

New Frontiers in Internationality

Introduction

Thank you, Paula, for your gracious introduction, and thank you, organizers of the Frontiers Conference, for inviting me to be one of the speakers at this spectacular gathering to pay tribute to our pioneer-mother Philippine Duchesne.¹ I am honored to speak about my #1 favorite subject – Internationality – I love talking about it, living and breathing it, because frankly, having grown up in tiny Netherlands (Holland), internationality is part of my DNA. I was literally spoon-fed internationality.

Yet when I eventually moved to the USA and entered the Society of the Sacred Heart, new doors into internationality have opened as I ventured into the world of international justice, the United Nations and its multilateralism, and global citizenship. Philippine, the one sister who, both on a personal level and in mission, always “knew” from the inside what it meant to move from one country to another, from one culture to another, has accompanied me throughout these years with her sisterly love and faithfulness. Thank you Philippine.

In Philippine’s time, the world was getting ever bigger, vaster, as people of all sorts, rich and poor, ventured out to settle in newly discovered, or rather conquered, lands. Communications and transportation went by covered wagon and boats, stretching over weeks and months. In contrast, today’s world is getting smaller thanks to the information revolution and many ongoing technological advances such as Artificial Intelligence. Today’s Global Village, once the scene of exploration and adventure into unknown territories, has become the play-pen of anyone with access to the Internet on their smart phone. We literally hold the world in our hands, at least that is what we think. Add to this the speed with which the world is constantly changing, of which Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada recently said, “This pace of change has been ... [so] fast, yet it will never be this slow again.”²

Navigating our “new normals” of living with terrorism and data breaches, nationalism and rising defense budgets has led to widespread feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. Our incarnational spirituality has been given to us for the transformation of the world. It asks us to be open to the spirit and willing to risk. We must both be knowledgeable about the world and translate that knowledge into action for the sake of the common good, our common home. Giving hands and feet, voice and heart to our relationships makes everyone more human, affirms and reaffirms our

¹ I want to express my deep gratitude to those of my sisters in the BFN and USC provinces who read an early draft of this presentation and have enriched it with their thoughtful comments and creative suggestions.

² Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the World Economic Forum, Davos, 2018, see <https://www.weforum.org/events/world-economic-forum-annual-meeting-2018/sessions/a0W0X00000AfvdHUAR>

common humanity. That is what propelled Philippine to set sail – that is what propels us to the next frontiers.

In the next 40 minutes I invite you to explore with me how we can reveal God’s love for all of Creation through the Society’s current and expanding internationality, one of our most treasured gifts. What new frontiers of internationality might all of us in the Sacred Heart Family pursue? First I will underscore the Society’s historical commitment to internationality as the welcome of many cultures and nationalities. Then I will explore three emerging frontiers that might stretch these commitments in new directions: 1) internationality “on the move”; 2) internationality as advocacy; and 3) internationality as deeper interculturalism.

Our heritage

St. Madeleine Sophie had a remarkable capacity to read the signs of the times. Growing up in the small town of Joigny during the French Revolution, she became aware that the world was full of unrealized goodness which she wanted to unleash by educating girls. Driven by a real need in the world, instead of becoming a contemplative Carmelite sister, Sophie established the Society of the Sacred Heart, a congregation of women contemplatives in action whose educational mission is still very relevant today.

Sophie envisioned a multitude of ‘adorers’ from all over the world who would know the love of God. It was her desire that each student would experience God’s personal love for her so that she, in turn, could live out that love to renew and transform her social context. For Sophie internationality was a given. During her lifetime, the Society had foundations on four continents. By 1865, the Society counted more than 3,500 members.³

Usually, internationality is understood to apply to an organization or group having branches or members in several countries.⁴ According to the Constitutions of the Society of the Sacred Heart, “international communion is created by the interaction of the provinces throughout the world, and by the richness of our diverse cultures.”⁵ It goes without saying that when the Society talks about internationality today we have more in mind than the simple fact of multiple nationalities.

