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**Inculturation taking place:
Experiences of Daughters of Charity of the Orient Province
-extracts from testimonies-**

*by Sr Marie-Claire Saad, DC
Visitatrix of the Orient Province*

The purpose of this brief introductory intervention is to point out the implicit sociology regarding the Daughters of Charity concerning the various peoples they serve in the midst of a Moslem majority. In this sociology we find an explicit declaration of aims and deeper attitudes, behaviours, signs and symbols which flow from a relational way of living. Through these we give expression to the gospel we profess.

For the last four years the Daughters of Charity of the Orient Province have been organising sessions of reflexion and of debates. They have been setting up pilot projects with the aim of investigating their implicit sociology in a way that will reveal it more explicitly to themselves and to the peoples among whom they are working.

The driving motivation which gave impetus to these movements of reflexion and action was the questioning which was addressed to them by the Company with regard to the inculturation of their charism in a world of change. In the course of those four years, inculturation became the driving force which motivated the Daughters of Charity of the Orient Province to analyse themselves and their works in order to gauge the effectiveness of what they want to achieve with regard to their mission and the peoples they serve.

What we would wish for, as Daughters of Charity, is to live Christ in the simplest way possible, with much modesty and humility, so that inculturation becomes visible in a living out of poverty. What we have tried to do is to accept poverty as a means of witnessing successfully. Through our poverty we tried to come face to face with neediness as a result of becoming dispossessed in order to be able to share our lives with the poor while developing our spiritual and human richness.

That is how we tried to live Christ and to transmit him through our words and actions. We feel however that we have worked to bring towards us the people we serve rather than to go ourselves towards them and to understand them in their cultures and to affirm the values they profess.

Inculturation is first of all a matter of seeing ourselves as actors who bear messages and values which are made palpable through particular cultural expressions picked up by people who express themselves differently. So the

question then came up of training ourselves for listening, through their own cultures, to the people we serve, in order to grasp their own personal worth. Next, it was a question of recognising the messages and the values of these people and of helping them to live them more deeply, through greater openness. In this way there could be a real meeting and a discovery of Christ at these levels, once made free from cultural ambiguities.

Our experiences continue to be observed and analysed at these three levels, namely observing ourselves, observing others, forming ourselves to listen to cultures and values, and to meet one another beyond our implied cultures. This helps us to keep a check on ourselves continually and to revise our approaches by making adjustments in response to the changes which arise in different contexts in which we serve. Also drawing closer to the people touched by our works so that we may all meet together in Christ.

The experiences which are reported here concern the following countries: Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Holy Land.

Daughters of Charity in Syria

How are we to speak of our activities in Syria? (A country with a Moslem majority where there are 10 to 15 % of Christians of different rites). I can give a few examples from the high points of the school year: Christmas, Ramadan and Easter.

With the aim of enabling the most needy to participate in the joy of Christmas, the sisters and the teachers encouraged the pupils to go out to the poor. Not simply to give them a present like they themselves receive at Christmas, but to become imaginative in order to know what to put into the parcel (toy, material for school, dress or jeans, pullovers, delicacies, soap, toilet articles....), then to wrap it in gift paper, decorate it and bring it themselves to an orphanage. Sister's office became a depot and the children stayed in during recreation so busy were they in their preparations.

At the start this was limited to one class, Seventh, and a Greek Orthodox orphanage for boys. The other classes wanted to do the same, and so two other orphanages came on the list: a Greek Catholic orphanage and a girls' Greek Orthodox orphanage.

Among our children we also had Moslems who took part in this gift-giving; and they are very generous. With Ramadan approaching, our professor of Moslem religion made arrangements with a Moslem orphanage of 150 children. They agreed readily and received us with open arms. Not wanting to be too demanding they indicated only two classes out of six. After having celebrated with them and

distributed the gifts, our children felt pity for the others who had received nothing. Back in school they recounted what they had done and all the classes combined in order to give something to those who had received nothing. When they returned to the orphanage it was the director and the staff who were the most deeply touched by this gesture.

The Sudanese refugees were also given their part on the occasion of a free day. This took place in the convent playground. The children organised for them a sort of fair in which everyone received a parcel. Dads and mums weren't forgotten. The greatest joy was to see the parents who were awaiting their children's return. They were so happy to see their children so full of enjoyment that tears were in their eyes. And they thanked us deeply for having sensitised the children to the making of such a humane gesture in a world which is so materialistic.

