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Walking Together Beyond Borders: Challenges and Capacities of Intercultural Couples

1. Introduction

An anonymous blog reflection on an online language learning portal wasted no time getting straight to the heart of the matter: "Can cross-cultural relationships ever really work?" The author – who at the time had been married to her husband from another country for 6 years – concluded with the following testimonial in the light of their journey.

> It is interesting to think about how much we have changed and adapted to make the relationship work. I often wonder how many of the challenges we face are related to culture and how much is just personality. Of course it is unquantifiable. Since globalization is here to stay I feel that being part of a cross-cultural relationship is kind of like taking ownership of that overwhelming inevitability. My partner and I, and our two small daughters, have created a modest and unique piece of the endlessly unfolding puzzle that makes up this crazy modern world.[1]

In this increasingly globalized world, it is only natural that intercultural relationships are a growing phenomenon.[2] As migration and global mobility become seemingly permanent features of contemporary life, the crossed paths of couples from different countries and cultures shape the face – not to mention the genome – of the human family. We, the authors of this article, come from two such couples, whose stories stretch across oceans and whose family trees reach across continents. In one case, it is the story of a Chilean-Slovak couple who began their relationship during university studies in Rome. In the other case, a couple from France and English-speaking Canada who met during studies in Montreal. Our stories involve learning new languages, being international students, moving half a world away, and trying to raise children in two distinct cultures. In both cases, one spouse comes from Europe, while the other is from the Americas.

1 Anonymous: "Can Cross-Cultural Relationships Ever Really Work?", in: *Verbling* (2 June 2020); available at: https://www.verbling.com/articles/post/can-cross-cultural-relationships-ever-re.

2 In this article, we have chosen to speak in terms of "intercultural" rather than "cross-cultural", since this is the terminology more frequently employed in contemporary scholarly literature.

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Taking an autoethnographic approach, this article reflects on the contemporary phenomenon of intercultural couples from the perspective of two scholars in theology who have personal experience in this area of interest. Autoethnography has been defined as "a research method that uses personal experience ('auto') to describe and interpret ('graphy') cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices ('ethno')."[3] As researchers, we will draw upon our own personal experiences of intercultural relationships to reflect critically upon this significant but often overlooked topic. As theologians, we ask what resources the Christian community and the teachings of the gospel might offer to support couples who take up the daring challenge of intercultural relationships. We see this question as having considerable pastoral significance in the intercultural and multicultural contexts of global Catholicism. However, we also wish to highlight the real capacity of intercultural couples as protagonists in culturally diverse Christian communities, since the habits and insights learned from daily life in an intercultural home can help build relationships across cultures in ecclesial contexts.

The objective of the article is not to provide an in-depth statistical analysis to demonstrate predominant trends regarding intercultural couples but rather to investigate key nuclei of both tension and meaning that characterize couples who come from vastly different places and perspectives. These reflections develop in resonance with our own experiences, exploring the challenges and hopes of family life as an intercultural couple, and drawing lessons for Christian communities today. The ultimate horizon of the text is to observe in the practices of intercultural couples certain aspects of the synodal church and thus to affirm the potential of intercultural families as spaces where the synodal church is both practiced and learned. We aim to illustrate our points with concrete and relatable examples that may resonate with the experiences of other couples, fostering dialogue and reflection.

2. Definition and Typology of Intercultural Couples

Existing definitions of intercultural couples come mainly from the field of psychotherapy, which is indeed an important source of literature on this topic. This fact highlights that intercultural couples experience a distinct set of challenges compared to those experienced by couples in which both partners come from the same cultural background. Here, we define culture as: "a learned meaning system of shared beliefs, values, norms, symbols, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that members of a group utilize to make sense of their world and one another, as well as foster a sense of shared identity and community."[4] In this article, we

3 Tony E. Adams/Carolyn Ellis/Stacy Holman Jones: "Autoethnography", in: Jörg Matthes (ed.): *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, John Wiley & Sons, 2017, 1, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011.