Reading through the Society’s General Chapter documents since 1988, I realized that we increasingly articulate a much deeper and wider understanding of internationality, one in which our relationships take on global dimensions and are placed within the context of one, common human family. During the past 30 years the Society moved from

³ Phil Kilroy, *Madeleine Sophie Barat: A Life*, 2000, p. 427.

⁴ See <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/internationality>

⁵ Constitutions paragraph 156. See also Constitutions paragraph 170 ff, regarding finances in our international congregation.

- “The political dimension of our apostolic life” and “Inculturation” (1988),
- to internationality as a responsibility and not a mere choice (1994),
- to “Dialogue of Cultures” and interculturality (2000),
- to “Dialogue toward Communion: Walking with Humanity” (2008),
- to “reach new frontiers,” “live more humanly,” “create silence,” and “be and act as one Body” (2016).

Today, our internationality is firmly rooted in the awareness that not only the human family but all life on earth is relational and interconnected, that all of creation is interdependent, and that hence my wellbeing depends on your wellbeing and vice versa. Wholeness of creation is both a process and our goal. Nobody and nothing is an island. *UBUNTU*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu would say, “I am because other people are.”⁶ Did Philippine understand this wisdom when she left France?

Internationality “on the Move”

Two hundred years ago, Philippine Duchesne and her companions became our first missionaries when they set sail to the New World, thus acting upon Philippine’s long-held dream to work among the Native Americans. They literally planted their feet on an unknown continent – a pretty radical and courageous thing to do for a midlife woman like Philippine who was unaccustomed to the hardships of frontier life. Where do we hear a call as we move toward the end of the 1st Quarter of the 21st Century? Using our own feet, what does our call to radicality⁷ mean? - to use a term former Superior General Helen McLaughlin used at the beginning of the 1988 General Chapter.

The first frontier that comes to mind is as simple as it is radical: *offer – move – serve where the need is*. As our demographics keep shifting, the places of new vocations do as well. Why not offer ourselves as “*disponible*” sisters or lay volunteers who are ready, willing and able to help ensure that the Society’s charism and mission can flourish in a new or struggling RSCJ context? Many of our foremothers – and maybe even some of you here present – have done so when they planted their feet on different soil.

An often forgotten side-effect of living in another country is that living abroad opens us up to looking at our own country and culture through an uncommon lens. This new lens is not the same as looking at our home environment from another political vantage point, but is informed

⁶ Desmond Tutu (with Douglas Abrams), *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, 2005, p. 25. Or, in the words of an African idiom, “A person is a person *through* other persons.” Id.

⁷ “We are called to radicality. To be women who speak of God’s active presence in our world, women who are willing to love to the end with all the consequences of that, giving our life for our sisters and brothers so that they may have life. We are made for a life of giving and a giving of life.” Helen McLaughlin, RSCJ, Superior General, at *Opening of the General Chapter*, Rome 11 July 1988.

by a very different cultural angle and worldview. This new worldview leads to a deeper and wider experiential understanding of the interdependence and interrelatedness of peoples around the globe and, hence, of our common humanity. As some of you have heard me say before, I came years ago as a Dutch woman and became a European by living in the USA. Not only is such a grasp necessary for any global citizen, it also bonds people together and is part of the Chapter's call "to be more human" and "to be and to act as one Body."

Of course, not everyone will be able to uproot herself or himself. For those staying home, a new frontier in internationality might be to find other ways of moving deeper into the human experience of the exploited and uprooted, for example by watching videos about refugees such as *4.1 Miles*, a short film documenting the actual rescue by the Greek coast guard of Syrian refugees on the Mediterranean Sea.⁸ I was seasick watching it! Others might read and discuss one of many current books on the plight of refugees or offer more hands-on assistance at the food bank or in immigration services. We need to become creative in looking for innovative ways to support the footsteps of our contemporary Philippines.

While our new Philippines answer the call to new, foreign destinations, it is also a fact that the Society has ended her presence in several countries. And his trend is likely to continue. Is there a way to transform our absence in these places into something active and enduring, for example through coworkers and colleagues who continue the work? Is there a role in all of this for our Associates or lay volunteers? For the Solidarity Fund?

