

Cross Cultural Life—An African Perspective Brother Raymond Papenfuss, csc

I was privileged to spend 28 years working in Ghana, West Africa. I grew up a pre-Vatican II Catholic with all the good and the bad that this entails. As a young man, even before I entered Holy Cross, I wanted to be a teacher and to work in a foreign land. The motivation was clearly pre-Vatican II. It was clear that unless all these people learned about Christ, they were doomed to go to hell. My call was by bringing Christ to them so this would not happen. In 1959 after teaching for 3 years at Holy Trinity High School, Chicago, I was asked to go to Ghana. With great joy I arrived in Ghana late in September, 1959. It did not take me long to realize that the original motivation that drove me was not quite correct. God clearly was there and working intimately with the people of Africa. I learned to read, write and speak the Akan language and I studied the spiritual culture of the people with whom I very soon fell deeply in love. I had to change my definition of a missionary. It is not a case of bringing Christ to people to save them from hell. My new definition would be: A missionary is a person who is able through grace and natural disposition to enter into a culture quite different from his own, learn to love it and then be able to discover what work God is already doing within that culture and cooperate with God in that work. Make no mistake here. Every culture is ultimately the handiwork of God! All are created in the image of God! He has placed people where they are and allowed (helped) them to use their ingenuity and resourcefulness to subdue their environment, adapt it and control it in order to flourish as a people. A missionary entering a new culture can, if he/she is open to it have a liminal experience, i.e. can stand in the doorway of an entirely new world experience. If someone goes to an African country and stays in an expensive hotel, eats at a McDonald's and complains that things are not like they are at home, he/she hasn't left the U.S. This person has let go of nothing and therefore can receive nothing. He/she is not having a liminal experience. We have to become more aware that others don't see things the way we do. We have to have our fundamental assumptions questioned. Maybe our questions are not the only ones and maybe America is not the center of the world. Maybe our religion is not the only way to look at reality; OR, maybe I haven't really understood how religion has transformed many people. Liminal space is always an experience of displacement in the hope of a new point of view. It is so important to try to understand or at least to become more aware that there are cultures "out there" that are different from ours. A look at a culture quite different from our North American culture is very important today as the world grows so much smaller. We can do this without any kind of judgment—they are not better or worse, just different! I am convinced that our State department is frequently clueless when it comes to working with cultures quite different from our own culture. In this paper I

want to talk about the uniqueness of the Ghanaian culture that I experienced. Much of this comes across as humorous, but it is very serious and shows a world view quite different from ours and a way of processing world events that is unique to Africa. I went to Africa to convert and to a large extent was converted; not that I gave up all of my beliefs—my horizons were broadened and deepened. I found a new way of seeing; an understanding of God’s work that was waiting for me there.

Concept of Time

Probably one of the most upsetting aspects of African life to visitors is their understanding and use of time. It drives most Americans absolutely wild. Several years ago the Brothers in Ghana celebrated the golden anniversary of their arrival. It was a full year of celebrations and I was fortunate to be present at the opening of the anniversary year. The opening was taking place at Brafuyaw near Cape Coast with a celebration of the Eucharist with several bishops concelebrating. I noticed a Holy Cross Sister that I had not met before and went to greet her. I discovered that she was a lawyer. Surprised, I asked what work she was doing in Ghana. She replied that she was there to help them get organized. How American! I responded that I thought that most Ghanaians were quite well organized. “Oh Raymond,” she said, “They are never on time! This mass was supposed to start at 10 o’clock; it is now 10:15! They never start anything on time.” I assured her that Ghanaians always start on time, that they just had a different concept as to what “on time” means. “On time” is not a concept governed by a clock for heaven’s sake. “On time” simply means that whenever everyone that is supposed to be there is there, it is time to start. There were two bishops that hadn’t arrived yet, so clearly it was not time to start. The American concept of time is very linear. Our TV culture clearly shouts: “Life is short—cram as much into it as you can! Enjoy!” The Ghanaian suggestion would be: “Indeed life is short—enjoy it, savor it like a piece of expensive chocolate; let it linger on the tongue.” The Ugandan poet, Okot p’Bitck says in one of his poems that white people treat time like it is a sausage to be cut off in small pieces and consumed. The African, I suggest, treat time the way an animal looks at a mud hole—it is something to wallow around in and to enjoy thoroughly. There is an African proverb that explains this. When God created the world the gift of “time” he gave to the Africans; to the white people, he distributed wrist watches. Have you ever noticed that when people go to a ceremony of some sort, say a wedding, most of the men will look at their watches and wonder—how long is this going to take? They are busy planning their next event and failing to enjoy the moment they are in. In Ghana if you go to a wedding you plan nothing for the rest of that day—it is a “time” to celebrate and enjoy the wedding.

