Abstract: The word “globalization” refers to a multiplicity of political, economic, cultural and media processes having a clear impact on present day history. We live in a world characterized by fear and mutual alienation, a world where many are forced into situations that immerse them in processes of cultural homogenization, happening even within religious organizations and Christian communities. This article aims to analyze the challenges posed to the Church by a pluricultural and interconnected world, so as to offer to humanity a culture of mutual love and hope rooted in the gospel. The importance of fostering and safeguarding real and visible intercultural relationships in Christian communities is explored.

The today of history

Christians believe that God became flesh in Christ. This means that they believe that history has become a meeting place where human beings encounter not only other human beings but also God. It also means that the quality of relationships is crucial, for it is through these relationships – with other human beings and with God – that one defines and discovers one’s identity, and reaches his or her fullness. It also means that it is important to take into account the historical nature of our relationships when sharing one’s experience of encounter with God. Pope Benedict XVI expressed it with these words: “Talking about God means first of all expressing clearly what God we must bring to the men and women of our time: not an abstract God, a hypothesis, but a real God, a God who exists, who has entered history and is present in history; the God of Jesus Christ as an answer to the fundamental

1. “Our peoples do not want to walk in the shadows of death; they hunger and thirst for life and happiness in Christ. They seek him as source of life. They yearn for this new life in God to which the disciple of the Lord is born by Baptism and is reborn by the sacrament of Reconciliation. They seek this life which is strengthened when it is confirmed by the Spirit of Jesus and when the disciples renew their covenant of love in Christ, with the Father and with their brothers and sisters at each eucharistic celebration. Accepting the Word of eternal life and nourished by the Bread that has come down from heaven, they want to live the fullness of love, and lead all to the encounter with Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America, Disciples and Missionaries of Jesus Christ, so That Our People May Have Life in Him (Bogotá: CELAM, 2007), n. 350, https://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf.

2. “The Christ-event is therefore the beginning of this new subject emerging in history that we call ‘disciple.” “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction (Deus Caritas Est n.1).” This is precisely what all the gospels have preserved, while presenting it differently, as the beginning of Christianity: a faith encounter with the person of Jesus (Jn 1, 35–39).” Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America, n. 243.

question of the meaning of life and of how we should live.”

How, then, can we describe and fulfill this historical reality in which one is called joyfully proclaim Christ? Our contemporary historical context has particular features, one of which is globalization, a term by which many social, economic, political, but also media and cultural phenomena can be expressed. The analysis proposed here will focus on the last two realms of media and culture. From a cultural perspective, contemporary society struggles to find its own self-representation. In the desire to overcome structures and past norms, a principle of continuous innovation is embraced. To use the words of Zygmunt Bauman, one could say that this is a period in which “sociality, so to speak, is free-floating, seeking in vain solid ground in which to anchor, a visible-to-all target on which to converge, companions with which to close ranks,” and with this also the very concept of culture has become fluid.

I believe the concept of culture has become fluid because it is no longer easy to find clear coordinates or borders in ethnic, geographical, linguistic or religious components that neatly define and distinguish one culture from another. Too many phenomena – not least the world’s migratory currents – challenge simplistic notions of cultural definition. The number of territories or cities inhabited by pluri-ethnic, multicultural and pluri-religious societies is growing daily. On the other hand, some communities attempt to tie a sense of identity to a territory of origin, struggling to preserve linguistic or religious purity, only to find that other cultural influences – values, customs and objects beyond the narrow definition they wish to protect – cannot be thwarted indefinitely. These influences are viewed most often as a kind of contamination or invasion. The process of metissage, a part of humanity’s natural growth over the centuries, is accelerated in today’s world, not least by the commercialized dissemination of precise customs, traditions, celebrations, beliefs and values, and the globalization of markets. An expansive and invasive “cultural industry” is taking hold, one strengthened by information technology: it creeps into cultures and takes hold of the collective imagination, homogenizing and oversimplifying it.