We have already begun the work of internationalizing some of our networks. Will there be, one day, a Global Network of Schools with universal Goals and Criteria which will need to be contextualized in each country? And how about making intercontinental cross connections with regard to widely used and successful methodologies such as Popular Education? Such dialogue and exchange could possibly enrich and benefit our common mission on all continents.

One key dimension of internationality that I encountered while serving as the Society's NGO Representative at the United Nations is respectful dialogue. How do you get 193 Member States with very different, often opposing, political agendas and ideologies to agree on anything, for example the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The answer, I have learned, lies in the quality of our human relationships. Yes, governments will differ in their priorities and approaches, but it often is the manner of their interactions during deliberations and negotiations that allows for mutual understanding and appreciation of the "other" to develop, bridges to be built and friendships to be formed. We all know that relational servant leadership goes much further than authoritative dictatorship. And Pope Francis tells us repeatedly the secret of "how":

⁸ This 21 minutes documentary film can be watched at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjnj5B2GCvc> .

If there is one word that we should never tire of repeating, it is this: dialogue. We are called to promote a culture of dialogue by every possible means and thus to rebuild the fabric of society. The culture of dialogue entails a true apprenticeship and a discipline that enables us to view others as valid dialogue partners, to respect the foreigner, the immigrant and people from different cultures as worthy of being listened to. Today we urgently need to engage all the members of society in building “a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter” and in creating “a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society”.⁹

Dialogue and encounter are two mantras Pope Francis calls each one of us to personify and humanize. Repeatedly he speaks of a culture of encounter, encountering the Risen Christ in everyday life. When you add to that what Karl Rahner once said that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing at all,” these sacred words become a powerful invitation to any contemplative in action, because our loving Creator is awe-inspiring: both transcendent – God beyond our imagining who is too big for our minds and hearts – and immanent – God living within each one of us, mysteriously incarnate in us.

The mystic knows that everyone and every living creature breathes God’s Breath of Life, that this Love is the heartbeat of creation and has been its sustaining energy throughout our human and cosmic history. Reminiscent of Matthew 25, it means that by serving, welcoming, caring for and reaching out, in short, loving our neighbor, we serve, welcome, care for, reach out, and love God who lives in our neighbor.¹⁰ A deep awareness of the Indwelling Presence of Love, Compassion, Forgiveness, and Communion in all of our relationships puts mission in a new perspective because this consciousness results in a constant dialogue and encounter with Christ: wholly contemplative and wholly active.

Internationality as Advocacy

Advocacy is the second aspect of internationality that calls us to cross new frontiers. As we all know, advocacy takes place at every level of life, from the most local setting (our neighborhoods or cities) to the international stage, for example the European Union or United Nations. Local advocacy is done by those who speak up and speak out for the needs of the people. As close

⁹ Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Conferral of the Charlemagne Prize on May 6, 2016, available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/may/documents/papa-francesco_20160506_premio-carlo-magno.html.

¹⁰ Scripture is full of references to God’s desire for this union in creation. Thomas Merton has openly shared his profound experience of the presence of God in each single person, and also the Dalai Lama has proclaimed that “[t]he ultimate source of happiness is within me.” His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, 2016, p. 14.

witnesses of injustices suffered by their closest neighbors, they allow their prayer to be transformed into action.

From women's self-help groups to humanizing repugnant prison conditions, the need for effective advocacy always lurks around the corner as one more option. And we are strong when impelled to such action, both in our schools where social justice projects have a firm place in the curriculum and in other ministries.

The challenge for us today, as an international congregation, is to gain a deeper appreciation of how these social ills are connected across borders. Dire poverty and the negative effects of climate change for people living in extreme poverty often lead to migration – poverty is multi-dimensional, advocates explain. Our world is such a web of life that “cause and effect” are literally half a world away, thus crying out for new multitudes of adorers who *want* to understand the systemic root causes and interconnections. In short, we need more global citizens.

