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Introduction

to the first volume of “Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling”

topics:

- a definition of “intercultural pastoral care and counselling”
- methodological questions
- intercultural communication

source: *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling No 1, 1996; pp. 3-5*

Purpose and theme of this documentation ¹

The documentation follows a double purpose: Firstly we want to offer some insight into the structure, the content, the atmosphere and the many ways of communication applied at the 9th Intercultural Seminar for Pastoral Care and Counselling, which was held in Mülheim a.d. Ruhr from October 15th to 20th, 1995. Secondly we would like to give account for the general intercultural learning process, to which this seminar was only a stepping stone. For it stands in the Tradition of a whole series of International Pastoral Care Seminars. Initiated by the centre of CPE in Düsseldorf-Kaiserswerth, they have been conducted on an annual basis since 1986. Since the first seminars, not only have there been some changes with regard to the organising groups, more importantly, the international encounter gradually led to a more conscious awareness of the importance of the cultural dimension of Pastoral Care and Counselling (*see the report K. Temme / H. Weiß*)². The active exchange with colleagues from abroad led to an understanding of the content and importance of one’s own pastoral actions, as well as of one’s own spiritual and biographical ramifications. Any kind of Pastoral Care and Counselling takes place in a specific setting and at a specific point of time. Often it is not easy to “export” its value into another, international setting. We, as Western Europeans, more than once had the distinct feeling that we could benefit greatly from our Asian and African colleagues for whom the intercultural dialogue has long been a vital part of their pastoral actions.

¹ This text is the opening article to the first volume of the then newly established magazine *Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling*, containing a documentation of the 9th International Seminar on Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling. References in the text point to articles in that magazine.

² Reprinted in this workbook, p. Fehler! Textmarke nicht definiert..

Pastoral Care and Counselling in 'Postmodern Times': Human Images and Life-Stories in Various Cultures and Religions – was the topic of the 1995 seminar. With “postmodern time” a key word was thrown into the discussion which more than once led to controversies, since its meaning is often arguable. We would like to stress that as the seminar’s working title the expression “postmodern” was meant to be less analytical than guiding. Thus, the expression “postmodern” should signify that today Pastoral Care and Counselling takes place predominantly within a specific context. A context, which is marked by an increasing degree of cultural variety – a plurality which implies possibilities and chances, as well as the possibility of a loss of identity.

Towards a definition of “Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling”

Since this documentation repeatedly deals with the expression “Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling”, the attempt of a definition is required. It is our wish that the expression is not to be understood in a rigid way, rather it should reflect a certain approach within the pastoral work, i.e. a hermeneutics, marked by the specific love and interest for another culture. To define Intercultural Care and Counselling *via negationis*, that is to simply separate it from the common kerygmatic, clinical or therapeutic ways of Pastoral Care would be all too easy and oversimplifying the issue. Indeed, there are modes within the movement of Intercultural Pastoral Care that readily apply to one or more of the more traditional ways of Pastoral Care and Counselling. Thus, the intercultural form of Pastoral Care refers to a sort of inquisitive approach. Its hermeneutics is marked by the main desire to consciously reflect on all cultural aspects, which might emerge in any given pastoral encounter. This reflection is not mainly fostered by theory, but rather through the actual practical experience which each and every encounter provides.

In doing so, the Intercultural Pastoral Care approach goes beyond the traditional concentration on the individual and his or her unique biography. Rather - as all of the contributions to this documentation prove - a multitude of aspects, such as the political, the societal, or the religious, are fostered and dealt with in the pastoral encounter.

