Blessings and challenges of Intercultural Community

**Intercultural community: Blessings**
One of the comments that I have often heard from people who live in intercultural communities is that they have grown a lot in spite of moments of difficulties and misunderstandings. The communities where differences are perceived positively, there are many blessings:

1. **Witness of God as the father of us all**
The Christian conviction about God as the Father of all is affirmed through the living testimony of people of different cultures forming a family.

2. **Intercultural Community a model of communal harmony**
An intercultural community is a prophetic sign of harmony and communion in the context of a world wounded by ethnic conflicts, and communal wars.

3. **Learn broader perspectives about reality**
The presence of members from various cultures contribute to personal growth by challenging the limited world vision of a single culture and opens up to broader perspectives in one’s life.

4. **Better self-knowledge and personal growth**
Contact with people of other cultures sheds light on one’s own unquestioned beliefs and prejudices and enhances greater self-awareness. People who have been in another culture with a positive outlook seem to achieve greater personal growth and refinement as humans.

5. **Cultural confrontation and mutual learning.**
Exposure to other cultures lead to healthy confrontation among cultures that sheds light on each culture’s limitations and idiosyncrasies mutually benefit from the best of one another.

6. **Apostolic effectiveness**
An intercultural community has richer resources and more paradigms to address various pastoral needs. It is all the more relevant for a multicultural society.

**Intercultural community: Challenges**
In the communities where differences are perceived as a threat, there are various defensive dynamics that drain its vitality and enthusiasm for mission.

1. **Prejudices and stereotypes**
Preconceived ideas and evaluations regarding a group (country, ethnic or national, region etc.) that affect the perception of a person from that group. We tend to categorize people into gender, age, and ethnic groups. Once categorized, a person is assumed to have the category’s attributes. (eg. “Indians are ...; Nigerians are ...”)

2. **Cultural domination**
In an intercultural group the predominant group (persons from economically/numerically/socially
favourable groups) tend to consider themselves superior and impose their group norms as normative for everyone.

3. **self-victimization**
   One who suffers from low self-esteem may easily perceive discrimination and ill-treatment from others even when there are no objective evidences for it. He may tend to play the “victim” role in relation to those perceived as belonging to a “superior” culture. One may even provoke in others what he expects of others or read such behaviours in neutral situations.

4. **Cultural shield**
   In intercultural communities members may defend their self-interests using cultural differences as a shield. The rationalization of the deviant behaviour is either by defending oneself in the name of culture (“in our culture we are doing like this”) or attacking the other for his difference of culture (“you Spanish fool, you do not understand us”)

5. **Minority discount**
   In an intercultural context, a member from a minority group tend to enjoy privileges and attention which the majority group may not be granted. Some mistakes done by the minority member may be easily absolved by the authorities. Eg. Superiors tend to allow some margin for minority member in the approval for professions than for the members of majority group.

6. **Majority cultural insensitivity**
   The predominant group in an intercultural community tend to indulge in conversations in vernacular language and practice their customs without any sensitivity to others. This can affect the fraternal climate of the community.

The above-mentioned immature tendencies can snowball into group tensions. Generally, inter group tensions in religious communities do not explode into group fight and violence. People may resort to withdrawal into oneself, departure from community, or passive aggression.

**Dealing with the challenges of intercultural communities**

The above immature forms of community relationships prevent growth and drain our creative energy. Paradoxically, struggles of the community are also moments or grace that provides opportunities of growth and improved relationships. Avoiding difficulties and refusing to address issues may give a temporary sense of well-being, but in the long run it will only promote individualism and “groupism”.

Here are some principles to promote group cohesion in intercultural communities:

1. **Priority of vocational values over cultural values**
   Our community is formed by our charism and mission that unites us into a family. The members are not representatives to any cultural group or a country. Hence vocational values should guide the course of the community.

2. **Clarity between cultural relativism and moral relativism**
   Cultural relativism is a positive attitude that respects and appreciates each culture and its differences. Moral relativism is not an acceptable attitude. Objective moral principles are applicable to cultural norms and practices. (eg. Human sacrifice is wrong and unacceptable even though it had religious sanction in some cultures). Vocational values and our constitutional norms have priority over particular customs of individual members of the community. Gospel values are non-negotiable in a confrontation with cultural values.
3. **Model of Incarnation.**
Our presence in culture is because we are sent there to proclaim the Good News to the people there. In an intercultural community, customs, language and practices of the host culture should have priority over that of the culture of individual members.

4. **Cultural enrichment**
Creating opportunities for knowing and appreciating the culture of the members is important in an intercultural community. Cultural feasts and presentations are helpful for getting to know the others in perspective. Often ignorance of the other breeds misunderstanding and communication failures.

5. **Problem management**
When relational problems arise between two persons, it is to be handled as personal issues rather than as cultural issues. Generalization of the mistake of a person as that of those who belong to his culture is to miss the individual nature and responsibility of the event.

6. **Conflict management**
Conflicts and tensions are natural for any group. In a formation community they offer opportunities to learn about conflicts and healthy ways of dealing with them. In an intercultural community conflicts may assume cultural nuances and can create added complications. Healthy ways of managing community conflicts address the core issues of differences and refuse to be communalized.

**Conclusion**
We are at an opportune time to create a congregational culture which goes beyond merely tolerating cultural differences of our brothers, but rather tapping them to celebrate our charism and mission at the service of life. It is a noble task of all especially those who constitute intercultural communities at the moment.

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**Bibliography**


[http://www.claretianformation.com/intercultural-community-living/]