

Contemporary new frontiers in internationality

By Cecile Meijer, RSCJ

As an immigrant to the United States, I have always felt a special bond with Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne. Throughout the years, Philippine has been the one sister who always “knew” from the inside what it meant to move from one country to another, from one culture to another. So when I was invited to be one of the speakers to address internationality at the Frontiers Conference in July 2018, my heart leapt.

The following article is a shortened version of my presentation at that conference. It explores what new frontiers of internationality we, as Sacred Heart family, might pursue today, both individually and collectively. With the Society’s historical commitment to internationality as the foundation, this reflection looks at three emerging frontiers that might stretch

- 1) internationality “on the move”
- 2) internationality as advocacy
- 3) internationality as deeper interculturalism or interculturality.

For the Society of the Sacred Heart, internationality is one of our most treasured gifts.

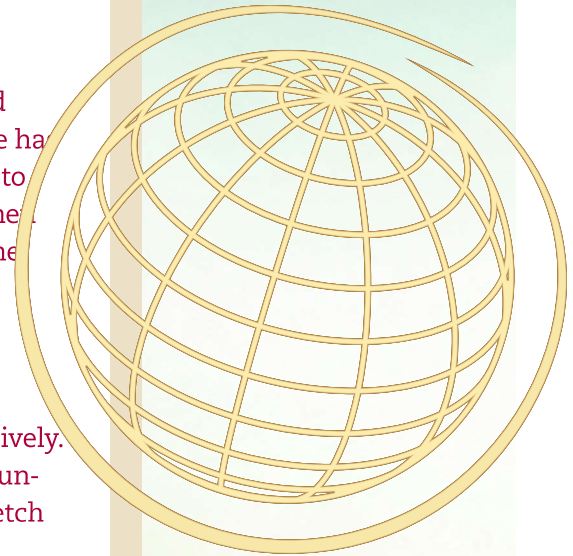
In Philippine’s time, the world was getting ever bigger, vaster, as people of all sorts, rich and poor, ventured out to settle in newly discovered, or rather conquered, lands. Communications and transportation went by covered wagon and boats, stretching over weeks and months.

In contrast, today’s world is getting smaller, thanks to the information revolution and many ongoing technological advances, such as artificial intelligence.

Today’s Global Village, once the scene of exploration and adventure into unknown territories, has become like a sandbox for anyone with access to the internet on a smart phone. We literally hold the world in our hands, at least that is what many think; and that in an era where change is constant and fast, seemingly never ending.

Navigating our “new normals” of living with terrorism and data breaches, nationalism and rising defense budgets, has led to widespread feelings of vulnerability and insecurity. Our incarnational spirituality has been entrusted to us for the transformation of the world. It asks us to be open to the spirit and willing to risk. We must both be knowledgeable about the world and translate that knowledge into action for the sake of the common good and our common home.

Giving hands and feet, voice and heart to our relationships makes everyone more human, affirms and reaffirms our common humanity. As the Spirit propelled Philippine’s desire to set sail to the New World, so the signs of our times beckon us to the next frontiers.



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Our heritage

Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat had a remarkable capacity to read the signs of her times. Growing up in the small town of Joigny during the French Revolution in the late 1700s, she became aware that the world was full of unrealized goodness, which she wanted to unleash by educating girls. Driven by a real need in the world, instead of becoming a contemplative Carmelite sister, Sophie established the Society of the Sacred Heart, a congregation of women contemplatives in action whose educational mission is still very relevant today.

Sophie envisioned a multitude of “adorers” from all over the world who would know the love of God. It was her desire that each student would experience God’s personal love for her (today we would speak of “her and him”) so that the student, in turn, could live out that love to renew and transform her social context.

For Sophie, internationality was a given. During her lifetime in the early to mid-19th century, the Society had foundations on four continents. By 1865, the Society counted more than 3,500 members. Today, RSCJ serve in 41 countries.

Usually internationality means an organization or group has branches or members in several countries. The Society’s General Chapter documents since 1988, however, show that over the years, the Society has increasingly articulated a much deeper and wider understanding of internationality, one in which our relationships take on global dimensions and are placed within the context of one common human family.

Today, our internationality is firmly rooted in the awareness that all life on earth, including the human family, is relational and interconnected, that all of creation is interdependent, and that, hence, my wellbeing depends on your wellbeing and vice versa. Wholeness of creation is both a process and our goal.

Did Philippine intuit this wisdom when she left France?

Internationality ‘on the move’

When Philippine Duchesne and her companions disembarked the *Rebecca* in New Orleans in 1818, they literally planted their feet on an unknown continent – a pretty radical and courageous thing to do for a midlife woman like Philippine, who was unaccustomed to the hardships of frontier life.

Where do we hear a call as we move toward the end of the first quarter of the 21st century? What does our call to radicality and risk imply?

