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"DIFFICULTIES OF COMMUNICATING: THE CULTURAL PROBLEM"

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In a conference on "Total Involvement Through Communication", you have asked me to speak about "Difficulties of Communicating." This is a very appropriate selection of titles. Unless a person communicates effectively, he cannot involve himself totally. Or, to put it more clearly, the more a person is involved with himself, the less he can communicate with others; a person communicates effectively with others to the extent to which he is involved with others. Therefore communication and involvement with others are parallel. In a very real sense, the saying of Our Lord, "Unless a man dies to himself, he remains alone," affects the whole experience of communication. I presume that Father Curran has spoken about some of the psychological aspect of this problem. I shall speak about the cultural aspects of the problem. In other words, one of the major blocks to communication is my culture. Effective communication, therefore, and consequently total involvement, will depend on a person's ability to deal with the problem of cultural differences and intercultural understanding. Let me see if I can clarify what I am saying.

In order to communicate with another person, I must be able to explain to him what something means to me. But I cannot do this unless I first understand what this thing means to him. I will understand this only when I understand his culture and my own. Let me take an example. Suppose I wish to teach the doctrine of the Trinity to people of a culture foreign to my own. I tell these people that God is a Father. But what does father mean? What images flood the mind when the term "father" is used? In the United States, "father"

is a pal; a good friend; a man who is generally close to his son; who plays ball with his son; takes him fishing; "kids around" as we say in an informal manner. Ideally it is expected that there will be a close intimate relationship between one who is "father" and one who is "son." When we speak of God as "father," this is the imagery that springs to the mind of an America. Inevitably it will color the way we think about God, and the way we relate ourselves to God. However, if we are dealing with a patriarchial society and culture,-- something like traditional China, "father" is a distant and forbidding figure. He is the personification of authority, of patriarchal power and responsibility. He is one whom I treat with awesome respect. It would be profane to be familiar with him, to treat him with informality. For a son to treat him as an American boy treats his American father would be considered sinful disrespect. This very different cultural definition of "father" will form the context in which people in this culture will think about God as "Father," and relate themselves to Him. In order, therefore, to communicate to people of this culture what I mean by the concept of God as "Father," I must first know what "Father" means to them. I will never know this if I remain within the limits of my own culture; I will know it only if I succeed in becoming involved with the people of this other culture to such an extent that I perceive clearly and understand what the concept "Father" means to them. This is the problem of intercultural understanding.

Culture is the context of communication. A person is formed under the influence of his culture. It is his way of life; it influences the way he acts and thinks and feels; it influences those associations and sentiments which set off his spontaneous reactions to persons and words and things. As we saw above, it influences the way he thinks about God and relates himself to God. It is the framework of a person's life. In brief it consists of the meaning things have for him. But cultures differ. The way of life of a person from a village

in India will differ vastly from the way of life of a suburbanite in the United States. The meaning that things have for the person in the Congo will be very different from what they have for the person in Mexico. If you have read Fr. Andre Dupeyrat's wonderful book, Savage Papua, you will recall his interesting discussion about the pig. For the Papuans, the pig is the sacred animal. They treat the pig tenderly, to the extent that women will even suckle the young pig at their breasts. Father Dupeyrat explains the difficulty this created for him when he began to teach the Scriptures. Everytime the Gospels wish to picture a man in hopeless degradation, they speak of him as feeding swine. For a Papuan, this is a great honor. Dupeyrat pointed out that, if he wished to communicate to the Papuans the sence of reverence that "Lamb of God" evokes in us, he would have to have referred to Our Lord as the "pig of God," This would have conveyed the appropriate sentiment. Or, to come closer to home, the American girl expects to date young men freely, to fall in love, to choose her own marriage partner, and when married, to move as far away from inlaws as she can conveniently get. A girl in village India expects her parents to select a marriage partner for her, a young man whom she is likely not to see until the day of her wedding. If an American girl were asked to accept as a husband a man whom she had not seen until the day of her marriage, she would be psychologically incapable of doing it. Her culture has not prepared her to do it. If a girl in village India were asked to go out and find a husband for herself, she would probably die of fright. She has been brought up to expect her Father to select a husband for her.

These are brief and rather superficial examples of cultural differences with which you are probably familiar. They serve simply to illustrate the different meaning things have for people in different cultures. How are things like these related to the problem of involvement and communication?

In the first place, all men have a deep and consistent tendency to identify their own culture with nature. American boys and girls speak of it as being "natural" for them to mingle freely; to fall into a pattern of romantic love; to select their own marriage partners. Isn't it what everybody does? Far from being natural, it is a relatively new and dangerous innovation in man's social life. Americans consider it "natural" to work in order to "get ahead." They do not realize that most people in the world consider the competitiveness of American society not only un-natural but even inhuman.