Many of our educational institutions have wonderful global citizenship education programs.¹¹ Likewise, our presence at the United Nations is a critical vehicle through which we can act as one body. Once we understand that local injustices are reflections of a sick global system of imbalance, inequality and greed, we can begin to contribute at the international policy table from our life and mission as RSCJ to the benefit of the world, the common good. Systemic ills require systemic change. The world is one, the Society of the Sacred Heart is one. Now we must start to communicate that we also act as one.

One further frontier, in relation to the UN, holds out great possibilities for international advocacy. Have you ever realized that through the Society's NGO presence we now have access to governments of countries where we are not physically present? Think about it: talking with and entering into serious dialogue with government officials of, say, Mozambique or Zambia to discuss their educational challenges – that is now possible. By being at the UN, we have multiplied our potential impact in ways that were unimaginable to both Sophie and Philippine.

¹¹ When speaking about Global Citizenship Education, UNESCO identifies three core dimensions: 1) on the *cognitive* level – the need “to acquire knowledge, understanding and critical thinking about global issues and the interconnectedness/interdependency of countries and different populations;” 2) on the *socio-emotional* level – the necessity “to have a sense of belonging to a common humanity, sharing values and responsibilities, sharing empathy, solidarity and respect for differences and diversity;” and 3) on the *behavioral* level – the imperative “to act responsibly at local, national and global levels for a more peaceful and sustainable world.” UNESCO, *Global Citizenship Education: Topics and Learning Objectives*, 2015, available at <http://leer.es/documents/235507/415170/Global+Citizenship+EDucation+UNESCO+2015/6c1bb493-db6b-464b-b95f-4e83a179d084>

Internationality as interculturalism

This leads me to the third and last frontier of internationality: interculturalism or interculturality, as General Chapter 2000 called it. Interculturalism has been the Society's agenda since we left our cloisters and began inserting ourselves in small local communities. International experience for probanists, sisters studying abroad, international novitiates in Chile and Chicago, are examples of how RSCJ, to varying degrees, are part of an intercultural flow shaping our Global Village. For others, an intercultural student body in schools, exchange programs, and a summer service program abroad, might illustrate that multiculturalism and interculturalism are a social fact of life today. Is there an educative angle to these valuable experiences as well?

I mention just a few of our challenges which go beyond the delight of having someone come or return to our community:

- Are we sufficiently aware that intercultural living demands much of our time and energy? That dialogue and encounter are essential parts to its success but require daily commitment and effort?
- How do we deal with differing values, norms and worldviews that underpin our communications and decision making processes?
- How attentively will we listen to the recently professed sister who returns from her year abroad for probation and international experience? Are we ready, willing and able to let her 'changed self' influence our community life?
- How do we journey with our returning missionaries? In addition to existing workshops being offered by others, is there anything we can do to assist the returnees in their re-entry process?
- Would it be possible to exchange best practices of how members of the Sacred Heart family prepare for intercultural life? How to allow those returning to educate others?
- In community life is it possible to allow foreign-born sisters to really contribute to our life together or are they the ones who need to adapt to us who are the norm?

As women religious, we increasingly live in intercultural communities – examples include the motherhouse and Joigny. Might the recent Chapter calls invite all of us to discover and manifest how to live interculturality?¹² My own current experience of living in the Beguinage community in Brussels (Belgium) is a case in point. Let me describe it to you.

As the unofficial capital of Europe, Brussels is a surprisingly diverse city. It is home to Belgians, of course, and many people from other European countries because of the European and other international institutions located in Brussels. There are also lots of

¹² For those who want to learn more about intercultural living, I highly recommend the following book by Anthony J. Gittins, CSSp, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis*, Liturgical Press, 2015.

migrants and refugees who have settled or been resettled in Belgium from francophone Africa or from the Middle East, for example Iraqi and Syrian families. Then there is a large Muslim population coming originally from North African countries such as Tunisia and Morocco. These are not always recent arrivals but include those who settled in Brussels one or more generations ago. And what makes the city's diversity even more of a challenge is the fact that all this international and intercultural living takes place on a relatively small territory, in small dwellings, cozily close together European style.

