

Racism – Xenophobia and Interculturality

“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”

Nelson Mandela, “Long Walk to Freedom”

I am challenged by the invitation to write for *MAST!* The topic, Racism – Xenophobia and Interculturality, intrigues me and invites me to dig deep. Today, as never before because of the speed of social media, we are living at a time when ***Words Matter!***

All across the globe, we are witnessing first-hand how words cause damage when they stoke antagonism, when they keep people paralyzed in opposition, when shifting political paradigms create turmoil and isolation. Words matter because how we speak so often reveals who we are.

For those of you who do not know me, my name is Deirdre Mullan and I was born in Derry, on the northern part of the island of Ireland. It was there that I first encountered the Sisters of Mercy, who had come to Derry in 1848. Our foundress in Derry was Mary Ann Doyle, Catherine McCauley’s companion. Remember Catherine’s words: “It started with two – Sister Doyle and I.”

I taught for over 20 years in Derry before assuming my role as Director of our Mercy Global office at the United Nations. More recently, I became an adviser to UNICEF, the United Nations Children’s Organization, with the specific role of forming partnerships between UNICEF and women religious on the ground. I serve as a trustee with ARISE, the anti-slavery and human trafficking organization based in London/New York. That work is ongoing, as are the passions of my life – Girls’ Education and the NGO, *The Mercy Girl Effect*, now in its 17th year.

When I received the invitation to write on this topic, I wondered whether I should venture into these murky waters. The theme is especially difficult and topical in the world we currently inhabit, where structural exclusion seems to be the order of the day and nationalistic tendencies seem to have overtaken

the concept of the common good. The current Covid-19 pandemic sweeping our world has certainly highlighted that!

The topic of this article, Racism – Xenophobia and Interculturality, poses a major challenge to that ever-old, ever-new question:

“Who then is my Neighbor?”

Coming as I do from a story-telling nation, I will try to weave my way around this very challenging topic, using the stories of two significant teachers in my life.

One was President Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa, who without doubt was one of the greatest human beings ever to grace this Earth. As a young teacher, I knew a lot about the apartheid movement in South Africa because my younger brother, Don, was heavily involved in the ‘Dunnes Store Strikes’ in Ireland in, educating customers at the checkout about the reason for their refusal to handle South African produce.

Mr. Mandela was born on 18 July 1918 in the small village of Mvezo, on the banks of the Mbashe River, near Mthatha, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, as the First World War was entering its final months.

On the following day, 19 July 1918, in the town of Derry, on the banks of the River Foyle, in the northwestern part of the island of Ireland, my father, Charles Mullan, was born. One was an African baby with black skin, the other a European baby with white skin. Neither was born to hate the other. Both grew up in deeply divided societies.

Nelson Mandela suffered injustice because of the color of his skin. Charles Mullan suffered injustice because of his cultural background and religion. While both were determined to end injustice, neither filled their children with hate. They taught that another way was possible!

Near the end of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela wrote the following:

No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.¹

President Mandela's autobiography is a powerful testimony of a man who refused to hate despite a lifetime of racial discrimination inflicted upon him and his loved ones, culminating in 27 years of unjust imprisonment. It is a powerful witness of a human being who resisted the temptation to allow his spirit to fester with bitterness.

Mandela emerged from prison, not calling for retribution and revenge, but proclaiming his hope for a rainbow nation – in which all the peoples of a new democratic South Africa would be cherished with the respect due to every human being born upon this earth.

When Mr. Mandela said: "***No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion,***" what did he mean? And what does it mean for us as Sisters of Mercy who belong to a diverse and international Congregation, drawing membership from 55 nation states?²

Yes, we are diverse. Yes, we have different colors and shapes. Yes, we speak different languages, some with different accents and dialects.³ Yes, we have different cultures and ways of expressing our zest for life. Yes, we have different ways of expressing our understanding of God and the source of our creation. But does that make us different? So different that some choose to consider their color, culture, gender or spirituality to be more 'pure', 'true', superior and/or exclusive?

The Mercy Global Family forms a very small part of a 7 billion-strong and growing human family. In our human family, clearly, some of us are intellectually more gifted than others. Some of us are physically more powerful. and some richer in cultural appreciation. Does that give us the right, either as individuals or collectively, to consider ourselves superior to others?