Philosophical Center

How one views oneself and the world one lives in

Almost every American who has gone to the university has learned the famous Cartesian utterance; “Cogito Ergo Sum”, I think, therefore, I am. This became the cry of the philosophers, the beginning of new knowledge and new way of looking at the world. The individual became the center of everything. Unless the individual could see and understand how anything related to and help him/her, it had not much significance. The age of self-reliance was born. The liberal anthropology of the US states that the fundamental unit is the individual. People distance themselves from others in order to discover their own abilities. Once this is discovered they associate with others for mutual benefit; relationship is a contract dependent on mutual assent. I am not saying that this is good or bad, but trying simply to state what as a matter of fact is the reality. If one tried to teach this concept to a class in Ghana they would have no idea what you are talking about. It would simply make no sense at all. The basic unit in Africa is not the individual; it is the family, the clan, the tribe and finally the country. One works not to benefit oneself but the family in general. This gives a much broader view to one’s relationship with the world. The African response to Cogito Ergo Sum (I think, therefore, I am) would be: We are, therefore, I am. This becomes a question of inter-dependence –I am, at this time, standing in front of you, defined by your presence. You make me who I am at this time. This determines how I look at the world, what my responsibilities are to the world and how I am to behave. This is not a personal issue, it is a community issue. Strong individualism, radical self-reliance, the “I can do it myself!” syndrome has no place in Africa. Diarmuid O’Murchu has said; “Robust individualism is our great sin; cultural isolation our curse.” In Africa it is clear—first comes the family, then the clan, then the tribe and finally the nation. I am not by myself but part of a much larger reality.

Relationships

The Oil that Makes Life Work

There is probably nothing that is a stronger value than the relationships that develop between people in Africa. The family unit in Ghana is very strong and all relationships are evaluated according to the family unit. No member of the family exists for himself/herself alone. Each member exists for the good of the unit. This group can and is expanded. If a person behaves toward a child like a father, the relationship is established and the young boy will refer to that adult as his father. For example I recall going to pick up a young man at his home in Takoradi because he had some work to do at school. I met his mother at the door and she called out, “Kwesi, hurry up your father is here to take you to school.” I still get letters and emails from business men in the U.K. and the U.S. who sign their letters: “Your loving son.” There is

no hatred greater than that of a child who realizes that his paternal father has not behaved towards him as a father. Everyone understands what is expected of a parent in Ghana; when this expectation is not fulfilled real anger and even hatred can follow. All adults are expected to look upon children as somehow their own. If a young child is in trouble he may well go to any adult and ask for help and expect to receive it. This is an important value within African culture.

Attitudes towards expressions of sexuality are also quite different in Ghana. In all the years that I lived in Ghana and the many times I have visited since I left Ghana I have never seen a man and woman kissing in public. It quite simply is not done; it is considered obscene for this to be done in the open. This sort of intimacy is reserved to the home. It is entirely too sacred to be done where others can see it. I have not even seen young boys and girls holding hands. Compare this to what one can see within our culture. A visit to a local high school during break or just after school lets out and most kids are holding hands. It is not necessary to make any kind of judgment here; I am simply pointing out a different cultural approach. An example will illustrate this difference. A student of mine from St John's, Sekondi, was an exchange student in the U.S. for a semester. He was able to spend a few days at Notre Dame and was living at Columba Hall. One incident in his experience appalled him. When he returned to Ghana he came to me and said, "Bro. Ray, your people are crazy!" When I asked what had happened he responded: "There is a big lawn in the front of Columba Hall going towards the church. When I was there two young people, a boy and a girl, put a blanket on the grass and laid down on it. Brother, they were hugging and kissing and if they didn't have clothes on I would have thought they were fornicating. Yet, if a guy wants to pee he has to run into the building and lock himself in the toilet! You've got things mixed up." In Ghana you are likely to see someone urinating virtually anywhere. This is a natural function and not to be taken very seriously. If you happen to get your kicks watching someone pee, then you have a serious problem!

An outdoor ceremony for a newborn gives some good examples of African cultural values. When a child is going to be outdoored—shown to the family—the family is called to the infant's home for a 6 am ceremony. All important events in Ghana take place at 6 in the morning. This is prime time. And they take place outside. Only evil things are done in secret and behind closed doors. The extended family forms a circle in the compound in front of the home. The mother brings the infant out and lays him on the ground in the center of the circle. This is never a problem. The coldest temperature all the time I was in Ghana was 70. If it rains one changes the day. One of the younger boys comes to nudge the child