The Beguinage is located in the European quarter of town, just around the corner from the European Parliament and the European Commission. It is a complex of little houses and apartments modeled after the closed courtyards in the Middle Ages where pious widows and single women lived together a lay spirituality of prayer, a sort of private religious life without vows, each in her own little house.

Our Beguinage was built in 2017 and is meant to provide a combination of market-value and low cost rental housing for Christian families and single persons from around the world who are committed to living a Christ-centered life through solidarity, prayer, and the building of community across cultures. Many people are bilingual or trilingual.

The Beguinage is international, intercultural, intercontinental, intergenerational and multilingual. Among our residents are African families as well as multiple mixed European households with persons from all parts of Europe. Each family raises their children in accordance with their own culture or mix of cultures. Our own RSCJ community of four comprises two Belgians, one French and me Dutch. Within the context of larger Brussels, all four of us RSCJ are committed to refugees, either as community organizers or as tutors.

What binds us together as 20 largely international households is of course our unity as humans despite our diversity. Nobody can boast about being the norm and our way of living together is to be discovered and formed one day at a time. We socialize together, we pray in the church next door together, and the children learn to play together regardless of each one's skin color. At Christmas we had a multicultural live crèche, at Easter time we celebrated the baptism of two of our youngest members. Illness and death bring us together in support of those who suffer and mourn.

Slowly but surely we are building our new intercultural community among those coming from very diverse cultures, backgrounds and languages: Respecting and valuing one another as we are; Appreciating and accepting our differences; Celebrating our common feasts in ways that allow for different cultural expressions; Able or learning to speak one or two of our common languages; Recognizing God's presence in each one. These are some of the ways that lead us to

communion.¹³ For me intercultural living is a gift, but one that requires daily commitment and effort because it is a relationship!

No doubt there are other examples of lived interculturalism that we can share with one another, and I encourage you to do that during this meeting.

Conclusion

These are three dimensions of internationality in which I recognize new frontiers: being on the move; international advocacy, and deeper interculturalism. I am convinced that you have things to add and I look forward to our interaction in the Q&A session and afterwards.

In closing I want to tell you about a remarkable little booklet I read this year called *Een Jihad van Liefde* (A Jihad for Love), by Mohamed El Bachiri (who wrote this booklet with the Belgian author David van Reybrouck). El Bachiri was born near Molenbeek in Brussels from Moroccan parents. He is a Muslim and a widower with three small children after his wife was killed in the terrorist attack in the metro station close to the EU offices in 2016. Refusing to allow hate to take hold of him, Mohamed knows that love is his origin and destiny, and he therefore raises his children in the ways of love, away from revenge, because:

*You can lose your culture, your faith, your country, but you don't lose your humanity.*¹⁴

Doesn't that summarize the recent Chapter calls for all of us in the Sacred Heart family? It's all about making life more human by acknowledging and acting upon our common humanity. This, in turn, cannot but lead to more solidarity within and across borders. New frontiers are calling us.

Thank you.

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¹³ A Tibetan saying, quoted by the Dalai Lama, expresses it similarly: "Wherever you have friends that's your country, and wherever you receive love, that's your home." His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu with Douglas Abrams, *The Book of Joy*, 2016, p. 38.

¹⁴ Mohamed El Bachiri with David Van Reybrouck, *A Jihad for Love*, 2017, p. 73.

Reflection questions

In his book *The Sacred Heart of the World*, David Richo states that “the divine in our inner stillness becomes the divine in daily action.”¹⁵ In what ways does this phrase resonate with you when thinking about new frontiers in our internationality? Reflecting on this re-articulation of what it means to be wholly contemplative and wholly active, do any insights, invitations or challenges come to mind in relation to the three dimensions of internationality we have discussed?

In this presentation the environment has only been scantily referenced even though many environmental challenges of today are transnational in nature (*e.g.*, climate change nor air pollution stop at the border). How might our internationality assist us as Sacred Heart family to answer the call to stand up to protect and defend all life on planet Earth, our common home?

¹⁵ David Richo, *The Sacred Heart of the World: Restoring Mystical Devotion to Our Spiritual Life*, Paulist Press, 2007, page 48-49.