Our experience as Daughters of Charity in Syria leads us fundamentally to revise our role of serving in society. Aren't we called to appreciate deeply the values of Christian and Moslem Arabs which find specific expression in Syria through the dominant culture, and to make the general populace buy into these values, by specially inviting Christians to affirm this?

The Christians in Syria are consequently called upon to make their own contribution to society, by rediscovering their difficult but characteristic role whereby they hold a special identity as "Christian Arabs", in a society which has a Moslem majority with whom for centuries they've been forming one single society.

Their mission assumes two fundamental aspects: intensification of ecumenical efforts involving a common and frequent exchange on the principal socio-political problems, as well as the opening of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue with Islam and Moslems.

In this regard there's an urgent need for the churches to develop an awareness of the need for more and more collaboration which overcomes ancient rivalries. Also a firm sense of community involving an effort to work out common pastoral projects and establish links with the society and the country in which they exist.

Daughters of Charity in Egypt

In spite of the diversity of rites the Christians in Egypt strive to give witness to unity by developing common initiatives (Bible translation, manuals for religion teaching, uniform calendar...)

Nowadays the relationship between Copts and Moslems is important for all, but it is not automatic or evident. For example, although the Copt community is

clearly in the minority, it refuses to consider itself as such. That is why this is seen as a challenge offered to all who expect from the Copts and Moslems an explicit determination to maintain what it is agreed to call "national unity".

As a matter of fact Christians and Moslems often share the same building, often the same schools and even the same work-places. They share the same culture and are confronted by the same problems. In spite of great difficulties, both parties can be seen to be developing a clear and sincere determination to live together (at the levels of intellectual class, of populist class, of the nation, of religion).

How are we to incarnate our love for God? Through our simple daily acts of service, through literacy courses and the advancement of women, we are struggling against ignorance. We are trying to help women and girls to become agents of their own advancement through their learning a trade, through economic projects, courses in hygiene and in general living. Because in our society the woman is often kept down; she is not recognized as a person having her own dignity and her place in society.

Our social centres are frequented by veiled Moslem women as well as by Christian women. At the start the latter were off-put by the former, they tended to keep to themselves. But living together means a joining of hands in order to build up society which constitutes the family of tomorrow. This is realised through mutual aid, solidarity and sharing.

A few examples by way of illustration:

- Fatma, a young Moslem was getting married. Teresa and her friends offered to help her to prepare her trousseau.
- Zeinab admits frankly that she detests Christians and says she comes to the centre solely for her own personal interest. At the end of a certain time she discovers, thanks to Mary, a committed Christian, that fraternity is better than hate.
- Our dispensaries offer quality service to all who visit them.
- Our schools are sought after by Moslems and well as Christians. Certain of our schools have up to 90% of Moslems and others up to 65% of Christians. Many Moslems have pleasant memories of our schools and are filled with a gospel spirit of forgiveness, sharing and solidarity with all others.

Our ten houses in Egypt are at the service of the whole population without no discrimination and no fanaticism. Through challenges and eventualities of all sorts, St Vincent gives us support and gets us to turn the medal when things go awry, and glorify God when things go well!

Let it be noted however that our experience leads us to bring Moslems over to our values in a way which makes these to be respected by them. Our wish for the future would be bring ourselves as close as possible to Moslem values, to understand and to love Moslems.

Daughters of Charity in the Lebanon

Our pupils in the two schools in Ras Beirut, "St Louise's", primary, free and mixed(200 pupils), and "St Vincent's", secondary (1150 pupils), are 94% Moslem. Of these, 50% are poor, 30% very poor, and the remainder are either children sent out of the big schools because they are not up to standard, or else they are middleclass pupils. They are divided equally between Shiites and Sunnites with a small minority of Christians and Druzes. The teaching staff is 97% Christian.

In addition to the schools, we welcome to our free dinners almost 50 old folk, of all denominations, from the local area. How do we understand our mission? Firstly we are a community conscious of being a presence of the Church and a place of communion. That's why we consider that our primary mission is prayer. Daily mass is a fresh incarnation of Christ in our local area. Along with prayer we know that it is the transparent witnessing of our community life which reveals Jesus Christ to those who approach us.