with his foot, just enough to make the infant cry. Then the Abusuapanyin, the eldest male, comes and picks the child up to comfort him/her and says: "Little one, we are sorry that you have felt pain. But this is the world and there is much pain here and many who might try to hurt you. But look at the people in this circle"—he then shows the child all the people—"this is your family. As long as you stay within this family we are there to protect you and to comfort you. Leave the circle and you are on your own." Then the young boy brings him two bottles, one filled with water and one with palm wine. He first dips his finger into the water and wipes it into the infant's mouth and says, "Kweku, this is water." Then he dips his finger into the wine and wipes it into the infant's mouth and says: "Kweku, this is wine. Always call water, water and wine, wine!" In other words, within the family circle, one must always be absolutely honest; it is the only way we can survive. It might not be necessary to tell the truth to outsiders, but within the family truth is imperative. Kweku is the name given to a boy born on Wednesday. Every Akan child bears as one of his/her names the appellation of the god that rules the day on which the child was born. This is another way to create unity within the clan, within the tribe. All Wednesday born are somehow related. After the wine has been put into the mouth of the infant the bottle is passed around the circle and all present take a sip of the wine as a sign that they have accepted the child into the family and will work together that he might flourish. The addition of this child makes the family stronger and it is up to the entire family to see to it that the child not only survives but becomes an important contributor to the family's success. No one is an end in himself, but is a part of a larger group and in the end he will work for the survival and success of the family.

When it is time for the child to go to school it is likely that everyone in the circle will contribute to help put him through school. He is being educated and trained not just for himself but for the family. At St John's we had a rule that no student was ever allowed to repeat a semester. He would either pass on or pass out (be dismissed from school). Just before Christmas a letter would be sent to those boarder line students from the headmaster saying that unless the child improved he would have to leave the school. One of these students was from a small village. In January another student from the same village came to me and begged me never to let this happen again. When I asked him why, he answered that at 6 am on the day before Christmas the chief beat the gong gong (meaning everyone was to assemble before the chief's house). The letter had been brought to the chief and the St John's student was put in the center of the circle and the chief began to abuse him verbally for about 20 minutes, with everyone in the circle agreeing. The chief ending by saying that if he was dismissed from St John's school he should not consider coming back to the village, ever! He clearly was not in school just for himself; he was there for

the village that was supporting him. Responsibility is something taken very seriously in Ghana. I am happy to say that the young boy got the message. He not only succeeded at St John but became a university graduate.

A final note, perhaps two, about building up the family. Traditional wisdom indicates that a woman becomes fully a woman when she has 10 children. The number of children a woman has certainly gives stature. I remember hearing an argument in the market place between two women. I don't recall what the argument was about but I do remember the conclusion. One woman drew herself up tall and said: I have brought forth 6 children; you have brought forth only 2—what right has you to argue with me." End of argument. Everyone listening to the argument had to agree that this was the way it was supposed to be!

If I were to ask you what the opposite of life is, I suspect your answer would be death. The African would look upon this quite differently. He would say the opposite of life cannot be death because death comes to all of us. It is the natural end. The opposite of life is infertility. As long as women are giving birth to children, death is of no real consequence. If women become barren, the family, the clan, the tribe die out. Therefore, fertility is of supreme importance. This is one of the main reasons why "trial" marriage is so often practiced in Africa. It is important for the young couple to discover whether or not they can have children before they get married. Inability to have children does not help the family, clan or tribe to grow; therefore it is not a good marriage. Without making any judgment on either the man or the woman, the extended family in traditional society will insist that the couple break up and find other partners who will help the family grow. This is one of the reasons why many marriages are still arranged by the parents. It is important to protect and strengthen the family unit. Culturally, love does not seem to be a very strong basis for a good marriage. This does not mean that they do not have a great deal of love of each other; it is simply not the main basis for the union.

The Natural Spirituality of Africa

Everything, it seems to me, in Africa is seen within the context of God and their Ancestors. The soil of Africa knows intimately the human soul, and as the African people themselves intuit, the African air breathes the living spirit of the ancestors. African spirituality vibrates with ancestral enthusiasm. Stories abound on the immediacy and intimacy of the ancestors. Rituals record the achievements of the ancestors and invoke their healing and liberating powers. (Think of the communion of saints.) Every

mountain and valley, lake and river, plant and animals carries the embodied power of the ancestors. In the power of ancestral grace, everything is interconnected; interdependence thrives. An example. While at St John's one of my jobs was to watch over the health of the students. Essentially this meant getting them to the hospital when malaria would strike and taking care of minor problems. Fortunately I was able eventually to win the trust of the students. One day a senior student brought a young boy to see me. It was the beginning of the school term and this was the first time the boy had been away from his village. His name was Kwame and we had the following conversation:

BR: Kwame, what seems to be the problem?

Kwame: I can't sleep at night.

BR: What is wrong? Do you feel sick?