As the United States, and indeed other countries across the globe, become more and more focused on nationalism as opposed to the common good, one wonders what democracy means? In this country (USA), and indeed in my own country (the north of Ireland), the notion of democracy has many interpretations! In many countries, democracy, and the privileges it brings have been largely reserved for white people through the intentional exclusion and oppression of people of color. The deep racial and ethnic inequities that exist today in the USA are a direct result of structural racism that has led to the historical and contemporary policies, practices, and norms that create and

maintain white supremacy. Racism is both an American problem and a global problem. It is not a black people's problem to solve.

The view that racism is an American problem has been developed by Steven O. Roberts & Michael T. Rizzo in a paper published in 2020 by the American Psychological Association. These researchers have identified seven factors that contribute to American racism in particular. These factors are: *Categories; Factions; Segregation; Hierarchy; Power; Media and Passivism*. In the course of my discussion of these findings, I will use examples from both my personal life and what I have witnessed and experienced as a new citizen of this country.

1) **Categories:**

Categories are a system which organizes people into distinct groups by promoting essentialist and normative reasoning. Individuals do not only learn about categories, they are also embedded within us. I myself became aware of the concept of imbedded categorization when I worked with a group of Catholic and Protestant young people (all white) in the north of Ireland during the worst of the 'Irish-troubles'. In an effort to promote mutual understanding and appreciate the dignity of differences, using the medium of creative dance, the embedded perceptions about the 'other' which emerged were both alarming and challenging. While most of the group had never actually interacted with persons from the other group, their learned perceptions were a deeply embedded reality, very troubling in people so young – and presenting a major challenge!

2) **Factions:**

When people buy into factions, it often triggers in-group loyalty, along with intergroup competition and threat. The idea of factions and in-group loyalty is unfortunately alive and well. Often, people's positive perceptions of themselves are extended to positive perceptions of their group, which leads to an in-group preference. Secondly, because people care about cooperative alliances, they intuitively interpret the groups that they are assigned to as requiring their cooperation, trust, and support, which leads to them behaving in ways that benefit the in-group and are consistent with in-group norms. Again, this was highly visible during the **Dance of Co-Existence** mentioned above, when the young people displayed perceptions and group loyalty that

was not grounded in reality, since the majority of the teenagers had never before actually interacted with people from the other faction. This in-group loyalty and factionalism is currently playing out in the US Congress, where truth and facts are being sacrificed for in-group loyalty.

3) **Segregation:**

In the U.S. and across the globe, racial segregation is pervasive at macro and micro levels. Segregation hardens racist perceptions, preferences, and beliefs through the denial of intergroup contact. In the USA, because White Americans have historically and contemporarily constituted a numerical majority and occupied most positions of power, they have been able to establish societal norms (e.g., which accents are considered standard and who is allowed to participate in political elections). The fact that this numerical majority will be eroded by 2042, when Americans of color are projected to make up a majority of the U.S. population, is causing many White Americans to feel that their status is under threat, causing greater pro-White biases and support for conservative policies, parties, and extremist political candidates.

This was especially evident in the past four years during the Trump administration. Donald J. Trump – the 45th President of the United States – did not cause American racism, but his racially prejudiced statements certainly contributed to a resurgence of White supremacists. A blatant example of this was when Trump proposed that the U.S. accept more people from countries like Norway, a predominantly White nation, and fewer people from countries like Haiti, a predominantly Black-Latino nation, which he referred to as a “shithole”.

In the same manner, a Unionist*-controlled government in Northern Ireland reinforced segregation between Catholic and Protestant peoples through a process of gerrymandering of electoral voting wards, resulting in a majority Catholic population in my home city of Derry, also called Londonderry, being denied voting rights, decent housing and jobs. As a Catholic man, my father, Charles Mullan, had no right to vote until 1969. (*Unionist refers to the group who want to remain attached to mainland Britain as opposed to the Republicans, who desire unity with the Irish Republic).

4) **Hierarchy:**

Hierarchical organization of peoples emboldens some to think, feel and behave in racist ways. I remember as a child growing up and looking to America as the land of possibilities and the maker of dreams. I think my ideas were in part formulated by my American grandmother, born in Philadelphia, who storied all her 37 grandchildren with grandiose tales of life in the USA. The truth of the matter was that her parents had escaped both the poverty and class bigotry of Ireland and landed in the USA to begin a new life. That life was short-lived as my great-grandmother died giving birth to my grandmother's sister, and so two small American-born children were returned to Ireland, where they remained for the rest of their lives. They never, however, lost the fairytale and idea that they belonged to a global hierarchy, or as my Grandma would tell us, the best country in the world!