Once people of a particular culture have identified their own way of life with nature, they tend to judge other cultures according to the standards which prevail in their own. They tend to define as wrong, or evil, or unnatural the cultural practices which constitute the way of life of people of a culture different from their own. For example, when the ordinary man and woman observe the subordinate role of woman in Latin America, they tend to define this as "demeaning" to the woman, as lack of respect for her dignity and position. On the other hand, when Latin American men and women observe the role of women in the United States, they tend to define it as disrespectful, bold, and destructive of the dignity of woman as they define it. Once the people of one culture have defined their way of life as "natural," and it is inevitable that they will do so, once they have begun to define the wya of life of others as wrong, or unnatural, the possibility of communication is limited. People of Culture "A" see in culture "B" only the meaning that things have for them in their own culture. They do not perceive the meaning which things in Culture "B" have for the people in Culture "B". The possibility of communicating "meaning" therefore is practically lost.

This becomes doubly complicated in the matter of a revealed Faith such as our own. The great mystery of the New Testament is the fact that God insisted that His Faith should never be identified with any particular culture.

The famous incident of the Baptism of Cornelius, as recorded in the tenth chapter of the Acts gives us God's specific revelation: "God has been showing me that He makes no distinction between man and man; He welcomes anybody, whatever his race, who fears Him, and does what piety demands." However, the Faith is not a disembodied spirit. It must always express itself in a cultural form, even though it is never to be identified with any cultural form. Therefore, the cultural expression of the Faith in Germany will be different from the cultural expression of the Faith in Mexico. And the cultural expression of the Faith in Egypt will be different from the cultural expression of the Faith in Ireland.

In this situation, however, people have a tendency, understandable and inevitable, to identify the Faith with their own cultural practices. As a result, the communication of the Faith of Christ becomes complicated by the tendency to communicate my own culture with it. The flock in a foreign culture to whom we preach, may then be given the impression that they cannot accept the Gospel of Christ unless they accept the "Way of Life" of the Apostle along with it. You are all familiar with this problem which has been of such concern to the Church in recent generations. It is the basis of the great efforts, being made by so many of you, to prepare your missionaries to avoid the kind of religious or cultural imperialism which has affected missionary work so unfavorably in the past.

This is a rather lengthy discussion of the problem which "culture" creates for communication. I think it was necessary to review this familiar ground, so that my remaining remarks may have more meaning.

In the first place, in a very real sense, my culture is myself. As an adult in the United States, my personality has been formed on the deepest levels by the "meaning" which so many things have for people in the United States: a respect for the individual; a sense of personal responsibility and a host of other values. This is myself. It is what makes me an American rather than a

Chinaman or Congolese or an Indian. Reflect for a moment on what hard work means to a North American in contrast to what it means to an educated South American. What does it mean to a North American to "get ahead", to "better himself" in contrast to the tribesman in Africa or the peon in Latin America fo whom family loyalty takes precedence over personal advancemente . For the most part , these values of my culture have formed me. Granted the criticisms we may have about some aspects of our culture-- I shall speak of this later-- to a large extent I love my culture because it is myself. It is the way I share with others of thinking and acting , feeling and believing . Once I have been formed in a culture , the meaning that things have for me is so clear to me, so vivid and often so satisfying, it makes so much sense to me that I find it extremely difficult to sense in an understanding way that the same thing means something quite different to a person of another way of life. This constitutes the cultural difficulty of communication. I think it is clear , therefore, that languages is not the key to effective communication. Most communication is non-verbal; and knowledge of a language is no sure sign that a person can communicate affectively with others who speak the same language. The three expressions, "Observe silence": "keep quite" and "Shut up", all say the same thing; but what a different meaning they have! It is not a knowledge, but a knowledge of the culture which enables a person to understand the context in which the use of "Shut up" , will evoke the opposite reaction to the one the speaker intends.

In view of this, the problem of communication is a problem of inquiry, of knowledge, of that patient effort which is required to search into the meaning that words, , custums, objects have for people of another culture. Some of this meanings will be fearly obvious, such as the religious value of the pre-occupation with the spirit world in Haiti or Brazil; most of them are very subtle, such as the real meaning of some of the rites used in the Macumba or Candomble of Brazil,or the costumbre of Guatemala; some of them will

be percived only by observers or researches who are gifted with creative insight, such as the complicated status relationships among the lower classes. This kind of inquiry requires a humble willingness to learn from others and a readiness to forego one's own ideas. The anthropologists have recognized what extraordinary persistance and patience are needed in order to archieve this understanding of other cultures. It can hardly be less of a challenge for the servants of God. I do not suggest here that only a trained scientist is capable of this. Many a perceptive missioner reaches an understanding of freign cultures much deeper than that of a social scientist. But in either case, the understanding will not be archieved unless the inquirer has the sincerity and humility to seek to learn from others what things mean to them rather than interpret them entirely within the framework of his own ideas.