4 Rebecca M. Bustamante/Judith A. Nelson/Richard C. Henriksen/Sarah Monakes: "Intercultural Couples: Coping with Culture-Related Stressors", in: *The Family Journal* 19/2 (2011), 155, https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480711399723.

will prioritize a notion of intercultural couples that includes a dimension of stability and projection. We will therefore exclude minimalist definitions that include occasional intimate contact. Intimate intercultural relationships can be defined as "committed, loving relationships between two people who identify with different cultural groups because they represented at least two nationalities, races, or religions".[5]

This definition highlights the fact that there are diverse forms and dimensions of interculturality. These include cultural, national, racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences. We are conscious that in our case, as authors, our relationships do not involve all of these differences. For example, we do not experience racial differences, as many couples do. In this sense, we in no way intend to speak on behalf of other intercultural couples, so as not to essentialize the nature of intercultural couples. Rather, we offer this article as a critical reflection on the basis of our own experiences in the hope that they can shed light on this complex reality in an unexhaustive manner.

3. Challenges of Intercultural Couples

Intercultural couples face challenges that are both unique and universal. On the one hand, there are unique challenges based on their particular circumstances: cultural and linguistic differences, different social expectations, and geographic distance. On the other hand, intercultural couples contend with the challenges experienced by all couples, albeit in a different way or to a different extent. The stage actor and playwright Sacha Guitry is known for the adage: "Marriage is about solving problems together that you wouldn't have had on your own." This is all the more clear in the case of intercultural couples, who face as a pair challenges that neither one of them would ever have encountered if not for the other. The nature of their challenges naturally depends on the cultural background and identity of each.

Of course, every couple has to manage the differences between the two partners, since they will necessarily have two unique personalities, come from two different families, and have distinct opinions and life experiences. However, in the case of intercultural couples not only may the distance between the differences feel wider, they may also make themselves felt sooner in the relationship and have more far-reaching consequences. In this sense, intercultural couples may become more quickly aware of the crucial differences between them, which couples from a relatively similar social or cultural background may discover further into their relationship.

While *Amoris laetitia* pays special attention to migrant and transnational families (AL 46), interchurch couples (AL 247), and interreligious couples (AL 248), no particular reference is made to intercultural couples.[6] Vincenzo Rosito, a scholar

5 Ibid. 154; see Man Keung Ho: *Intermarried Couples in Therapy*, Charles C. Thomas, 1990.
6 See Francis: *Amoris laetitia* (AL), 19 March 2016.

whose work is situated at the nexus of social philosophy and theology regarding families, has emphasized the fact that the field of Migration Studies can illuminate that of Family Studies, particularly when it comes to processes of learning, adaptation, and mutual understanding within family life. His reflections draw attention to how families – not only as social units but also as spaces of ethical and spiritual growth – navigate the challenges of intercultural encounters and integrate new knowledge and practices into their shared life.[7]

There are noteworthy differences and similarities between migrant families in general and intercultural families in particular. Of course, there is considerable overlap between these two terms. Many migrant families are composed of partners from two different cultures, while many others come from the same culture, particularly during the first or second generation after migration. However, many intercultural couples experience migration in some form or another, and mobility is a common feature of their life together. Indeed, it is often through migration or mobility that intercultural couples meet in the first place. For example, we met our respective spouses in the context of being international students. Student mobility was the vector of the couple being formed.

Both migrant families and intercultural couples may share the common experience of feeling they are not at home. A couple from a given country who migrates across the world will take time to adjust to their new country and will feel "at home" in a different way in their country of adoption versus their country of origin. A particularity of intercultural couples where each partner is from a different country is that oftentimes one or the other will always feel they are not entirely at home, no matter where the couple is living. In this sense, there is an asymmetry within intercultural couples that is not necessarily true of migrant couples, especially when both partners in a migrant couple come from the same country. Sometimes, intercultural couples manage this asymmetry by deciding to live – at least for a time – in a third country. This has been the case for both authors of this article.

Choosing to live in a third country highlights a common phenomenon for intercultural couples: creating a new culture. Miriam Riaz Nichol and Dora Regoczi have described this as "intercultural couples co-creating a third culture".[8] This co-creation of a third culture, characterized by the particular interculturality of a given couple and the family they form, both links them to their cultures of origin while also distinguishing them from those original cultures. There may be a sense of belonging to multiple cultures, and at the same time of belonging together to a new familial culture, that is forged together over time, drawing together threads of the original cultures while also producing something unique and unprecedented. This occurs gradually, as an almost artisanal and often unconscious process. It will

7 See Vincenzo Rosito: *Famiglia e apprendimento sociale: Nuovi orizzonti di ricerca*, Studium, 2025, 56-58.

8 See Miriam Riaz Nichol/Dora Regoczi: "'Worlds Apart': Examining the Experiences of Intercultural Couples Co-Creating a Third Culture", in: *Personal Relationships* 32/4 (2025), 1-12, https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.70035.

naturally be colored and conditioned not only by the cultures of origin of the partners but also by the countries in which each has lived, and in which they live together over time.