Americans are bombarded with social ideologies that legitimize white supremacy and their right to a place at the top of the world. Some ideologies are subtle, like the myth which suggests that hard work breeds success, despite the fact that success is more attainable for some than for others. Individuals who subscribe to the Protestant work ethic are more likely to attribute hierarchies to dispositions (e.g., those at the top simply work harder than those at the bottom), rather than to biased social structures.

Another ideology is the depiction and belief of God as white and male. In contemporary USA, God is often conceptualized as a white male, which among Black and White Americans, adults and children, predicts evaluating white job candidates as particularly leadership-worthy. Thus, Americans are bombarded with social myths that assert that high-status membership is earned by hard work, fixed at birth, and given by God. As the first black President, Barack Obama often worked under that old, unspoken pressure that can still freeze a black student at a predominantly white school: one must be twice as good in order to break even. As a leader who had no leeway, he found a way to make a way out of no way, as Dr. Martin King once said black people could always do.

5) **Power:**

Power and being in positions of power legislates racism on both micro and macro levels. Because White Americans have historically and contemporarily constituted a numerical majority and occupied most positions of power, they have been able to establish societal norms. Thus, white supremacy is deeply and intricately woven into the fabric of U.S. society.

How then does power enable the perpetuation of white supremacy? At the micro level, parents control much of their children's lives, and children are particularly sensitive to what authority figures do and say when determining what is or is not appropriate. Examples playing out at present suggest that parents high in authoritarianism (i.e., a tendency to support norms and authority) are more likely to have children who trust authority figures. This is especially relevant as the *Black Lives Matter* and *Support the Blue* movements are very current topics as I write!

That same perception was true when I was growing up in Northern Ireland where the majority of the police force were Protestant. As a child, I had both a fear and distrust of the police. This fear and distrust were reinforced for me as a sixteen-year-old girl, when Catholic women and men who marched for Civil Rights in my city in 1969, demanding the vote for all, were subsequently battered to the ground. Years later, that image deeply affected me when, as an adult, I was appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to be part of a group looking at the under-representation of women, Catholics and ethnic minorities in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (police force). I was invited to a meeting held at police headquarters in a very sectarian part of Northern Ireland. The environment was foreign, intimidating and culturally oppressive and I remember distinctly checking under my car in the police yard, to make sure a bomb had not been attached while I was inside at the meeting!

How parents talk (or do not talk) about race also matters. Racial socialization is the process by which parents transmit their beliefs about race to their children, through implicit, explicit, intentional, or accidental means. Some white parents tend to adopt a colorblind ideology (i.e., believing that race does not matter and that conversations about race should be avoided), which leaves the observations and myths learned from the broader society unchallenged and reinforces the legitimacy of racial hierarchy. In contrast, parents of color often speak with their children about historical and structural inequalities, and about how to deal with racial biases that they might encounter in the real world, which challenges the observations and myths popularized by the broader, majority white, society. Simply put, American society teaches American citizens that **whiteness** is superior, and while parents of color often speak out against those lessons to prevent their children from internalizing them, many white parents often remain silent about those lessons, allowing their children to internalize them.

6) Media:

Media is the medium which legitimizes overrepresented and idealized representations of the dominant group, i.e. white people, while marginalizing and minimizing people of color. That the media is both part of the problem and the solution to the current race problem playing out in the USA is very evident, where we have the CNN version of news versus that of the Fox news group.

An article by John Amato, entitled “Helping the West’s adversaries seems to be the goal of Fox News and its parent company, NewsCorp,” the author writes:

In an interview with the former Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull stated very clearly that right-wing media mogul Rupert Murdoch has done more to divide and damage America with the help of Donald Trump than Russian President Vladimir Putin.

“What does Vladimir Putin want to do with his operations in America? He wants to divide America and turn Americans against each other,” said Turnbull at a parliamentary hearing in Sydney on media diversity. “That is exactly what Murdoch has done: Divided Americans against each other and so undermined their faith in political institutions that a mob of thousands of people, many of them armed, stormed the Capitol.”

Turnbull said that instead of appealing to the mainstream, media companies like Murdoch’s thrive by cultivating the fringe.

