

## ***Witnessing to the Word in the World – Reflective Overview, 2007 IACM Assembly***

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*“Sharing the Good News in the Interaction of Cultures: ‘The Word of God grew and multiplied’ (Acts 12:24)” served as the integrating theme of the Third Plenary Assembly of the International Association of Catholic Missiologists (IACM), held at the SVD Seminary in Pieniezno, Poland, August 28-31, 2007. Attended by 66 participants from five continents and the Pacific Islands, this missiological conference explored the dynamics of Christian mission vis-à-vis the context of cultural plurality and interaction.*

**A** three-fold creative methodology was employed: the plenary assembly for continental exchanges, thematic groups for specific topics (e.g. migration), and language groups for free discussion and personal sharing. An evident, positive spirit of cooperation and participation manifested itself throughout the gathering, overcoming any and all challenges (e.g. the multilingual mix of participants). This experience itself was an affirmation and concrete realization of “sharing the good news in the interaction of cultures.”

### **Conference Discussion**

The interaction of the Gospel with multicultural contexts captures the focused “problematic” of the conference. This reality shapes evangelization in the contemporary world; the mission encounter is no longer the interaction between a mono-cultural missionary with a rather homogenous group of people. The person of the evangelizer embodies multiple cultural influences; all peoples are impacted by a variety of cultural factors such as

communication, travel, media, and migration. The rapid and increasing interaction of cultures defines human existence today. Identifying and exploring this phenomenon (a conference goal) already serves as an important step toward a fruitful engagement with this crucial dimension of the contemporary mission context.

Many Christians worldwide, as noted by the IACM participants, are committed to living their faith-convictions in the context of cultural pluralism (GS 53-62). They understand that they function and find their meaning in the complex world of multiple belongings. Indeed, this is to be appreciated as a gift, bringing enrichment and blessings. It is also a daily challenge to personally interact with greater awareness, sensitivity, and patience. Again and again, Christian witnesses ask themselves: What does it mean to be a genuinely *human* person in this situation? How can we build a more *humane* society that reflects God's loving design for humanity? How can peoples of such diverse cultures and religions authentically live as true neighbors, all drawing upon the dynamic treasures of their specific cultures and faiths (NA 2)?

To be in mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands an honest examination of both positive and negative aspects in the history of mission and colonization; in other words, how have faith and culture interacted in specific contexts? Hopefully, people of faith can maturely examine such difficult questions and experiences. They will move beyond self or mutual accusation toward the process of the healing of memories. They will affirm that the diversity of cultures actually reflects the multiple ways in which people live their authentic humanity, and concomitantly, the need for multiple approaches to "evangelize humanity's culture and cultures" (EN 20). They are clearly aware that the contemporary interaction of cultures is no less difficult and prone to pitfalls than was the encounter of cultures in previous eras.

Yet, the IACM participants affirmed the permanent validity of the call to mission (RM 1-3); the Word of God must continue to grow and multiply (Acts 12:24), notwithstanding the uniquely new contexts for sharing the Good News. How does today's Christian

foster a genuine encounter with God and then share that transforming experience with others (I John 1:1-4)? Is not this dual encounter a perennially valid mission imperative: authentically encountering God and offering the fruits of one's experience to others?

Numerous mission challenges—all in the context of multicultural living—were explored by the enthusiastic IACM participants. One pivotal area centered on “communication.” How does one transmit or give witness to the Christ-event (Eph. 1:10), given the cultural complexity of life? Possible pathways that were suggested include: deep respect for people's cultural narrative through profound “listening”; recipient-oriented mission approaches which address people's true concerns; preferential use of person-to-person “incarnated” communication, not overly relying on the means of media; the use of symbolic gestures (e.g. washing feet, breaking bread) that easily transcend specific cultures; appreciation of the contribution of older missionaries who successfully communicated the life story and values of Jesus.

Evangelization necessarily is cognizant of people's apprehensions and fears. The realities of globalization, secularization, and multiculturalism may appear overwhelming. People ask: Where are we going in this run-away world? How will I protect my family, values, religion, and culture in this newly emerging world reality? To whom can I turn when I am overwhelmed by unfamiliar circumstances (e.g. the experience of migrants and refugees)? Is a renewed focus on the basics of my faith the only option open? How can all faiths avoid a closed, fundamentalistic view of religion?

This feeling of “chaos” and “no control” due to apparently overwhelming changes and uncertainties is reality for many millions. Can one find in it a positive opportunity for networking, coming closer together, knowing others in their cultural diversity, and living together in sharing and collaboration? Mission means searching God's inscrutable designs in these new contexts (AG 1); it means that human unity in solidarity is not only a concept or

ideology, but it will be the fruit of honest and dedicated struggle.

