Trinity Washington University/CARA Study: International Sisters in the United States

Reflection Guide

2017

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Prepared by the Mexican American Catholic College with:

- o **International Union of Superiors General (Rome)**
- o **Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América**
- o **Leadership Conference of Women Religious**
- o **National Conference of Vicars for Religious**
- o **National Religious Vocation Conference**
- o **Religious Formation Conference**

In 2017 the GHR Foundation hosted representatives of key organizations of women religious in Washington and in Rome for a report on the groundbreaking "Trinity Washington University/CARA Study: International Sisters in the United States." Rather than simply reporting data *to* the participants, the research team and facilitators expertly led a dialogue *with* and *among* the participants. The prayerful process led to rich conversations about the challenges and opportunities presented by the data. Hoping to widen these circles of reflection and dialogue, GHR invited the Mexican American Catholic College (MACC) to collaboratively develop a simple reflection guide to accompany the report and provide questions to focus and deepen conversations on the implications of the study's initial findings. Representatives of the following organizations enthusiastically and generously offered their time and wisdom: The National Religious Vocation Conference (NRVC), the Religious Formation Conference (RFC), *la Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América* (AHLMA), the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), the National Conference of Vicars for Religious (NCVR), and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG). We are deeply grateful for their guidance.

The following results from several lively focus sessions that identified themes and critical areas for further reflection and dialogue, especially for leadership teams, vocation directors, and those entrusted with initial and ongoing formation. "International Sisters in the United States" is a unique resource to deepen awareness about the growing cultural diversity in religious life today and engage in critical conversations about the opportunities and challenges it brings to religious communities, especially in light of present and future membership. This accompanying guide offers brief reflections and questions that will hopefully lead to a deepening of intercultural understanding by sparking conversations about the study's data and its implications for community life, vocations, initial and ongoing formation, and the ministries of women religious in today's diverse settings. While the guide is primarily geared to congregations, the questions may hopefully be adapted and utilized in diocesan and educational contexts, especially among vicars of religious who are on the frontlines of a wider integration of international sisters into diocesan ministries and inter-community living.

The guide is intended to be a tool for prayerful reflection and dialogue. Therefore, it will be important for the organizers and facilitators to supplement the guide with copies of the study and relevant scriptural, pastoral, or congregational documents. Most importantly, the sessions will require the time and space necessary for respectful group process. Along with effectively addressing the challenge of language differences, intercultural communication requires a commitment by all to mutual respect. Eric Law's "Mutual Invitation Process" is highly recommended. It is included, along with other helpful resources, in the USCCB's curriculum, *Building Intercultural Competence for Ministers*.

The Data: What Do You See?

The Trinity Washington University/CARA research team has presented the preliminary results of a rigorous, scientific process of collecting and analyzing both quantitative and qualitative data. The charts and graphs visually present the data to see and evaluate in light of one's particular congregational reality and charism. From the outset of this reflection process, *the invitation is to allow the data to inform discernment for action, rather than rationalizing action with data.* The first step of both scientific research and authentic discernment is a sincere commitment "to see" reality for what it is and from as many perspectives as possible. Therefore, teamwork and communal processes that seek diverse points of view are essential. An open mind, however, is not an empty mind. *We see reality through our lenses, tinted by an array of self-referential perceptions, beliefs, and preconceived assumptions.* Recognizing potential biases in our worldviews, motives, goals, and methods is key to seeing reality clearly and responding effectively.

1. **What are my motives, goals, and expectations as I enter this process? How willing am I to set aside my conscious assumptions and agenda to allow the data to speak to me? As I enter into this group process, am I open to see the data from another's point of view?**

2. **As I look at the data, how do I understand the narrative, charts, and graphs? Is there information that surprises or confuses me?**

3. **What feelings emerge as I see the data? Am I skeptical about or resistant to what I see?**

4. **How does the data affirm my experience and knowledge? How does it differ from or challenge my experience and knowledge?**

5. **What are my questions about the study's design, methods, or conclusions?**

Community Life: A Sea of Icebergs

At the heart of community, *relationships require time, trust, communication, and ongoing commitment to work through conflict.* The fundamental challenge of forming intercultural relationships lies in the very nature of culture. Sociologist Edward T. Hall describes it as an iceberg that has both visible and invisible dimensions. All that we usually refer to as culture—the food, music, traditional dress, etc.—is only the "tip" of the iceberg! The mass of culture lies below the surface in the deep sea of unconscious norms, values, beliefs, assumptions, etc. Since we begin life in the collective iceberg of our particular culture, we normally don't notice this internal dimension until we leave our familiar surroundings and encounter people of other cultures.