“Just reflect on the damage that Murdoch’s publications and outlets (Fox News), particularly in the United States, have done to democracy there,” Turnbull said. “I mean, the Jan. 6th sacking of the U.S. Capitol was one of the most terrible events in American history.”⁴

Over the first three years of Trump’s presidency, nation-wide hate crimes on the basis of race, religion, and sexual orientation all increased at a rapid rate (Pew Research). The message of the former President was deafening and there was a constant media circus. Messaging and media are important in the current world we inhabit. In the U.S., the average household has 2 televisions, the average citizen watches television for around 2.8 hours a day, around 84% of U.S. households own a computer, 77% of U.S. citizens own a cell phone with

internet access, and 66% of U.S. citizens play video games.

How the media portrays (or does not portray) racial groups thus plays a pivotal role in reinforcing American racism. In a study conducted to look at how the media feeds racism, Dixon and Linz (2000) compared how often people were depicted as criminals and victims on television to actual crime reports. They found that Black Americans were overrepresented as criminals and underrepresented as victims, whereas White Americans were underrepresented as criminals and overrepresented as victims. Viewers exposed to such portrayals are more likely to perceive Black people as criminals.⁵

Media has also been used as a powerful tool to depict immigrants as people who want to steal their way into the USA. Everyone coming into the USA is not a criminal! My own experience testifies to this. In between the expiration of an R (religious) visa and the reward of a Green Card to work as the Sisters of Mercy representative at the United Nations, I was pulled aside by U.S. border control many times. At the top of his voice (it was usually a male officer), the border patrol person called out: "Alien on parole" and two officers escorted me to a facility away from everyone else. While initially I did feel frightened and intimidated, when this happened several times I was angry, insulted and watchful. The only alien I had ever met was the movie character ET, and now here I was at a U.S. border point being assigned a similar status! I noted that most of the other people being held were people of African, Latino or Asian descent. Many had small children in the crowded facility. One time, when questioned where I worked, the border patrol officer suggested I would do better in a grade school than in that useless place called the United Nations. I remained silent but noted his number and subsequently reported this harassment to the immigration authorities. And I wondered how the other people fared, given my experience as a white, highly educated woman!

7) Passivism:

Passivism, by standing or looking the other way when something morally wrong occurs, so that overlooking or denying the existence of racism obscures reality, encourages others to do the same and allows racism and hatred to fester and persist. Perhaps the most insidious component of American racism is passive racism, which is best described as apathy toward systems of racial

advantage, or denial that these systems actually exist. However, this is a phenomenon not confined to the USA. The bystander/denier culture has long been alive and well across the globe. In my culture, we had a saying: “Whatever you say – Say NOTHING” and it was the mantra told and sold to countless generations of Catholic youth as a way to avoid trouble, especially when confronted by the police.

The overlooking or denying the existence of the persecution of Jewish people during the rise of Hitler was, and continues to be, a major cause for concern and begs the question now: Could the persecution of a people occur in the heart of Christian Europe?

In early Holocaust historiography, the term ‘bystander’ was often used as a generalized catchall expression designating passivity toward Nazi crimes. ‘Bystander behavior’ became synonymous with passivity to the plight of others, including the failure to speak out against injustice and/or assist its victims.

Passivism or the ‘bystander effect’ is motivated by at least three psychological factors: diffusion of responsibility; a fear that helping will elicit negative public judgment; or the belief that the situation must not really be an emergency if nobody else is helping!

Taking refuge in the comfort of what other societal bystanders are doing (or not doing), fearing the ramifications of speaking out against racist institutions, and the denial of the full weight of the consequences of living in a racist society all passively reinforce racism. I recall a moment in my life when I was a bystander. I was fourteen years old and was returning from school. I noticed a crowd of people near the church and as I approached, I saw a young woman, probably in her early twenties, who was tied to a lamppost and tarred and feathered. Her crime was that she was dating one of the British soldiers stationed in the army barracks in Derry. Her punishment was a reminder to all local girls to stay away from British soldiers. Her eyes met mine and, as I turned away, that image stayed with me for many years. A paralyzing fear was my motive for turning away. But while I may have turned away, her tied-up body and frightened eyes visited me for many years.

The term xenophobia, which is so often linked to racism, breeds fear and hatred of strangers or anything that is strange and/or foreign. Whilst globalization has brought us closer together as never before, interweaving our

lives both nationally and internationally, in complex and inextricable ways, a new wave of tribalism is also birthing all across the globe. The September 11th attacks in New York marked a new and more sinister wave of fear of the stranger.