Our mission is in the first place welcoming and listening: St Vincent has nourished these attitudes in us as a second nature reflex. It is the Lord whom we are welcoming. Welcoming and listening to parents who come to us to talk about their problems and ask advice for dealing with their children and their spouses. Welcoming and listening to children and youngsters especially if they are victims of parental divorce. Many of them suffer from either the absence of their father when they are with their mother or else the absence of their mother when their remarried father hands them over to the mercy of the new wife, or else the absence of both when the two parents remarry and they are sent off to grandmother or aunt.

However our mission focuses especially on the work of advancement and education: education in gospel values of uprightness, welcoming, and respect for others in their differences, justice, freedom, friendship, forgiveness and joy.

How does this education take place? First, we base ourselves on the Moslem values which the children bear within themselves.

- The sense of prayer: the parents teach their children to pray, and often on free days they send them to the Koranic school.

- The sense of family and the patriarchal family....The parents love their children and the children love their parents.
- Solidarity: the sense of Umma, although this sense is in need of being enlarged.

But this education takes place especially through relationships (pupil-teacher, pupil-sister), and through the teaching itself. To crown all there's the philosophy class. A good teacher helps to structure the personality, create convictions, show how to organise one's thinking and behaviour in accord with this thinking. The young person discovers that he is a free and responsible person, possessing rights and duties.

Past pupils often come to see us. They are very grateful for the education which they have received. Many of them have become engineers, doctors, civil servants....This is our way of preparing for the Lebanon of tomorrow, a Lebanon of living together, of a meeting of values and civilisations, of forgiveness and of welcome.

Daughters of Charity in the Holy Land

What makes for the originality of our situation and is also perhaps an opportunity for change is that we are not working in a nation already in existence and well structured, but in a country which is fighting to get the right to exist, the right to be recognised as a particular entity: Palestine.

It is now more than a hundred years since the Daughters of Charity arrived in Bethlehem (1884). Today our involvement is seen in the following:

- A 40-bed maternity 98% frequented by Moslem women coming from Bethlehem, Hebron and the isolated villages where we have in the past four years organised weekly gyneco-obstetric consultations.
- A social service also started four years ago with the aggravation of the social situation due to the restrictive laws. It works for the advancement of poor families, 80% of whom are Christians, principally from Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour.
- A crèche which accommodates 90 children, 55 of whom live in, aged from 0 to 6, placed here temporarily due to grave social problems in the family (death of mother after child-birth, repudiation by the mother, or great poverty), or abandoned and awaiting foster parents. 99.5% are Moslem.

- A home for unmarried mothers who are confided to us anonymously and in secret, either by the Palestinian social services or directly by persons who know us, so as to keep them hidden and saved from death. 99.8% are Moslem.

We work with the whole Palestinian population in general, but the girls and the children come to us especially from the Gaza strip, from far-away villages of Judea and Samaria. They are people from a poor social class, peasant or worker, often with little education or having a very strong clan tradition. It is composed of 97% Moslems and 3% Christians. It is very important to stress this fact, not through discrimination but because nowadays the first official identity to which Palestinians refer is that which is offered by their religion, given the fact that their nation isn't yet in existence even if a Palestinian passport is put into circulation. This makes it more understandable that the ways of acting and reacting in face of certain situations tend to be dictated by reference to one's religion, to one's book (Koran or Bible), rather than to a civil law.

Faced with these distress calls and confronted by such "inhumanity" we, as Daughters of St Vincent, cannot remain inactive. That is why we are trying by various means to be the voice of the voiceless and to exercise through our contacts a discreet but real influence on the drawing up of laws in favour of children and women. We are trying to get the influential people in the country to come to share our view of Mankind. To lead them to discover that every human being is unique in the eyes of God, each has intrinsic dignity and doesn't exist merely through being member of a community; every person has a right to respect, to attention, to love; and the smallest ones, the weakest ones ought to be cared for and protected by those who are strongest.

We can freely speak of our faith in Jesus Christ. But through our consecrated life, which already poses a question, through the gratuity of the love we offer to all and especially to the poor and through our availability in their regard, we stir up questionings in people's hearts and at times we bring about a change of attitude.

(Translator: STANISLAUS BRINDEY, C.M.)