The first frontier that comes to mind is as simple as it is radical: *offer – move – serve where the need is.*

As our demographics keep shifting, the places of new vocations do, as well. Why not offer ourselves as “*disponible*” sisters or lay volunteers who are ready, willing and able to help ensure the Society’s charism and mission can flourish in a new or struggling RSCJ context? Many of our fore-mothers have done so when they planted their feet on foreign soil.

An often forgotten side effect of living in another country is that living abroad opens us up to looking at our own country and culture through an uncommon lens. This new lens is not the same as looking at our home environment from another political vantage point, but arises from a unique and distinctive cultural angle and worldview. This new worldview leads to a deeper and wider experiential understanding of the interdependence and interrelatedness of peoples around the globe and, hence, of our common humanity.

For example, I came years ago as a Dutch woman and became a European by living in the U.S. Not only is such a grasp necessary for any global citizen, it also bonds people together and is part of the 2016 *Chapter Call* “to be more human” and “to be and to act as one Body.”



Presenters Cecile Meijer, RSCJ, (right) and Josephine Adibo, RSCJ, at the Frontiers Conference in 2018, a signature event of the 2018 Bicentennial celebrations.

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of society in building 'a culture which privileges dialogue as a form of encounter' and in creating 'a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive and inclusive society.'"

Of course, not everyone is called to physically move to new foreign destinations, so those staying home will need to find other ways of moving deeper into the human experience of the exploited and uprooted. Watching videos about refugees and migrants could be one way to do this, or reading and discussing books or articles on the plight of the displaced. Others might be attracted to offer more hands-on relief, such as at our southern border or at the local food bank or in (legal) immigration services.

We need to become creative in looking for innovative ways to support the footsteps of our contemporary Philippines, RSCJ or not.

One key dimension of internationality I encountered while serving as the Society's nongovernmental organization (NGO) representative at the United Nations is respectful dialogue. How does one get 193 member states with very different, often opposing, political agendas and ideologies to agree on anything, for example, the sustainable development goals (SDGs)?

The answer, I have learned, lies in the quality of our human relationships. Yes, governments will differ in their priorities and approaches, but it often is the manner of their interactions during deliberations and negotiations that allows for mutual understanding and appreciation of the "other" to develop, bridges to be built and friendships to be formed.

We all know that relational servant leadership goes much further than authoritative dictatorship. Pope Francis tells us the secret of "how" when he accepted the Charlemagne Prize in 2016:

"If there is one word that we should never tire of repeating, it is this: dialogue. We are called to promote a culture of dialogue by every possible means and thus to rebuild the fabric of society. The culture of dialogue entails a true apprenticeship and a discipline that enables us to view others as valid dialogue partners, to respect the foreigner, the immigrant and people from different cultures as worthy of being listened to. Today we urgently need to engage all the members

Dialogue and encounter are two mantras Pope Francis calls each one of us to personify and humanize. Repeatedly, he speaks of a culture of encounter, encountering the Risen Christ in everyday life. This call becomes even more sacred when one remembers Karl Rahner's words: "The Christian of the future will be a mystic or nothing at all."

The desire to let our lives be shaped by dialogue, encounter and prayer implies a powerful invitation to any contemplative in action, because our loving Creator is awe-inspiring: both transcendent (God beyond our imagining who is too big for our minds and hearts) and immanent (God living within each one of us, mysteriously incarnate in us).

The mystic knows that everyone and every living creature breathes God's Breath of Life, that this Love is the heartbeat of creation and has been its sustaining energy throughout our human and cosmic history.

Evocative of Matthew 25, this means that by serving, welcoming and caring for – in short, loving – our neighbor, we serve, welcome, care for and love God who lives in our neighbor.

A deep awareness of the indwelling presence of love, compassion, forgiveness and communion in all our relationships puts mission in a new perspective, because such consciousness results in a constant dialogue and encounter with Christ throughout the day: wholly contemplative and wholly apostolic.

Internationality as advocacy

Advocacy is the second aspect of internationality that calls us to cross new frontiers. Advocacy takes place at every level of life, from the most local setting (our neighborhoods or cities) to the international stage, for example, the European Union or United Nations (U.N.). Local advocates speak up and speak out for the needs of the people. As close witnesses of injustices suffered by their closest neighbors, contemplatives allow their prayer to be transformed into action.

The challenge for us today, as an international congregation, is to gain a deeper appreciation of how social ills are connected across borders. Dire poverty and the negative effects of climate change for people living in extreme poverty often lead to migration – poverty is multi-dimensional, advocates explain. Our world is such a web of life that "cause and effect" are literally half a world away, thus crying out for new multitudes of adorers who *want* to understand the systemic root causes and interconnections.