Small non-state groups, hard to identify, harder still to locate, track down and bring to justice, but capable of organizing globally and wreaking havoc on a large scale, have pushed back by decades the work on tolerance and respect for the dignity of differences. Often driven by violent religious hatred or a particular ideology, they are willing to commit and even religiously embrace suicide as a means of entry into paradise. They make no distinction between combatant and non-combatant, innocent or guilty, young or old, involved or disengaged. They know that the openness of global societies and their interconnectedness constitute their vulnerability. The wars being waged do not use conventional warfare methods. Often, religious reasons or some sacred cause are used to justify the end. As a result, a new fear of 'the other' has taken hold, both in this country and beyond. The politics of identity has replaced the politics of ideology. And identity divides. The very process creates an 'us' and a 'them'.

Religion has been *used* to make sense of what is happening. Because globalization is perceived as profoundly destabilizing, faced with change, those who feel threatened by it turn to religion as a source of stability, an expression of all things that do not change. The word 'religion' comes from the Latin *religare*, meaning to bind. That is what religions did – and still do. They bind people together and to God by forming communities. What they have in common, especially in the case of the great monotheisms, is that they can create unities, systems, wholes. They bind groups together through rituals, narratives, collective ceremonies and symbols. Religions, as total systems of meaning, create totalities. The great tragedy of the twentieth century happened when politics was turned into a religion, when a nation (in the case of Germany) embraced fascism. The single greatest risk we face in the twenty-first century is not that politics is religionized, but rather when religion is politicized. Biblical monotheism represents the moment when humanity first lifted its sights beyond the tribe, the city and the nation and thought of humanity as a whole. To this day, and more than any other actor on the world stage, the great religions fulfill the imperative, "Think globally and act locally." I often see this played out at the United Nations when the Holy See Mission calls on member states to reflect on our common bond. Speaking to the special session called to combat Racism and Xenophobia held

in New York on February 12, 2021, H. E. Archbishop Gabriele Caccia, Apostolic Nuncio and Permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations, issued the following statement:

The equal dignity of each person requires us never to turn a blind eye to racism or exclusion, but rather to turn to every person with openness, solidarity, and love. The ongoing disease of racism is a virus that can quickly mutate. Instances of racism continue to shame us, for they show that our supposed social progress is not as real or definitive as we think.

We see that the evil of racism, xenophobia, and discrimination especially affects migrants and refugees. As Pope Francis stated in his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, “No one will ever openly deny that [they] are human beings, yet in practice, by our decisions and the way we treat them, we can show that we consider them less worthy, less important, less human.” This is unacceptable.

“Fear of the other” (xenophobia) also causes much of the intolerance, violence, and persecution suffered by an increasing number of people on the basis of their religion or belief. Disregard for the right to religious freedom, the “primary and fundamental human right,” has led to individual believers and groups being denied basic rights, imprisoned, tortured, and even murdered because of their faith while perpetrators enjoy impunity. Some religious minorities are even in danger of being entirely extinguished in certain regions, including Christians who represent the most persecuted group globally.

The international community must together combat racism, xenophobia and discrimination, and the “throw-away” culture they reflect. Only true fraternity can overcome this illness. Pope Francis asserted during the commemoration of the International Day of Human Fraternity, in a very clear and unequivocal way, “There is no time for indifference” – “either we are brothers and sisters, or we destroy [one another].”⁶

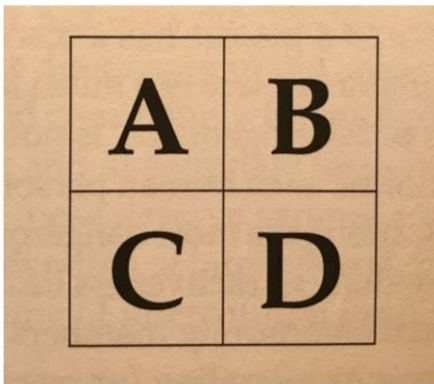
So the question remains: What is the way forward and how do we get there? As Jonathan Sacks expressed it:

It was one thing for Christians to fight each other in the age of the Crusades; it is quite another to do so in the age of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. It was one thing for wars to take place on a battlefield, another when anywhere – a plane, a bus, a hijacked delivery

truck (the weapon of choice by both sides in the North of Ireland) – can become the frontline and scene of terror.⁷

What do we need to do to restore respect and live in the conscious presence of difference? In the past, we have heard about multi-culturalism. By definition, multi-culturalism is about A, B, C and D cultures existing together in a location, separately. This has been the way for generations when ethnic groups lived together separately, as the following diagram demonstrates.