These cross-cultural experiences, whether thrilling or terrifying, inevitably lead to cultural clashes as icebergs collide—not at the tip but below the surface, in the icy depths. Cultural clashes can shape and reinforce stereotypes and prejudices, leading to ethnocentric isolationism, a comfortable room full of mirrors. However clashes can also move us beyond denial to a greater self-awareness and the openness to see the world from another's point of view. Intentional relationships with people of other cultures is the only way to diffuse fear and defensiveness. As the study indicates, the vast majority of international sisters live with members of their own communities or inter-congregationally, leading to many opportunities for both the challenges of cultural clash and the joys of intercultural "click."

International sisters come from over 83 countries, an array of distinct ethnic cultures. Sisters from the United States are also a very culturally diverse group. Some sisters are from individually oriented cultures, while others are collectively oriented. These differences are accentuated in daily interactions and communication. For example, sisters from individualist (low context) cultures need more space, are less formal, and communicate very directly to "get to the point" as soon as possible. They are very conscious of time, task-oriented, and long-term planners. Whereas sisters from collectivist (high context) cultures expect to closely share space, follow formal protocols, and often communicate indirectly with metaphors and details that seem unconnected to linear thinkers. They are not naturally focused on the future but rather on the present moment and how it connects seamlessly to their ancestral traditions and stories. There is plenty of time and it is meant for relationships. Of course, there is a vast continuum of cultural orientations between these two extreme stereotypes, but the point is that community life today is truly a sea of icebergs.

As if this were not challenging enough, the study also highlights the marked age differences between international sisters and mostly U.S.-born members of receiving communities. *Generational differences bring many gifts to community life and they also present overt and subtle challenges.* For example, a young international sister may naturally favor wearing a traditional habit and more frequent communal prayer because of her collectivist orientation. Just by looking at her, however, an older sister from an individualist cultural orientation may automatically assume her theology is pre-Vatican II. Because her communication style is very pragmatic and direct, the older sister unintentionally offends the younger by recommending further theological studies. The younger sister, who has been raised to defer to elders, outwardly agrees but internally remains hurt and resentful.

Interculturality implies intentional inter-relating that moves sisters out of isolation, away from assimilation, and into a mutually life-giving integration, rooted deeply in the common ground of the congregation's charism and mission. This requires a sustained personal commitment and institutional investment in developing intercultural competence manifest in cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills and characteristics that support effective and appropriate interaction in various cultural contexts. *Good will alone is not enough to navigate* in a sea of icebergs, the *profound cultural and generational differences in* perceptions and assumptions about *the fundamentals of religious life – community, spirituality, the vows, and mission.*

1. **How do I describe my cultural identity? What are the external and internal dimensions? How does my personal cultural iceberg click or clash with sisters of other cultures?**

2. **How does my culture influence the way I communicate? Is my style more low or high context? What self-adjustments can I make to better communicate with sisters of other cultures?**

3. **How important is it for me to learn another language? How do I feel when sisters speak my language incorrectly or with a heavy accent?**

4. **What are the generational differences I have observed and experienced in my community? How do these differences enrich and challenge? How do they impact older sisters, younger sisters, and sisters in their middle years?**

5. **How committed am I to acquiring and honing the competencies and skills needed for intercultural community life and ministry? Where am I in the process? How committed is my community to moving beyond multiculturalism into a more mutual interculturality?**

Vocation & Formation: Inviting, Belonging, and Accompanying

The report implicitly raises questions about vocation and formation ministries in light of rapidly changing demographics that characterize our times. Beyond culturally nuanced marketing and recruitment efforts, *religious communities are asking deeper questions about the influence of culture in the process of discernment, belonging, and lifelong accompaniment.* Just as self-awareness can lead to a greater awareness of the other, a deeper understanding of the congregation's collective iceberg can serve to better integrate new members and provide culturally responsive initial and ongoing formation programs. Tracing congregational roots and early histories can reveal unseen cultural patterns and unspoken norms that continue to influence today's systems of religious life— leadership, communication, organization, decision-making, and stewardship of resources. These systems hold and channel collective power and determine criteria for membership.