For example, in the case of both of our families, we have spent time living together in our respective countries of origin, but also in a third country, in our case Italy. This means that the children are growing up going to school in a language that is not the mother tongue of either of their parents. At home, a mixture of the local language and the mother tongues of both parents is spoken. If, on the one hand, this daily experience of interculturality and multilingualism significantly increases "the potential for misunderstanding",[9] it also, on the other hand, offers the possibility of widening cultural horizons, deepening understanding across differences, and developing the capacity for adaptation.

While intercultural couples experience a series of stressors specifically related to their intercultural nature, it is worth noting that they develop strategies to overcome these challenges. These authors point to the prevalence of six specific coping strategies: "(a) gender-role flexibility; (b) humor; (c) cultural deference by one partner; (d) recognition of similarities; (e) cultural reframing or the development of blended values and expectations that redefined the intercultural relationship; and (f) a general appreciation for other cultures."[10] Steven E. Quasha and Fumiko Tsukada warn about the danger of entering into an intercultural marriage without sufficient tools. They point out that there are cultures that tend to avoid conflict (such as Japanese culture) and others that see conflict as a natural part of human relationships (Western cultures).[11]

Unfortunately, there are many situations in which the strain produced by cultural differences has been cited as a primary reason for a couple breaking up: "The demands of cultural adaption add a considerable layer of stress to an international marriage and require the two people to be accepting and non-judgmental of values and behaviors different from their own."[12]

4. Capacities Arising in and from Intercultural Couples

In time, the challenges experienced by intercultural couples can give rise to capacities that enable them to manage, cope, and indeed thrive. These capacities are born of an ongoing process of mutual enrichment and experiential learning. Navigating cultural differences on a daily basis provides a foundation for developing a variety of social, relational, and emotional competencies, such as openness to others, cultural adaptation, and reaching compromises. In this section, we will

9 R.M. Bustamante/J.A. Nelson/R.C. Henriksen/S. Monakes: "Intercultural Couples", 155.
10 Ibid. 154-155.
11 Steven E. Quasha/Fumiko Tsukada: "International Marriages in Japan: Cultural Conflict and Harmony", in: Larry A. Samovar/Richard E. Porter/Edwin R. McDaniel (eds.): *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*, Wadsworth, 2012, 129.
12 Ibid. 136.

examine three specific examples of challenges that can give rise to capacities in the journeys of intercultural couples, namely: negotiating gender roles, navigating social dynamics in the wider family, and managing religious and spiritual differences.

4.1. Negotiating Gender Roles

The degree of differentiation of gender roles in a culture is closely linked to the level of hierarchy that culture accepts or, conversely, to the degree of egalitarianism or social equality that it is willing to uphold. In the context of romantic relationships, culturally assigned gender roles help to define and explain the differences between partners in terms of their attitudes towards work, power, money, and domestic responsibilities.[13]

The success of a relationship depends largely on the ability of its members to assume flexible and negotiable roles over time. This flexibility becomes especially relevant for intercultural couples. In these cases, expectations regarding gender roles, family responsibilities, and the organization of daily life can diverge significantly. In contrast, a considerable proportion of marital failures seem to be associated with the difficulty of revising and adapting rigid conceptions of these roles, a difficulty that tends to manifest itself more intensely when the cultural frames of reference are diverse.

It is important to note that the processes of negotiation and redefinition of roles are not exclusive to intercultural couples. Even when both members share the same national or cultural background, there may be significant differences arising from their family cultures of origin, different life trajectories, or divergent interpretations of social norms. In this sense, all married life involves some degree of negotiation regarding the distribution of responsibilities, mutual expectations, and the criteria that guide domestic life. However, for intercultural couples, these dynamics tend to intensify, as the differences are not limited to variations within the same cultural horizon but may refer to more distant normative frameworks.