Multicultural

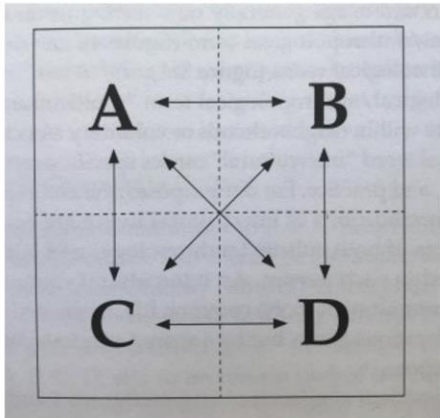


Is about different A,B,C,D cultures

- 'existing' together in a location
- living together separately
 - the experience of
 - ethnic groups
 - parish communities
 - families in neighbourhoods
 - individuals in 'community'

The call to interculturality is a process whereby A, B, C and D interact with each other through porous boundaries, as shown on the next diagram. While there is give and take, and some communication between groups, this is still not living intentionally in an intercultural way or real interculturality

Interculturality: a process



- interactions of A, B, C, and D with each other
- porous boundaries
- good relations, communication
- give and take, accommodation
- still not quite interculturality

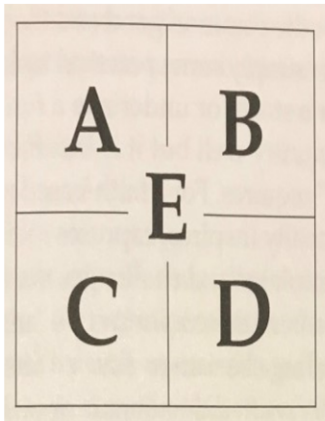
This interaction of A, B, C, D represents different cultures interacting and trying to live intentionally as an intercultural community/society

A further process is required beyond that outlined in the diagram above. It is a new, intentional movement of **going** towards and **coming** towards. It is an unfamiliar place for everyone and requires sustained effort and commitment. There is no hierarchy and it is a gospel call to conversion and entry into a journey to the unknown.

In this new space, no one culture dominates the other. Interculturality is not a problem to be solved, but rather a movement to be embraced. It is a theological call to conversion and transformation. Such a call/movement requires constant commitment and is more than just good will.

Those committed to living this way must be open to vulnerability, open towards all ethnicities and appreciative of the dignity of difference.

In the ideal situation a new culture "E" is created



- nobody is entirely in a familiar environment
- all find an appropriate degree of fitness/being and insider or "at home" in E
- everyone is, paradoxically, also an outsider in E
- no hierarchy, status, all are servants

Is such an ideal possible in our deeply divided racist and xenophobic world?

Those who believe in the possibilities of interculturality must be prepared to change their attitudes and false presuppositions. Such a theory and ideal will encounter great resistance, even amongst its own members.

Until the late twentieth century, the prominent default position was ASSIMILATION. If you want to live in this country, you must learn to live like us! The dominant culture made the rules and those coming in from outside were meant to obey and copy. Many of us who belong to religious congregations can acknowledge this experience. While the Second Vatican Council affirmed the richness of diversity, the dominant culture remained.

I can personally affirm this experience. I come from the north of the island of Ireland. We have a different political system, education system and healthcare system from the rest of the country, and while we are a culturally rich northern people, I have encountered resistance to my lived experience,

coming as I do from a deeply Irish-British divided society. I have attended most of our Congregation-wide Chapters as an elected delegate for the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland, with 7 former provinces. I have often felt ill at ease and silenced, and have found the encounters exclusive

As the part of the world where I was born and lived begins to fracture open again, the comments I have heard from misinformed membership about why there is trouble again on the streets of Belfast and Derry are troubling. They are a reminder of the attitudes and stances of many of the people on the island of Ireland beyond the six northern counties.

And so, how can we move beyond the racism and xenophobia to a world where all are welcome, all are included. Or can we?

