend is leading to the establishment of one that is bilingual.

The researcher conducted an informal interview of sisters¹¹ who expressed happiness with the institute’s growth in intercultural exchange and dialogue. They believed that cultural diversity within novitiate staff and the introduction of modules dealing with culture favored the concept. They also shared the mindsets and practices that hindered the process, such as fear of losing one’s cultural identity and cultural domination. There was the idea that the existence of minority groups could force cultural values to override institutional norms, and so uniformity was imposed to deal with the cultural difference.

⁹M. du Mont Carmel- Sr Marie Françoise Xavier ndm (Lyon), 26 February 1870, MFP Letter 47, §2. M. Emerentiana Cooney, “One Heart and One Soul,” 28.

¹⁰1971 General Chapter Acts, 72-74.

¹¹Sisters interviewed were formators, members of congregational leadership and sisters who recently participated in novitiate formation.

The researcher observed that SMSMs appear to take their cultural diversity for granted, or fail see the radicality of their way of life and its prophetic impact on those around them. In fact, the 10th General Chapter held in 2016 listed “valuing interculturality as a gift for community and mission” as a continuing challenge for the SMSM. Table fellowship was one of the places where the sisters experienced intercultural exchange and dialogue, hence, the researcher turned to the Early Christian community, that which the SMSMs, like all Marists, are enjoined to hold as their model for life and mission.

*Faith in Christ – The Criterion for
Table Fellowship for Breaking the Bread*

Luke composed the book commonly called Acts of the Apostles to present the early Christian community as a continuity and discontinuity of the Jewish faith tradition. Acts 2:42-47 describes a predominantly Jewish community with a membership initiated by baptism.¹² Their new life was structured on four complementary pillars: the teaching of the Apostles (*didaché*), fellowship/communion (*koinonia*), the breaking of the bread (*klasei tou artou*) and the prayers (*proseuché*). Of these, the breaking of the bread had a special significance which enabled them to build community, overcoming the rampant sectarian divisions present in Judaism at the time.

Breaking bread was a common Jewish meal custom which initiated table fellowship.¹³ Fragments shared among the commensals confirmed friendship, solidarity and sharing in the same stream of grace from God, the source of food.¹⁴

¹²Raymond Brown, Carolyn Osiek and PHEME PERKINS, “The Early Church,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy, 1338-1353. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc. printed by Rekha Printers Private Ltd, New Delhi, 1990.

¹³T. Alex Tennent, “The Jewish Idiom of Breaking Bread Among the Early Believers,” <http://themessianicfeast.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/MF-PDF-Pages-104-105>, Accessed February 10 2018, 83

¹⁴Xavier Léon-DuFour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread: The Witness of the New Testament*, trans. Matthew O. O’Connell, (Mahwah, NJ, Paulist Press, 1986). 22, 35.

However, first-century Jewish society was one in “pursuit of holiness”¹⁵ for they saw their colonization by the Romans as divine retribution for unfaithfulness to the Covenant. The pious sought to redress this with righteous living and avoided ‘contamination’ from foreign cultures and lapsed Jews. The table became as sacred as an altar with kosher foods and limited commensality between one’s family or sectarian group to ensure purity. Faithfulness to the Covenant evolved into a political and social system of religious discrimination that divided Jews from each other.¹⁶

Luke used table fellowship as a motif in his two-volume work to critique a practice that had begun to creep into the Christian community. His gospel reveals Jesus’ willingness to break bread with Levi and Zacchaeus as a strategy for evangelization (cf. Lk 5:30-31), a vision of the inclusive Reign of God (cf. 14:15-24) and the Lord’s Supper as the source and summit of Christian community life (cf. 22: 19-ff). In Acts, Luke’s mention of two gatherings for breaking bread among the early Christians highlights the continuation of this Jewish practice, but with acquired surplus meaning. It commemorated the Lord’s Supper and recalled the encounter with the Risen Lord on the way to Emmaus.

“Gatherings in the home” (cf. 2:46), may have been *agape* meals, wherein social distinctions between the baptized would blur.¹⁷ These were strengthened by their weekly gathering “to break the bread”, which created the bond between the believers and Christ, and through him, to each other. Luke’s Greek phrasing reveals the importance of this weekly gathering, which he called “breaking of the loaf- *klasei tou artou*”,¹⁸ the phrase he used in the Emmaus encounter. For Eugene LaVerdiere, the weekly gathering gained greater significance for the community because with the

¹⁵Borg, *Jesus a New Vision: Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship*, (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1987), 86.

¹⁶Citing of the work by Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*, pp. 84-85. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus a New Vision*, 91.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Alfred Marshall D. Litt, *The RSV Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980).