One Asian speaker summarized the missionary task in face of the dominant cultures proposed by cultural globalization as series of seven, concerted movements toward Gospel- and Kingdom-centered counter-cultures: from a culture of consumerism to one of generosity; from a culture of individualism to one of hospitality; from a culture of superficiality to one of interiority; from a culture of marginalization to one of solidarity; from a culture of conflict and violence to one of harmony; from a culture of information to one of introspection; from a culture of efficient communication to one of genuine community.

### **Conference Organization**

Any narrative presenting the 2007 IACM Conference on “Sharing the Good News in the Interaction of Cultures” will necessarily describe the program by which the conference theme was elaborated. In plenary assembly sessions the participants heard presentations which represented all geographical areas of the world: Europe (2), Africa (2), Latin America (2), Asia (2), Oceania (1), and North America (1). The interaction of cultures, without doubt, is a global phenomenon across the continents.

A second approach by which participants viewed the problematic was through thematic presentations in smaller groups, divided by four areas of concern: integral healing and reconciliation, cultural globalization and asserting identity, migration, and intercultural communication in the Church. Noteworthy was the fact that every participant was dynamically engaged in the discussion, because everyone presented a paper; there were ten major continental-geographical papers and a wide variety of shorter thematic reflections. This carefully crafted conference structure was well received and appreciated.

### **Missiological Themes**

As expected, the entire conference was imbued with



missiological-theological reflection. Yet, several distinct themes frequently appeared on the horizon. Selected reflections are included here.

Trinitarian mission theology undergirded many of the presentations; though not always explicitated, this theology remains the underlying bedrock of a renewed missiology (AG 2-4). The reality of Trinitarian communion proposes an ideal for the Church to be the “Sacrament of Communion” for contemporary multicultural human existence (LG 1; AG 5). Those who experience threats to their identity due to cultural rootlessness (being a “non-people”) can be invited into communion to become God’s people in the Church, Icon of the Trinity.

Mission seeks to reveal the authentic face of Jesus in diverse cultural contexts. The question of “how” to accomplish this task (what avenues can be employed) perennially remains with the Church—a challenge that repeatedly surfaced in the geographical and thematic papers. Who is he? Christ is the author of human unity manifested in creation and incarnation. Christ is both servant and redeemer of humanity through his *kenosis* (Phil. 2:6-11). Christ personifies and embodies the paschal mystery (GS 38), an experience daily shared by millions of individuals.

All mission ministry and service emerge from one’s “God-experience,” enhanced through a variety of means. Private prayer and communal Eucharistic celebrations during the conference enabled the 66 missionary missiologists to appreciate their humble role as “earthen vessels” (II Cor. 4:7), walking with their people amid the current transformation of cultures. These servant leaders remain committed to assisting people from all walks of life realize that they are, in the power of the Holy Spirit, agents of their own evangelization.

In both mission theology and *praxis* the employment of a variety of conceptual tools can frequently serve as a heuristic framework to guide both thought and action. Among many options, several IACM participants noted that the contribution of Paul Ricoeur appears to be helpful in bridging the interaction between

the Gospel and cultures. Specifically mentioned was the paradigm [first naïveté >>> hermeneutic of suspicion >>> hermeneutic of recovery >>> second, post-critical naïveté]; this insight addresses the dynamic growth from traditional Christian faith to a contemporary integration of faith and culture. One may term such a pattern of thought “applied missiology.”

### **Additional Highlights**

The magnanimous generosity and hospitality of the Polish hosts, particularly the SVD community, made a deep impression on everyone; no stone was left unturned to assure adequate provisions for the IACM assembly. Without doubt, this was Polish culture at its finest! More than a few of the assembled missiologists remarked that hospitality itself could serve as an integrating paradigm for the Gospel-culture encounter; it is a concrete, living, practical, and “so-human” approach for bridging cultures and faiths.

At the mid-point of the conference, delegates took an afternoon break to travel the short distance to the nearby town of Frombork (Frauenberg), the place where Nicolaus Copernicus did his scientific research which led to the conclusion (1543) that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun (the “Copernican revolution”). IACM participants drew several parallels with the missiological renewal needed to serve the Church’s task of evangelization in contemporary times.

Near the end of the conference, one participant shared a reflection he received while listening to the daily news from *BBC World*. A series of programs was being produced which would highlight the lives of influential historical figures; artist Leonardo da Vinci was specifically mentioned. The *BBC* newscaster began by asking: “What makes a true visionary?” The IACM member thought he heard: “What makes a true missionary?” Later, he reflected that both questions are interrelated. All Christians need to become “visionary-missionary-artists” for “sharing the Good News in the Interaction of Cultures”!