For many intercultural couples, at least during an initial period that may be more or less prolonged, one of the partners has more stable working conditions or higher remuneration. It is also common for one of them to have a greater command of the language of the country in which they both reside. These asymmetries, which may be temporary or persistent, influence the distribution of responsibilities in everyday life. In practice, the organization of domestic work and care tasks initially tends to respond to these differential conditions. However, the way in which such arrangements are interpreted and integrated into the common project depends largely on each member's prior convictions regarding gender roles and beliefs about fairness in the distribution of responsibilities.

13 See Judith Kellner: "Gender Perspective in Cross-Cultural Couples", in: *Clinical Social Work Journal* 37/3 (2009), 224-229; Jennifer Admire/Bryon Miller: *The Routledge International Handbook of Interracial and Intercultural Relationships and Mental Health*, Routledge, 2025.

In both our cases, work has been a significant motivating factor in making international moves. In some cases, it was the job opportunity of the female spouse that prompted the move; in others, it was the job opportunity of the male spouse. Our experience is that coming from two different countries opens the field of possibility for seeking work in various contexts. At the same time, this openness to a wider job market bears with it significant implications not only for oneself but also for one's partner and family. It also means that one of the partners may be out of work for a period of time upon arrival in a new location. This can be a challenge not only for that partner but for the relationship as well.

How such decisions are made and managed over time is part of a broader process of mutual adjustment that could be understood as a form of reciprocal inculturation. Each partner is exposed over a long period of time to different ways of understanding family, work, authority, or care. This daily exposure not only involves practical learning of new forms of domestic organization but also a confrontation with cultural assumptions that may previously have been taken for granted. Reciprocal inculturation consists precisely of this process through which each one revisits their own convictions in the light of their shared experience. Rather than limiting themselves to a unilateral adaptation to the other's culture or the social environment in which they live, they can develop a more reflective understanding of their respective traditions. Based on this recognition, the possibility opens up for joint discernment aimed at constructing their own codes to regulate family life.[14]

The intensity – or, conversely, the inadequacy – of this process often becomes particularly apparent with the arrival of children. The birth or adoption of a child is a moment when many normative expectations are expressed more clearly. Decisions regarding care, education, discipline, or the organization of family time reveal deep-seated conceptions about motherhood, fatherhood, and domestic life. Even seemingly minor aspects of daily life – schedules, routines, parenting styles, or ways of allocating time – can become points of tension when partners rely on different normative frameworks. In this sense, parenthood not only introduces new responsibilities but also requires the explicit articulation and negotiation of cultural views that may previously have remained implicit.

Although there have been significant cultural shifts in recent decades in relation to the distribution of care tasks within the family, numerous studies show that the burden of these tasks continues to fall disproportionately on women. This persistence is largely due to deeply rooted beliefs in different cultures about motherhood, work, and domestic responsibility. Such beliefs give rise to various forms of inequality, whose legitimacy and concrete expression vary according to cultural contexts.

14 Novels that allow us to explore this experience, both in relationships and in parenthood, include: Jhumpa Lahiri: *The Namesake*, Mariner, 2003; Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: *Americanah*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013; Zadie Smith: *White Teeth*, Hamish Hamilton, 2000; Amy Tan: *The Joy Luck Club*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1989.

When, in an intercultural couple, conceptions of equality, inequality, and justice in the distribution of responsibilities are too far apart, the externalization of expectations can become a particularly complex process. Negotiating these differences requires not only communication skills but also a willingness to question deeply internalized cultural assumptions. The absence of this willingness can lead to dynamics of misunderstanding or persistent conflicts that erode coexistence.

In this sense, flexibility in assuming cultural roles can be an educational approach to managing diversity between the two. More than a simple pragmatic adaptation to circumstances, such flexibility can foster an attitude of curiosity and mutual learning about different practices, as well as greater awareness of one's own cultural traditions. When this process is carried out in a reflective manner, it can contribute to a more mature form of conjugal love, characterized by the ability to integrate differences, renegotiate expectations, and build, on the basis of diversity, a truly shared family project.