Knowledge, however, is only the beginning. The second and more difficult problem is evaluation. When a person has archieved an understanding of the ideas, the custums, the meanings of a foreign culture, he must attempt to determine which of these are good, which are indifferent, which are incompatible with the Faith even within the framework of the foreign culture itself. This is an extremely difficult task , and one which requires humility, abnegation, a williness to "die to oneself" so that one should not remain alone. In order to percive the deep human and religious values of another culture, a person must be disposed to acknowledge that another way of life may be as good as , perhaps better than one's own. It requires the humility to seek that which is good and holy even though it appear in cultural forms which are strange and bewildering to me. Recall the astonishment of the Hebrew companions of Peter when they were struck with awe that the spirit should have been given even to uncircumcised gentiles (Acts X:46). The Spirit can likewise be given to people who know nothing of American efficiency; have no gift for organization ; and may express their piety in ways which we consider bizarre. to appreciate this, requires the kind of spiritual insight for

which Paul pleads in the Letter to the Philippians (IV:8) "And now, brethren, all that rings true, all that commands reverence, and all that makes for right; all that is pure , all that is lovely, all that is gracious in the telling; virtue and merit, wherever virtue and merit may be found, let this be the argument of your thought." This requires an extraordinary psychological and spiritual security . These are not gifts which are very common.

Just as difficult as determining what is good or holy or noble in a strange culture is the problem of determining what is wrong, or undesirable, or incompatible with a good Christian life. The fact that a form of behavior is culturally acceptable does not mean that, therefore , it is right. We deeply love our own American way of life, but we are very well aware of some characteristics of our culture which need to be changed. It will be necessary, likewise , to try to determine what characteristics of a foreign culture may have to changed. If these decisions procede from a deep understanding and respect for the people of the foreign culture, such a s I have just decribed above: the people of the culture will be disposed to discuss them seriously with me. If they do not procede from such a deep understanding , but are the result of my judging a foreign culture according to the standars which prevail in my own, there will be no environment of respect and reverence, and the possibility of effective communication will be lost . Chesterton once made the wise remark: " Don't take the front gate down ultil you know why the previous owner put it up ." Likewise, in dealing with another culture , it is unwise to seek to change a cultural practice unless I understand very well why it existed in the culture in the first place.

I trust that these few remarks have outlined the difficulties of communication created by our own culture; the need to understand the culture of another people if we expect to communicate effectively with them; the personal discepline and humility which we must exercise in order to respect a culture which is different from our own. One final word remains to be said about cultural change.

Most of the cultures with which our modern apostles deal are in a state of very rapid change. The economic development of underdeveloped areas; migration from

rural to urban areas; the rise of large, complicated cities; the rapid spread of education : the appearance of a middle class, these and a host of other dramatic developments are the causes of this rapid social and cultural change. This does not mean that communication will be easier ; it will be more difficult ,. The people caught in the midst of these changes, will have begun to lose those traditional practices, the meaning that was associated with a hacienda, a cattle ranch, a rural way of life that had lasted or centuries. The simple definition of the role of husband or wife, of children of land-owner and peon, these will be desappearing in the upsetting experience of finding a new way of life. The same principles of communication, however, which we discussed earlier , will be applicable here. People in the face of the disorganizing effect of rapid change require not less understanding , but more. It is not enough to interpret their experience-- generally unfavorably -- againts the norms of more established middle class life. It is necessary to try to gain an insight into the meaning this ex experience has for the unfortunate people who are caught in the midst of it. This again should lead to respect for the people who are experiencing this change; a perception of the noble and human values which are involved in their life; and a willingness to lead them to fulfilment of their own values in a new situation rather than imposing my own way of life on them. Communication thus flows from my awareness of what things mean to them rather than from what they mean to me.

It seems to me it should be clear how important it is to prepare ourselves for intercultural communication by a careful study of the meaning that life has for others in a culture different from my own, and by the cultivation of that humility, security and great-mindedness which will enable me to acknowledge and, where posible, accept all that is good and virtuos in the way of life of another people. With these dispositions, involvement will be more complete and communication will be more effective.