For several years already, there exists an ongoing discussion about the meaning and the importance of the cultural aspects of the pastoral relationship. In the English speaking context this issue has been summarized under the expressions “cross-cultural counselling” and “multicultural counselling”, and primarily deals with the counsellor’s and the counsellee’s differing social, cultural, or ethnic background. However, when we refer to the “Intercultural” aspect of Pastoral Care and Counselling it is our desire to enlighten not only one’s cultural background in such a professional situation, but to become aware of the general, life-long and progressing contextuality of all of one’s action. To a great extent this demands a willingness to freely deal with the “Other”, with his/her possibilities or limitations, and his/her choices and actions. Furthermore, it implies a readiness to incorporate this new frame of reference into my *own* pastoral work, so that there might be an increased awareness of the cultural rifts - the different “cultural dialects” within one’s own culture.

Our ‘postmodern times’ are marked by plurality and a fragmentation of life styles – a fact which implies that new cultures emerge *within* the existing cultural framework of any given country. Similar to the different dialects of a country’s language, various “cultural dialects” emerge along the lines of age, education and

gender. It is the people who have to begin translating, interpreting and practising the new “dialects”, the new modes of meaning and action. This might lead to an enhancement of the individual’s frame of reference - and perhaps to a conscious change in his/her actions.

Methodological perspectives

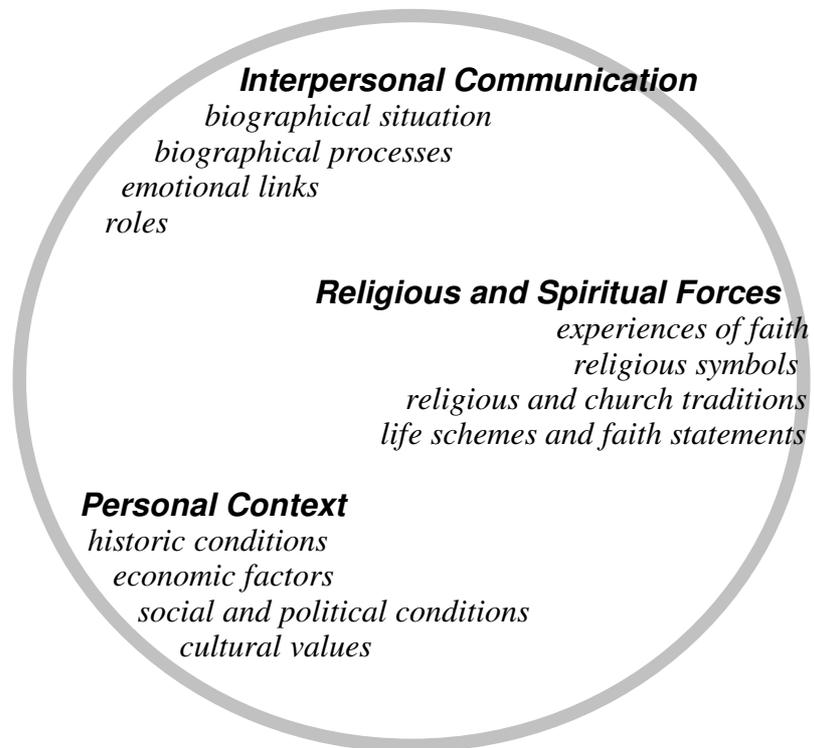
As we described above, the concept of Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling should not be understood as a new model of counselling. Nevertheless, it might lead to new approaches and open windows of opportunity within the more traditional movements of Pastoral Care and Counselling. Here are some suggestions:

- Any pastoral encounter dominated by an empathic approach, traditionally aims to overcome feelings of distance and estrangement. Intercultural Pastoral Care on the other hand, stresses the continuous difference to the other, and looks for ways how to authentically encounter it. The basis hereby being the ongoing attempt to carefully listen to the language and the “stories” of the other person.

The problems arising from the different languages spoken at the seminars, the difficult work of the interpreters, and the angry impatience which more than once erupted in the plenary sessions, signify how difficult it is to really listen to another person’s story. All too often this can only be done fragmentarily.