Apostles as presiders, the community shared in the eucharistic memory of the Last Supper,¹⁹ and the Emmaus experience testified to His presence in the *koinonia* of the believers and as a source of missionary zeal.²⁰

Luke refutes attempts to establish Mosaic law as the criterion for Christian liturgical and social table fellowship by presenting the Holy Spirit as the protagonist – one who enables the early community to break Jewish sectarian barriers and to cross cultural frontiers towards the Gentiles. The Spirit represents how faith in Christ is the criterion for Christians, regardless of ethnic or national origin, to engage in table fellowship. Although concessions had been made for cultural sensibilities, table fellowship among the early Christians affected the way they lived together and served in the mission. Their weekly gathering to break the bread challenged them towards coherence in daily life, and their domestic table fellowship testified to the power of the Gospel in uniting culturally diverse peoples in friendship. Their cultural identities were transformed, rather than obliterated.

Interculturality as Actualization of the Early Christian Experience for SMSMs today.

The researcher proposes interculturality as a means to actualize the early Christian community experience of SMSMs and consulted the work of Anthony Gittins and others who have posited its use by institutes of consecrated life. Offered as a framework for living multiculturally, interculturality looks at the quality of relationships between culturally diverse people. Gittins insists that consecrated persons look to theology over anthropology for orientation about living in situations of cultural diversity. Interculturality and intercultural living should be the fruit of a conscious decision, a faith-based way of coexisting and a concrete response to Jesus' call²¹ to participate in his mission. It is the belief

¹⁹Eugene LaVerdiere, *The Breaking of the Bread: The Development of the Eucharist according to the Acts of the Apostles*. Liturgy Training Publications: Chicago, IL, 1999., 88.

²⁰Ibid., 89.

²¹Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally*, 22.

that cultural diversity has the Triune God – the perfection of communion in diversity as its source, and despite their differences, cultures are valid expressions of humanity. However, because it is also the way that peoples distinguish themselves, unity in cultural diversity is neither natural nor easy.

Multiculturalism, while enriching, may be a threat that leads people to different coping mechanisms: either to eliminate difference or to tolerate it. This, too, occurs among the consecrated when dominated by cultures with strength in numbers, resources or personality. Adriana Milmanda comments that culture subtly influences the exercise of power, the distribution of resources and the systems which permit access to resources in consecrated life.²² Despite that, attempts to eliminate cultural differences violate the person as culture is the means to one receiving understanding and living the faith. In this, the researcher adds the constitutions of their institute.

Interculturalism challenges the human tendency to divide and discriminate by engaging all participants in the process of conversion.²³ Consecrated persons individually and corporately must face their prejudices and attitudes, set them aside to engage cultural differences not as barriers but as points of encounter. Leaving behind ethnocentrism, they must move towards ethnorelativism (i.e. cultural sensitivity) with cultural identities transformed as they acknowledge different ways to see the world. While the influence of age and personality is easy to spot and blame in regards to conflict, Jon Kirby, SVD states that this is a failure to look deeper, for personality is actually a person's particular embodiment of their culture.²⁴

²²Adriana Carla Milmanda, "Inserted Life: The Radical Nature of an Incarnated Spirituality." Translated by Brian O'Reilly. In *Intercultural Living Vol. 1*, edited by Lazar T. Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, 38-52. Delhi, India: Joint Publication of the Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, Delhi and Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut: Sankt Augustin, 2015, 43.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Kirby, Jon P. "Intercultural Competence for Religious Communities: Models, Gauges, and Guides," *Sedos Bulletin* 2016, Vol. 48, No. 5/6 (May-June 2016), <https://sedosmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/sedos-bulletin-v48n5-6.pdf> (Accessed July 4, 2017), 31-32.

Gittins offers Jesus the stranger – marginal and subject to the hospitality of others – as the model for intercultural living. Through interaction with each other from a position of humility, community members avoid allowing one culture to take center stage, or to be the ‘host.’ This marginality extends beyond the community to the world when consecrated persons use their experience at home to engage with the peoples on the peripheries of society.²⁵

Intercultural living must be planned. It requires the commitment of all community members. Because continued mistakes are a reality, there is the need for an attitude of mutual tolerance as well as appropriate structures for dealing with conflict. Leadership’s role is that of arresting inappropriate behavior and motivating the community towards its goal. Gittins cautioned that while consecrated community life has a certain domestic character, it will never be the home as one envisions, since leaving home is part of the renunciations to follow Christ.

Interculturality is an opportunity to reformulate one’s understanding and living of consecrated life. The shift of demographics to favor the global South is leading to the “de-westernization” of consecrated life,²⁶ which Milmanda describes as debunking the proposition that certain cultures model the living of the Gospel.²⁷ Just as the movement to reintroduce Mosaic law among the early Christians revealed the pervasive power of culture on the person, so too in consecrated life, one’s culture may prove more powerful than one’s faith in Christ. People may break the bread but be unable to break bread together. Interculturality actualizes the Early Christian community experience of cultural transformation. Their unity in Christ changes the way they relate to each other and how they serve the people of God.