Kwame: No, I am not sick. My grandmother keeps visiting around midnight?

BR: (I understood the situation immediately) When did your grandma die?

Kwame: About 6 months ago.

BR: What is she wearing? (The color of the clothing is important because of what it signifies.)

Kwame: (Understanding my question) She was in ordinary dress.

BR: Do you think she means to harm you?

Kwame: Oh No! She is protecting me.

BR: Then I don't understand why you are worried. This seems like something good.

Kwame: It is good. But, Brother, I am a student now. If she keeps waking me up my school work is going to suffer.

BR: That would not be good. (I took out a rosary I had, knowing that the boy was Catholic). Kwame, this rosary is made out of beads and has no magic in it. What I want you to do is this evening when you go to bed say one Hail Mary. Then tell Jesus to tell your Grandma that you are grateful for her protection and interest in you but you need your sleep so that you can study properly. Can you do this?

Kwame: Yes

This ended his sleepless nights. I had been in Ghana long enough to understand his reality. The appropriate American response to this episode would be to take the boy by the shoulders and in a firm, loud voice shout "Wake the hell up! There are no such things as ghosts! Get a life!" But I don't know what the boy had experienced. I wasn't there. And my faith vision allows for Grandma's to visit the living. I firmly believe that the spirits of my ancestors surround me at all times. The fact that I can't see

them, while this young boy could see his, is my problem. This experience in Ghana has led me to pray to not for my parents and relatives every day. If anyone is looking after me it is going to be my ancestors. I received a much more incarnational understanding of the communion of saints from my Ghanaian students.

Sense of Justice

One of the more interesting cultural differences that I experienced in Africa was their sense of justice. How does one right a wrong? I can illustrate the difference by citing two examples. World War II led to terrible atrocities against many peoples, all by “good” Christian people. At the end of the war there were the famous Nuremburg trials, in which the bad guys were found guilty and executed. Justice was done and everyone was, if not happy, satisfied. During the era of apartheid in South Africa many terrible things were done. When it ended there were reconciliation meetings during which the bad guys confessed publically their wrong doings, said they were sorry and were forgiven. Justice was done—relationships were restored. The same types of meetings are now going on in Sierra Leone and Liberia in an attempt to restore relationships. A knowing statement was made by Archbishop Desmond Tutu after the fall of apartheid. He said: “Be nice to the whites; they need you to discover their humanity.”

Prayer-Joy-Gratitude

The attitude that I discovered in Ghana towards prayer was to stand in God’s presence with open hands—an attitude of acceptance. Africans realize that they are not in charge. God is. As one of their proverbs says: God’s time is the best time. This is the heart of their prayer. In the West we practice discernment, i.e. we think about the solution to a problem or a course of action, then we pray about it, discuss it, pray about it some more and then come up with God’s will—what we are to do. The African would more likely think this is a form of arrogance. They would say: “God’s will happens! Your job is to adapt to it!”

I believe the key to understanding the African psyche is to be found in the two words: joy and gratitude. If there is a single important lesson the West can learn is the African sense of the joy of life. Long, spontaneous, joyful, religious ceremonies are the norm. Every year around 20 students from Holy Cross College spend two weeks in Ghana. I help prepare them for the trip. When they return one of the most common statements they make is this: “I don’t understand it! They’ve got nothing and everyone is happy!” What a wonderful intercultural experience to have.

The word for God in the Akan language is Onyame. This is made up of three small words: O-he/she/It; Nya-to get; me-to be satisfied. So God is: He/she when you get Him/her, you are totally satisfied. A fine concept of God. I can live with it!

Reentry

When a religious spends 28 years working in a culture other than his own and then has to return to the United States because of illness, he has a very curious experience. During this time the culture of the United States has undergone significant changes which the missionary has not bothered to keep up with. Thus, the missionary has the experience of being “lost”, having to relearn much of his original culture once again. In January of 1987 I had an attack of cerebral malaria. This is the malaria which kills many people every year. Since it remains in the system the doctors all advised that I not return to Arica again. After a convalescence of nearly five months I decided to make the Jesuit 30 day retreat to re-orientate myself. A friend of mine who spent many years in Africa decided to spend a couple of month at a Trappist Monastery for the same reason. This, for me, was a very important time because I had to come to terms with my new reality—I would no longer be able to work in Ghana! I think there are many ways for this new reality to be worked out. My decision is best expressed by a question I received in Akron, Ohio after giving a talk somewhat like this one to a group called the First Friday Club. Someone asked: “Clearly, you love Africa. How did you ever readjust to life in the U.S.? The answer was simple—I didn’t. I continue think about and live the values that I learned during my years in Ghana. They have nourished me and enriched me. I am eternally grateful for the gift of 28 years of life in Ghana.