The delegates who represented the Society of the Sacred Heart at the 2019 United Nations High Level Political Forum, July 9-16, 2019, were (from left): Betty Nakato (Uganda), Lisabeth Kelly (intern, United States), Daphne Sequeira (general councillor, Rome), Rita Pinto (India), Sheila Smith (Canada and our UN-NGO representative), Bang Junghye (Korea) and Kim Jihye (Korea). "Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality" was the theme of the forum.

Many of our educational institutions have wonderful global citizenship education programs that teach such connecting-of-the-dots. Similarly, our presence at the U.N. is a critical vehicle to engage in international advocacy.

Once we understand that local injustices are reflections of a gravely unjust global system of imbalance, inequality and greed, we can begin to contribute at the international policy table from our life and mission as RSCJ to the benefit of the world, the common good. Systemic ills require systemic change. The world is one. The Society of the Sacred Heart is one. Now we must start to communicate that we also act as one.

One further frontier holds out great possibilities for international advocacy at the U.N. Have you ever realized that through the Society's NGO presence, we now can enter into dialogue with governments of countries where we are not physically present? By being at the U.N., we have multiplied our potential impact in ways that were unimaginable to both Sophie and Philippine.

Internationality as interculturality

A third frontier of internationality is for me interculturality, also known as interculturalism. Interculturality has been the Society's agenda since we left our cloisters and began inserting ourselves in small, local communities.

International experience for RSCJ probanists prior to taking final vows, sisters studying abroad, international novitiates in Chile and Chicago are examples of how RSCJ, to varying degrees, are part of today's intercultural flow shaping our Global Village.

For others, an intercultural student body in schools, exchange programs and a summer service program abroad, might illustrate that multiculturalism and interculturalism are a social fact of life today *and* are highly educative.

To name just a few of the challenges:

- Are we sufficiently aware that intercultural living demands much of our time and energy? That dialogue and encounter are essential parts of its success but require daily commitment and effort?
- How do we deal with differing values, norms and worldviews that underpin our communications and decision-making processes in an intercultural setting?
- How attentively will we listen to the relative or sister who returns from spending significant time abroad? Are we ready, willing and able to let her/his "changed self" influence our life? How do we journey with our returning missionaries?
- Do we expect foreign-born members in our neighborhoods, families or communities to adapt to us because we are the norm? Or are we open to their contribution, which will transform all of us?

As women religious, we increasingly live in intercultural communities – think, for example, of the motherhouse in Rome and the retreat center in Joigny. Might the recent *Chapter Calls* invite us all to discover and manifest how to live interculturally?

My recent experience of living in the “Beguinage” in Brussels, Belgium, might be illustrative.

As the unofficial capital of Europe, Brussels is a surprisingly diverse city. It is home to nationals from all European Union member states because many European and other international institutions are located in Brussels. There are also many migrants and refugees who have settled or been resettled in Belgium from francophone Africa or from the Middle East. Brussels is also home to a large Muslim population coming originally from North African countries, who came one or more generations ago.

The Beguinage where I lived is located in the European quarter of town. It is a complex of small townhouses and apartments modeled after the closed courtyards in the Middle Ages where pious widows and single women lived together a lay spirituality of prayer, a sort of private religious life without vows, each in her own little house. Built in 2017, our Beguinage is meant to provide rental housing for Christian families and single persons from around the world who are committed to living a Christ-centered life through solidarity, prayer and the building of community across cultures.

The Beguinage is international, intercultural, intercontinental, intergenerational and multilingual. Residents come from all over the world. As a deliberate religious presence in the Beguinage, the RSCJ community is one of the 20 households that make up the Beguinage. Our community was intercultural as well, constituted by two Belgians, one French and myself.



Central team members Marie-Jeanne Elonga (standing, second from left) and Monica Esquivel (seated, on right) visited the RSCJ, associates and staff from Ottawa, Ontario, during their recent visit to the United States – Canada Province.

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What bound us together as 20 largely international households is, of course, our unity as human beings despite our diversity. Nobody could boast of being the norm and our way of living together was to be discovered and formed one day at a time. We socialized together, we prayed in the church next door together, and the children learned to play together regardless of each one’s cultural background.

Slowly, but surely, we were building our new intercultural community among those coming from very diverse cultures, backgrounds and languages. Respecting and valuing one another as we are; appreciating and accepting our differences; celebrating our common feasts in ways that allowed for different cultural expressions; able or learning to speak one or two of our common languages; recognizing God’s presence within each one. These were some of the ways that led us to communion.

For me intercultural living is a gift, but one that requires daily commitment and effort because, ultimately, it is a relationship!

Conclusion

These three dimensions of internationality call us to cross new frontiers: global mobility/displacement of peoples, international advocacy and deeper interculturality. A contemplative gaze upon reality cannot but lead us to want to make life more human by acknowledging and acting upon our common humanity. This, in turn, will lead to greater understanding, solidarity and harmony within and across borders.

New frontiers are calling us. ✦

Cecile Meijer, RSCJ, was the Society’s NGO representative at the United Nations in New York, 2003-2017.