²⁵Milmanda, “Inserted Life,” 41.

²⁶Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its ongoing challenges since Vatican II*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017, 37.

²⁷Milmanda, *Inserted Life* 46

Marist spirituality offers the SMSMs an apt way of living their interculturality as it is a call to live Mary's Fiat today, to imitate her hidden presence at Nazareth and Pentecost, and to speak, act and think like her. It encourages a healthy marginality described as being hidden and unknown. SMSMs with their new mandate will be able to respond to those left behind by the tide of globalization.

CHALLENGES

The future of the SMSM is dependent on the quality of the formation received by its newest members. Designing a mode of novitiate formation for their proposed bilingual novitiate is a major challenge – one which recognizes and embraces cultural diversity as a gift from God and encourages novices to be attentive to culture's influence on the way they experience life and faith with skills to embrace and not evade cultural diversity. This culturally sensitive novitiate program must also communicate the renunciations that are part of SMSM life. Interculturality offers the SMSMs the possibility of a new mode of novitiate formation and means that formation staff who will accompany novices must receive appropriate preparation for living consecrated life interculturally.

Below are recommendations offered by the researcher to the institute that she hopes can help the SMSM novitiates achieve greater coherence between their spiritual aspiration and daily life.

1. Engage sisters in an institutional discernment process to articulate their experience and understanding of cultural diversity as a constitutive dimension of SMSM life.

Interculturality consultant Diana de Vallescar Palanca cautions that taking cultural diversity for granted impedes the development of intercultural sensitivity and living.²⁸ Thus, it is important to begin

²⁸Diana de Vallescar Palanca, "Contexto y preocupaciones de Interacciones Culturales: La importancia de la conciencia sobre una formación intercultural" *SEDOS Bulletin* 2016, Vol. 48 #5/6 (May-June), 3-13. <https://sedosmission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/sedos-bulletin-v48n5-6.pdf>. (Accessed July 4, 2017), 9.

with an assessment of how sisters experience cultural diversity as a constitutive dimension of SMSM life and mission. Led by the General Administration, this can be an opportunity for them to articulate their experiences: joys, challenges and the healing of memories.

2. The General Administration should lead sisters in an articulation of the SMSM understanding of interculturality which builds on its experience of internationality.

Supported with feedback gathered from sisters and local communities, the researcher recommends that the General Administration engage in dialogue with sisters to enable them to express their understanding of interculturality and how it can be appropriated by SMSMs.

3. Introduction of assessment tools for intercultural competence for formation staff and novices.

Considering the importance that cultural diversity plays to SMSM life and mission, assessment tools need to be introduced to novices to help them to identify areas for growth and discern their suitability for SMSM life. In addition, formation staff can receive the help they need to recognize their own areas for growth and conversion. These are non-threatening ways of introducing the different ways people engage with each other and can help them identify their level of tolerance for cultural diversity. The institute can consider Muriel Elmer's Intercultural Competence Scale, which explores the conjunction of culture and personality traits, providing a more holistic reflection of a person, their consciousness of self and as a cultural

being.²⁹ Other tools to use may be Milton Bennetts' Developmental Model for Intercultural Sensitivity and the Intercultural Conflict Style Inventory, which brings to consciousness the different ways that cultures manage conflict.³⁰

4. Engage novices in the elaboration and strengthening of the community project for intercultural life and mission.
5. As a community on mission, encourage novices to design a missionary outreach activity that they can do together and that participates in the institutional mandate.

While external pastoral activities have always been a part of the novitiate curriculum, the researcher suggests that novices be encouraged to engage with other elements of the host culture, such as social movements, the political system, and history of the country. Thus informed, she recommends that they are encouraged to elaborate a missionary outreach that they can do together; one which allows them to serve to those on the margins, especially to families, refugees and care of our common home.

6. Formation team participate in the same process of intercultural formation, receive regular updating and appropriate supervision for intercultural living and mission.

The researcher recommends that appropriate preparation is offered to those who will be staff to the novitiate and, if possible, that they participate in the

²⁹Jon Kirby, "Intercultural Competence for Religious Communities," 32.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 34-ff.

same preparation. The team must be supported by them just as formators seek supervision for their ministry of spiritual accompaniment. They also need to consult with persons with some expertise in interculturality who can evaluate their work with the novices.

7. Appropriate evaluative processes.

Finally, the researcher recommends that appropriate evaluative processes be introduced, especially in the first year of the new novitiate experience, to assess the appropriateness of the model used, its strengths and weaknesses, among others.

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