- “Therapeutic” Pastoral Care concerns itself with the healing progress of the client, with his/her emotional integrity and the maturity of the personality. Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling reminds us how problematic this allegedly clear distinction between sickness and health really is (*see articles on Buddhism*). As individuals of any given society we forever live in a state of cultural constraints, in demanding emotional and societal relations - literally with a baggage full of “burdens” (*see E. Decenteceo*). Pastoral Care and Counselling therefore should not attempt to try and radically eliminate these “burdens”, but rather to make them more bearable for the “burden bearer”, through gaining new insights and lending more meaning to life in general.
- Although the modern movements of Pastoral Care and Counselling have long since been concerned with changing the image of the traditionally more patriarchal relationship between counsellor and counsellee, there remains an incline between the role of the professionally trained counsellor or pastor and the client, seeking help. Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling aims to enlighten the counsellor’s own limitations, his/her particular, cultural way of understanding. At the same time the intercultural dimension aims at investigating in and acknowledging the genuine, vital resources of the other’s personality and culture. Pastoral Care and Counselling thus advances into a dialogue, marked by solidarity and mutuality, which if successful, bears the chance of positively affecting *both* partners. In other words, from the start, Intercultural Pastoral Care is a correlative endeavour to bear the “burdens of life” together and, by doing so, discovering the manifestation of the life-giving God in our lives.

**The intercultural way of communication:
A circular motion**



At this point we have to ask ourselves whether Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling involves a new way of communication. Generally speaking one might say that each story telling process sets off a circular movement: In the story telling-process the story teller gradually moves away from his/her individual experience, while at the same time opening him/ herself and approaching the listener. A new, original relationship emerges. Through the encounter with the other, through participating, and through relating to a new context, a new form of believing, and a new history, the listener learns something essential about the other person; and what is far more important here, he/she learns something about him/herself, his/ her limitations and possibilities. Through encountering another culture, one learns more about one's perception of one's own culture. At the same time the exchange of practical, cultural experiences steadily enlarges the circular movement of story telling and listening. The circles become bigger, link into each other and may gradually build a chain of understanding. What remains is a linear movement between the original experience of the story teller and the process of understanding.

It is important to point out that intercultural communication, probably more than any other way of communication is determined by its setting, time, context and its chosen language. And it has been our experience at the seminars that language difficulties do not only represent an obstacle in the line of communication, rather they bear the potential to reveal new ways to fully relate with one another. New modes of listening arise, and old structures outlive themselves. While this insight bears great potential for the pastoral crosscultural encounter, it also proves to be helpful when dealing with a new, "other" culture within the context of the old, well known one.

In preparing the structure of the seminar's study groups it has been our intention to work also with a kind of circle. That is, the abundance of issues which arise in and around any kind of communication were structured into the three realms of the *interpersonal communication*, the *personal context*, and the *religious and spiritual forces* (for an example, see the case study presented by Hilary Johnson³).

It was our intention to introduce these areas of reflection not only through the various case studies, but also within the work of the study groups, i.e. to observe the relationship among the group members, as well as their individual relation to the presented case.

At this point we are aware of the fact that it will be a future task to further develop a concept and a methodology of intercultural communication. However, it remains a fact that Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling does and should not depend on a rigid methodological structure. Rather, it thrives on movement and on change. It is for this reason that the definition of Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling has to retain a certain extend of vagueness. Its tradition needs movement and continuation.

Working structure of the seminar and the papers of this documentation

Lectures, study groups, and intercultural plenary sessions are the key elements of the seminars. Most of the lectures have been included in this documentation. The study groups were structured according to a certain theme, a specific case study represented the working frame of any study group. However, it proved to be difficult to give a full account of the seminar's group processes and individual learning processes. Some impressions are being included in part 4 and 5 and reveal a personal insight into the seminar's work.

Some of this documentation's contributions had to be shortened. In doing so we tried to withstand subjective assessment. We think, that each contribution reveals its own character, and speaks in its own "dialect". But all the dialects put together, created a new "language", if not a new "mother tongue", which best describes what Intercultural Pastoral Care and Counselling is all about: The interceding of one individual for another, across all cultural borders.

³ Reprinted in this workbook, p. 485.