4.2. Navigating Social Dynamics in the Wider Family

Of course, the differences experienced by intercultural couples do not exist in isolation. They emerge from, and are continuously influenced by, wider family dynamics on both sides. It bears recalling that: "In addition to the small circle of the couple and their children, there is the larger family, which cannot be overlooked" (AL 196). Since each family has, in a certain sense, its own "culture", there are naturally differences in the ways that two spouses have been brought up, learned to socialize, and experienced love in the families in which they were raised. However, the extent of these familial differences can be particularly acute in the case of partners whose families come from markedly different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, relationships with one's in-laws can be a source of joy and mutual discovery, while they can also engender tensions and frustration. The positive and negative factors may both be amplified when the differences are heightened. Being in a couple with someone from a markedly different cultural background accentuates the need to get to know their family as a way of understanding who the person is, where they come from, and why they act the way they do.

In navigating social dynamics with one's in-laws across cultural differences, a spirit of understanding and respect are crucial elements for the development of caring relationships. Speaking of the parents and relatives of one's spouse, *Amoris laetitia* states that: "The conjugal union demands respect for their traditions and customs, an effort to understand their language and to refrain from criticism, caring for them and cherishing them while maintaining the legitimate privacy and independence of the couple. Being willing to do so is also an exquisite expression of generous love for one's spouse." (AL 198)

However, what AL does not explicitly address is the need for respect that is *mutual*, and not only one-sided, with one's in-laws. Indeed, there is a basic need for mutual understanding on both sides. Much is at stake in the extent to which the newcomer to the family is made to feel welcomed. The arrival of a new member

of the family from a distinct culture constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity for the family of which he or she is becoming a part. On the one hand, they did not necessarily choose to have a family member from a culture that is different from their own. One can wonder: would they be more content and/or more at ease with someone who more closely resembled them or came from the same place, with the same traditions, worldview, and cultural references? On the other hand, navigating this new relationship with someone from elsewhere offers everyone involved unexpected possibilities for mutual enrichment. It opens up a window of intercultural understanding, acceptance, and love across borders, broadening horizons and creating links with other parts of the world. The relationship between the two families of origin is also a striking litmus test of interculturality. If geographical, cultural, or linguistic differences are too great, this may hinder authentic ties from developing between the two sides. However, when efforts are made to bridge these differences, it can give rise to bonds of friendship and a deepening sense of mutual discovery.

The cases of the authors vary significantly in this regard, largely as a result of two main factors: geographical distance and language. On the one hand, for the two of us coming from English-speaking Canada and France, there is the benefit of the two extended families being able to communicate in English as a bridge language. On the other hand, for the two from Chile and Slovakia, there is no common language between the two sides of the family. This means that interactions between the two require a series of translations, which makes social interactions more arduous. What's more, the geographic distance is greater, and travel more difficult between Chile and Slovakia than it is between France and eastern Canada, offering fewer occasions for the two sides to see each other in person.

Besides the intrinsic value of these relationships, they also enable a more genuine connection with one's own immediate relatives whose lives span the two cultures. Getting to know the other set of grandparents of one's own grandchildren, for example, can also serve as an authentic sign of love, care, and interest in one's own flesh and blood, enabling a deeper awareness of their identity and perspective. Being open and accepting of other cultures can start with being welcoming towards newcomers in one's own extended family who come from a different cultural background. The relationships of love, care, and affection that develop between people from different cultures put us in touch with the common humanity we share and offer a lived experience of the possibility of universal communion, with its challenges and opportunities.

4.3. Managing Religious and Spiritual Differences

Coming from two different family backgrounds, one of the key cultural differences to be managed by the couple are those relating to the religious and spiritual spheres, dimensions that often play a significant role in the organization of daily life and in shaping personal and family identities. Indeed, religion is not limited to a set of individual beliefs but is closely linked to forms of community

belonging, shared practices, and normative frameworks that guide moral life. At the same time, spirituality refers to the subjective experience through which people interpret their existence in the light of transcendent meanings, developing their own ways of relating to God, to others, and to the world. Managing these dimensions can be particularly complex in intercultural couples. In the present analysis, however, the scope is deliberately kept within the boundaries of Christianity, with the aim of highlighting a phenomenon that has not always been sufficiently addressed, namely, the differences that can emerge even when the partners belong to the same Christian denomination but cultivate that belonging with different cultural and spiritual accents.