Pope Francis has called on each of us to actively and intentionally go out and encounter others who are different from ourselves, and to go beyond our usual circles. To move in this way is to go to places where we will be disturbed, afraid and uncomfortable. It is an invitation to go towards the fringes and peripheries and model inclusivity, conscious that we are all created in the holy image of God.

Such encounters have been clearly defined by Maria Cimperman, RSCJ. In her work on *Social Analysis for the 21st Century*, she is passionate about helping to create communities of hope on a global scale. Cimperman identifies four layers of encounter:

1. To stop and see another. It is more than a glance. Think about the people we glance at every day – women in burqas, British soldiers on the streets of Northern Ireland.
2. To see differently and try and understand from the other's perspective. To be curious and ask questions, to wonder why rather than judge too quickly. To crack each other open and peep inside, rather than being indifferent.
3. To try to recognize the other and connect. To try and enter into the mystery of difference by honoring and respecting the humanity of the individual, however culturally expressed.
4. When we reach this layer, we know that something within us has shifted and there is a recognition within the self of oneness and respect.

Fear is one of the greatest obstacles to encounter and, as Samantha Power has reminded us so often, the greatest fear is fear itself!

In conclusion to this article, perhaps we might consider widening our viewing tent and take a look at our world from the perspective of astronauts. Astronauts who have had the privilege of peering down upon the Earth from Space have commented on how unified the Earth looks without human-made political borders.

Our galaxy is but one of billions of galaxies across a known Universe that is estimated to be 14 billion light years across. And, if the 'Big Bang' theory marks the beginning of time, scientists calculate that the Cosmos is still expanding and gathering speed.

With this perspective, we realize that, in fact, we are little more than insects who are relatively young and very vulnerable in a fathomless existence. To look out is to look back into history, for the light that reaches our eyes from distant stars has, other than the sun, travelled longer than we have lived on Earth. Such thoughts are awe-inspiring and should be humbling. They teach us that in the vast, speckled darkness within which we exist, those who believe themselves more intelligent and powerful and, therefore, more entitled, are truly ignorant, lacking the understanding that should move us to compassion.

The Cosmos teaches us that we are yet infants learning to walk, dipping our toes into the lapping waves of a vast ocean of knowledge beyond us. Catherine McAuley appreciated this when she said:

How quietly the great God does all His mighty works! Darkness is spread over us, and light breaks in again and again, and there is no noise of drawing curtains or closing shutters.⁸

Such thoughts help us to realize that we have a great responsibility towards one another, to ensure that the miracle that is each one of us is cherished and given every opportunity to grow, irrespective of our skin pigmentation, social background or religious or secular beliefs. They help us to realize that perhaps our greatest endowment is the gift of *consciousness*, through which we can ponder and contemplate the great privilege of being.

Catherine McAuley knew this and when she founded the Sisters of Mercy, she envisioned a group of women who would serve and be served as part of the great community of life, recognizing that we have a deep responsibility towards one another.

Mandela, too, had this deep sense of responsibility. When he was released from prison, he had the power to invoke an uprising that might have achieved the ultimate objective of black emancipation, but at a terrible price. Instead, he chose the path of truth and reconciliation, wishing to imagine a new South Africa in which the great rainbow of cultures, tribes and colors might offer hope to all humanity. That is his greatest legacy.

It is part of our sacred legacy too. Catherine McAuley, who lived many years before Nelson Mandela, understood this concept clearly. She instilled in her early followers that: "It is not sufficient that Jesus Christ be formed in us... He must be recognized in our conduct."⁹

Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu promoted the concept of *Ubuntu*, a multi-layered word familiar to several South African languages, including their native Xhosa. Ubuntu offers a way of thinking on what it means to be human. It tells us that our humanity cannot be lived in isolation from one another. Ubuntu emphasizes the connectedness that does, and must, exist between peoples. Archbishop Desmond Tutu described Ubuntu thus:

A person with Ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are.¹⁰

In the end, we are one human family, all with one origin. Color is, literally, skin deep and exposes the shallowness of racial profiling and prejudice. A heart transplanted from a black person will function in exactly the same way in a white person's body, and vice versa.

Let me conclude with three quotations, two from the great American astronomer and cosmologist Carl Sagan...

Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.¹¹

For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love.¹²

And Catherine McAuley challenged us:

Try to act at all times and places that if the Lord were to appear, he would not be ashamed to point you out as one of his own.¹³

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