ATS seminarians explore intercultural competencies at recent workshop

By Sebastian Mahfood

One of the assumptions of the Global Awareness and Engagement initiative (GAEI) of ATS is that "global" and "intercultural" are co-constitutive, especially at the level of practice. The workshop described in this piece, written by Sebastian Mahfood who is a member of the GAEI working group, serves as an example of the relationship between the two.

Cultural competencies are specific dispositions and behaviors that enable people living within a given culture to interact with others within their own culture, and intercultural competencies are specific dispositions and behaviors that enable authentic encounters with people from different cultures. Competencies are skills, and they may be cultivated. But how? Enter Wayne Cavalier, an ordained Dominican friar and director of the Congar Institute for Ministry Development, who prepared a one-day formation workshop on intercultural competencies earlier this month for St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary (SVDP) in Boynton Beach, Florida.

The general assumption made by members of a prevailing culture is that they have no culture at all. Culture is what other people have, as a student in a Catholic seminary once explained to me: "I'm white, living in America, so I have no culture, but we have missionaries visit from other countries, and they have a lot of culture." Freeze frame on that moment. The meaning of the statement is clear—the "in-group" has no culture. It is the "out-group"—those from cultures outside their own—that brings it to us.

But what is culture? According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on Cultural Diversity in the Church, culture has three distinct dimensions:

1. ***Cultures have ideas and ways of expressing them.*** Cultures have beliefs about God, themselves, and others. Cultures carry values that shape their ways of living and interacting with others. Cultures have a language that conveys their ideas, feelings, and ways of living.

2. ***Cultures have behaviors.*** Cultures have rules about what is proper and improper behavior. Roles—for example, within the family—have distinctive features. They have ways of celebrating and extending hospitality.

3. ***Cultures have material dimensions.*** Cultures have material, outward signs that express and reflect their ideas and beliefs. Cultures have their special

foods (what is eaten every day and what is eaten on special occasions). Among other things, they also have unique modes of dressing and furnishing their homes.

The team of three workshop facilitators that Cavalier assembled focused on three outcomes, namely, ensuring:

1. an understanding of the nature of culture and of differences among cultures,
2. an understanding of the myriad ways in which people from different cultures interact with one another, and
3. an understanding of how to work among cultural groups different from their own.

They met these outcomes by highlighting concepts such as individualism versus collectivism, maintaining face/respect, differences in styles of conflict resolution, time orientation, variant historical realities, and different understandings of hierarchy, gender, and ambiguity for the nearly seven dozen Catholic domestic and international seminarians who attended.

Opening with an iceberg model, representing the concept that there is much more beneath the surface of a culture than there appears to be, the facilitators framed the Mutual Invitation Method for the small group interactions that would occur throughout the day. According to the workbook *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*, "the Invitation Method is a way to include all people in the conversation in a very respectful atmosphere. While each person is speaking, the others listen. No one may interrupt the speaker or jump in to speak without being invited by name. In this method, no one has more authority than anyone else—each person is invited to share, and after sharing, that person has the privilege to invite who will share next."

The seminarians began their group work by identifying themselves culturally with a few examples of their external and internal cultural heritages. While external cultural heritage is manifest in what is visible, internal cultural heritage is not. A person from a collectivist culture with a hierarchical social structure, for example, thinks and responds differently than a person from an individualist culture with an egalitarian social structure. Likewise, for a person from a culture that shares very little context for interpersonal communications—requiring explicit communications—as opposed to one that shares a great deal of context—enabling implicit communications. So, understanding and modeling communication styles are of primary importance in the cultivation of intercultural competencies. As one facilitator noted concerning effective intercultural communication, "People with different internal contexts must spend time and energy to establish a common context in order to reach a common meaning."

The reaching of common meaning is key to constructive conflict, which may occur in low-context cultures because of violations of individual expectations, and in high-context cultures because of violations of collective expectations. Persons skilled in intercultural competencies understand how to set expectations in ways that honor the cultural realities of the participating parties to establish parameters for engagement, confrontation, and shared living. It is in the cultivation of such competencies that a person can listen for all those unspoken and unobservable internal cultural heritages that make up the bulk of any iceberg. Questions we might ask of any intercultural encounter (regardless of how subtle the cultural distinctions), according to one of the facilitators, include the potential problems people might anticipate when communicating with a person of the opposite communication

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style and what self-adjustments a person might make to address those potential problems.

The workshop concluded with a series of case studies provided to the seminarian groups for their discernment concerning the kinds of intercultural competencies that would be needed to address the situations at hand.

Using the Mutual Invitation Method, they explored one of the cases and reported back to the assembly the cultural elements they noticed, the areas in which conflict was likely to occur, and some possible methods for addressing them. The exercise demonstrated that a minister who is aware of the need to apply intercultural competencies in a given situation is better prepared for the encounter with the Other than the minister who has had no preparation. Applying intercultural competencies in real-life situations, then, makes intercultural engagement the art of the possible.

So, returning to our freeze-frame from above, the "in-group" very much does have a culture even if its members do not recognize their own cultural parameters as such, and this is part of what is challenging about its encounter with the "out-group." S. Mary Krysiak Bittár, professor of practical theology at SVDP, said she found helpful the explanation by one of the facilitators that "intercultural competencies are not so much about understanding or labeling what the other person might think or do, but about becoming more aware of one's own subconscious cultural responses so that one can better understand how those responses might affect others."

When I was young, I moved to North Africa for two years on a tour of duty with the United States Peace Corps. When I returned, I experienced "reverse culture shock"—a fancy way of saying I had come back face-to-face with my own culture and was able to see it for what it is. Aristotle once wrote, rather presciently, that we will not be able to understand the planet we are on until we are able to get off it. Perhaps the same is true for our cultivation of intercultural competencies—we need to step outside of our culture to see it for what it is and thereby better understand how it may authentically encounter the culture of the Other.

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