In this sense, belonging to a common religious tradition does not necessarily guarantee a homogeneous experience of faith. The concrete ways in which people live their relationship with the Christian tradition are mediated by specific cultural contexts, particular biographical trajectories, and spiritual sensibilities that can vary considerably. For intercultural couples, these variations can become particularly visible, even when both spouses see themselves as members of the same church.

One of the cases considered here, the Slovakian-Chilean couple, clearly illustrates this dynamic. Both grew up as practicing Catholics; however, their formative experiences took place in different cultural contexts, one in a Central European country and the other in Latin America. This difference in context has given rise to different spiritual emphases in the way they understand and live their ecclesial belonging. The European spouse attributes particular significance to the liturgical dimension of Christian life, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, which is perceived as the structuring center of the experience of faith. Participation in the liturgy, continuity with the sacramental tradition, and the symbolic value of the rites are decisive elements in his experience of Christian belonging.

For her part, the Latin American spouse recognizes her religious identity with a greater emphasis on experiences linked to the practice of social justice. Her understanding of faith is articulated around the ethical and communal dimension of Christianity, particularly in relation to commitment to the most vulnerable and to forms of social action inspired by the gospel. In her experience, the authenticity of Christian life is manifest in a privileged way in the ability to translate faith into concrete practices of solidarity and social transformation.

These differences should not necessarily be interpreted as irreconcilable oppositions. Rather, they can be understood as complementary expressions of the same religious tradition, whose historical richness has given rise to multiple ways of living and expressing faith. However, in the couple's daily life, such emphases can raise questions about the spiritual priorities of the partners, forms of community participation, and the way in which faith is integrated into family life.

Throughout the partners' life together, it is possible to identify different moments in the management of these differences. In the early stages, an attitude of curiosity and mutual admiration usually prevails, in which each partner discovers dimensions in the other's religious experience that broaden their own understanding of faith. Over time, however, moments of friction may arise in which

it becomes necessary to verify the real possibilities of building a shared spiritual experience. This verification takes on particular relevance when the couple faces the task of transmitting their faith to their children. In this context, decisions regarding religious education, participation in community life, or spiritual practices in the home require the explicit articulation of criteria and priorities that may have previously remained implicit.

Reflective management of these differences can ultimately become an opportunity to develop a more conscious and dialogical form of living the faith. When both partners recognize the legitimacy of each other's spiritual sensibilities, diversity can become a pedagogical resource that enriches the family's experience of faith. In this way, children can receive, not a uniformly simplified view of religious tradition, but an experience that introduces them to the plurality of ways in which the same faith can be lived and understood.

Ultimately, differences in religious sensibility for the couple constitute a real challenge for conversion. It is not a question of superficially incorporating external elements but of allowing the experience of the other to transform one's own spiritual experience, giving rise to something completely new and broader. This openness requires discernment, patience, and a willingness to question previous certainties, but it also offers the possibility of enriching personal and family faith. When approached from a contemplative and reflective perspective, this experience can become a valuable resource for a synodal church that trusts in listening as a space for transformation. Living with spiritual diversity as a couple allows us to recognize that the truth of faith is not exhausted in a single sensibility but is enriched in attentive and respectful dialogue, in the creative integration of different experiences of faith, and in the construction of a common horizon that, at the same time, respects the uniqueness of each person.

5. Exploring the Role of Intercultural Couples in Society and in the Church

All families are called to have an impact on the societies and communities in which they live. As Pope Francis states in AL: "In the family, we learn how to live as one. Perhaps we do not always think about this, but the family itself introduces fraternity into the world. From this initial experience of fraternity, nourished by affection and education at home, the style of fraternity radiates like a promise upon the whole of society." (AL 194) In this sense, there is a "social vocation of love"[15] that is called to radiate outwards from family life across the entire human family, "inject[ing] a family spirit" into the heart of the world (AL 183). Is there a particular social vocation of intercultural couples and families? What are specific lessons that both the church and society can learn from them?

15 Philippe Bordeyne: *Famiglie alla ricerca di Dio: Orientamenti teologici e pastorali per i tempi nuovi*, Studium, 2023, 25-26.

The personal challenges that intercultural couples face offer them opportunities to develop capacities that can contribute in a unique way to the life of society and of the church. In his encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis called for a more open world characterized by social friendship, human communion, and universal love.[16] Intercultural couples and the families they form experience these values on a daily basis. Their daily learning and relearning of these values in the course of their life together can spill over into the many communities to which they belong. This includes the local civic community in which they live, as well as the religious, social, and cultural groups that they are a part of.