Systemic analysis is therefore essential but challenging because, like the cultures imbedded in them, systems are largely invisible. For example, systems silently reflect and influence cultural perceptions of power and leadership. Sisters from collectivist cultures may prefer highly stratified (hierarchical) leadership systems with clear ranking according tradition and relationship, while sisters from individualist cultures may prefer more diffused (democratic) leadership systems where personal achievement and influence determine authority and rank. Again, there is a vast continuum between these stereotypical extremes of cultural perceptions and preferences. Recognizing these differences can make us more aware of how sisters feel empowered or disempowered by the community's systems of leadership and formation.

Systemic blindness can only be overcome through intentional formation processes at the collective and personal levels. Skills and competencies develop over time and with practice. Milton Bennet's developmental model traces the milestones we reach gradually as we grow beyond ethnocentrism to a greater intercultural sensitivity. *The journey moves us beyond denial, defensiveness, and minimization to a greater acceptance of difference in both behavior and values. We learn to be more aware, flexible, and attuned to the cultural context.* Acceptance doesn't necessarily mean agreement but respectful negotiation, adaptation, ongoing adjustment, and a commitment to integration. This model is not only helpful in mapping personal growth, but can also guide communal efforts towards life-giving interculturality fostered by inclusive systems of belonging.

1. **Who are we inviting to consider religious life and is our message culturally relevant and appealing? What are we inviting new members into and how are we preparing our community to receive women from diverse cultures?**

2. **How attuned are we to the influence of culture in discernment and initial formation processes?**

3. **Is my perception of power (ability, authority, confidence, influence, decision-making, etc.) rooted more in an individualist or collectivist cultural orientation? How does this perception of power influence my relationships with sisters of other cultures?**

4. **What kind of leadership and formation systems are operative in my community? How do they empower or disempower sisters from diverse cultures?**

5. **How important is intercultural competence in my community's overall formation processes? How committed are we to ongoing education and formation for intercultural living and leadership?**

Mission: Witnessing Unity in a Divided World

The preliminary findings of the study on international sisters reveal the immigrant faces of religious life in the 21st century. This culturally diverse and multi-generational group of over 4,000 women in the U.S.—from more than 83 countries—mirrors our own identity as an immigrant nation and reflects the global reality of over 200 million migrants on the move. Therefore their presence here and now signals a much greater "sign of our times" that urgently calls us beyond "business as usual" to what Pope Francis calls the geographic and existential peripheries. Only from the margins can we more clearly see the impact of the widening economic gap, political polarization, religious and racial hatred, and environmental degradation. At the same time, *de-centering our point of view can open new vistas to see the creative forces already transforming religious life and giving witness to a radically ancient and refreshingly new interculturality that is truly the heart of Catholic identity.*

As the study notes, having *international sisters in our midst is nothing new;* they have been key protagonists in the remarkable history of the Church in the U.S. Often behind the scenes, they courageously defied seemingly insurmountable obstacles to build an incredible infrastructure of institutions and ministries infused with the spirit of the Gospel and their respective charisms. These pioneers persisted in the possible, not the perfect. Garnering support from Catholics and non-Catholics, sisters have been and continue to be catalysts of transformation in challenging times. This track record of competence and credibility undergirds a new trajectory women religious are forging beyond institutions and the polarities of liberal and conservative.

There is a global sisterhood steadily coalescing that is intentionally inter-congregational, inter-generational, and intercultural. Just as the prefix "inter" implies, new relationships and alliances are being forged in a spirit of mutuality. The initial report and the subsequent focus sessions highlight this exciting and hopeful frontier of religious life. The enthusiasm to move towards it is palpable but tempered by a mature realism of the long-term commitment it entails. The good news is that sisters have been on this journey for a while now! In fact, they are often leading the way and their faithful endurance continues to yield a collective wisdom that provides multiple strategies and best practices. There is no "one-size-fits-all" solution because cultural diversity is not a problem to be solved; rather—as the study shows—it is our reality and identity, with all its gifts and limitations. *The historic and current "immigrant identity" of women religious has crucial implications for mission and ministry in today's divided world.*

1. **How has our congregation recognized and/or forgotten its historic immigrant identity? How did this identity shape our mission and ministry in the U.S.? How have we been in solidarity with other immigrants historically and today?**

2. **How is our congregation embracing our immigrant identity today? What implications does this have for our mission and ministry today in the U.S. and beyond?**

3. **What does the phrase "global sisterhood" mean to me personally and to our community? What are its implications for us in terms of mission and inter-congregational collaboration?**

4. **How do we orient sisters from other cultures to the overall context of the United States and how our congregation lives out its charism in this country? How are we responding to the needs of international sisters identified by the study?**

Resources Consulted and Recommended

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