The way that these couples and families learn to love and live their unity in diversity offers keys for the church and society to do likewise. On the one hand, they are signs of how differences can not only be managed harmoniously, despite the challenges, but are also sources of mutual enrichment. On the other hand, they reveal the universal scope of love, friendship, and community, pointing to the common foundation upon which all human relationships can be based. To use Pope Francis's language, intercultural couples and families are not modelled after the *sphere* – in which all points are "equidistant from the center" and "there are no differences between them" – but are more aptly represented by a *polyhedron*, which brings together diverse parts without levelling their distinctiveness.[17] So too, they can help society and the church live not as spheres but as polyhedrons, especially in contexts increasingly characterized by pluralism and multiculturalism. Intercultural couples and families are not only models of universal love; they can also radiate its spirit and cultivate its *habitus* in the communities to which they belong. If the family is understood as a "school of deeper humanity",[18] intercultural families can be schools of a deeper human communion and a more genuine universal love, built on the daily experience of loving in and across differences, surpassing borders.

6. Walking Forward with Hope across Borders

In the face of the multiple ruptures that threaten the family of humanity in today's world, "it is families that make up the fabric of society and 'mend its tears' with patience and daily sacrifices".[19] Families formed by intercultural couples can offer a particularly vital contribution in this regard. At a time when war and conflict are putting the fate of entire peoples in jeopardy, the lives of intercultural couples are daily witnesses of unity in diversity and the hope of peace across cultural and religious differences. Perhaps a particular focus should be on the fact that the children of intercultural couples often grow up inhabiting multiple worlds at once. Their everyday bilingualism – linguistic, emotional, spiritual, and even

16 See Francis: *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020.
17 Francis: *Evangelii gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 236.
18 Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes*, 7 December 1965, 52.
19 Francis: "Preface", in: Dicastery for Family, Laity and Life: *Catechumenal Pathways for Married Life*, 2022, 9.

culinary – can become a precious resource. In a world marked by division, this familiarity with plurality may nurture attitudes of openness and mediation, offering a small but meaningful contribution to peace.

As these families walk forward through the daily experience of loving one another not *in spite of* but precisely *in* their differences, the church can play an active role in accompanying and supporting intercultural couples and families, not only in ministering *to* them but also in learning *from* them.

> Families, which the Council refers to as "as it were, the domestic Church" (*Lumen gentium*, 11), are the pre-eminent context in which we learn to live out the richness of relationships between persons, united in their diversity of character, sex, age and role…Family humanizes people through the relationship of "us" and at the same time promotes the legitimate differences of each one.[20]

In this light, intercultural families are vital cells and schools of a deeper humanization, which is rooted in what we fundamentally hold in common while celebrating what is unique about each person. Intercultural families can be protagonists in promoting encounter, understanding, and relationship in the many contexts of multiculturalism that mark the contemporary experiences of Christian communities across the globe. In this sense, they are also living schools of synodality and vital cells of a synodal church, walking forward together in diversity and cultivating communion and mutual belonging amid the challenges of daily life.

The lived experience of intercultural families offers a living witness that gives flesh to the theology of human community and social friendship, demonstrating that human love has the power to reach across boundaries and embrace differences. Amid the fractures that threaten the human family, families that weave together diverse cultures are prophetic models of peace and artisans of a more welcoming, inclusive church and world.

Summary

Walking Together Beyond Borders: Challenges and Capacities of Intercultural Couples

What are the challenges and capacities that intercultural couples experience in daily life? How can their experiences inform and promote the ability to walk together in the midst of the differences in church and society today? Through an autoethnographic lens, the authors reflect critically on contemporary realities that intercultural couples face, in the light of their own lived experiences and in dialogue with magisterial teachings and scholars from various scholarly disciplines. Three particular areas of interest are managing gender roles in intercultural couples, navigating social dynamics in the wider family, and managing spiritual and religious differences. Ultimately, the article points to the lives of intercultural families as vital cells and schools of a deeper humanization, offering an unsung but fundamental contribution to peace and fraternity in a world marked by division and conflict.

20 XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: *Final Document: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*, 26 October 2024, 35.

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