In this perspective, cultural realities and concepts that seemed sufficient in the past now show themselves in need of resemantization. But there is a deeper question here, and it is not only a question of concepts or semantics. For the religious believer, at least, culture is a context in which human persons participate in God’s creative dimension, expressed in their relationship with the nature in which they live, one that manifests and communicates experiences of beauty, joy, hope, encounter, and triumph over suffering through art, ritual and celebration. Every culture, notes theologian Piero Coda, has both a particular, distinctive dimension and a universal dimension, because every culture potentially expresses the whole human person.

Pope Francis, in his encyclical Evangelii Gaudium, writes: “It has to do with the lifestyle of a given society, the specific way in which its members relate to one another, to other creatures and to God. Understood in this way, culture embraces the totality of a

people’s life.”5 Such an understanding can be helpful in framing a reflection on the process of globalization and its impact on the cultural dimensions of the Church’s mission. According to Italian sociologist Pierpaolo Donati, this is true even where profession of a religious faith is not a given. Every human society is structured and organized around the fundamental question of God, even societies tending towards the position that God does not exist, or those that speak of God remaining within the private sphere of individuals’ lives, with direct repercussions on established social relationships within that given society.

In Western societies, for example, we might point to a series of important changes in those societies, such as the increased emphasis on the value of the individual as a benchmark, and the primacy of scientific rationality. In the 20th century, this led to the emergence of individuals driven by personal needs and ambitions, by the search for limitless freedom. In this context, society is perceived as burdensome and societal relations feared, because they cannot be controlled according to one’s own wants. One of the most dramatic consequences of this change, according to philosopher Giuseppe Zanghi, is that “to heal the human being, to finally give him or her full use of reason, the god of reason must disappear. ... The human person must eliminate God from the horizon in order to be fully him or herself (or if lacking this courage, at the very least bracket the God question).”6 In order to eliminate any constraints that could annul or reduce such freedom and originality, modern society has gone so far as seeing social bonds “as a negativity, even as an evil in itself.”7

New technologies and globalization of individualism

In this context, technological growth plays an important role, especially in the field of communication. Humankind today, in an attempt to free itself from constraints, has unwittingly canceled itself in a kind of technological vortex,8 despite the fact that, in principle, such developments can be understood as favoring interaction and therefore sociality. New technologies have given the world a new face, one of a geographically scattered people continually engaged in countless, simultaneous connections, as they dwell in a “digiplace.”9 This new reality offers its inhabitants any number of possible interactions, yet rarely demands or requires social commitment.

This change is clearly evident in recent decades, even with regard to use of the word, “communication.” Although “communication” continues to mean diffusion, expression, performance, or symbolic exchange, the word itself no longer uniformly signifies a necessary obligation to establish and consolidate social bonds. Communication, therefore, is no longer linked via its etymological root munus, to other words such as “community.” “Communication” can be understood simply as a means of message dissemination, detached

8. See Pierpaolo Donati, La Matrice Teologica Della Società (Soveria Manelli: Rubbettino, 2010), 181.
from a participatory meaning or one favoring communion or introduction into a community, etc.

It is important, therefore, to regain a sense that, behind every scientific/technological discovery or innovation, there are both culture and concrete subjects. It is clear that technology, at the service of communication, enhances the potential expansion of a culture that globalizes individualism and favors superficial interactions between persons, without true social bonds. The explosion of fake-news and challenges in identifying truths in a “post-truth era” are both evidence of this. One’s own ideas are constantly reinforced by means of algorithms that limit possibilities for interactions with those who hold differing convictions (echo chambers).10

The Impact of Migratory Processes
In this context, the current migratory process, which involves more than 65 million displaced people, is worth a brief reflection. In cities, peoples of various cultures live alongside one another and are often subject to homogenizing “integration” processes. The resulting situation can prove difficult both for those who arrive and those who see themselves as “forced” to welcome.

There are increasing numbers of people who feel like foreigners in their own land, either because they do not recognize the inhabitants as such or because they are born in a territory but do not find their roots there. People are no longer recognized by their culture of origin, nor recognized by the culture that welcomes them, suffer multiple expressions of contempt. This experience of rejection also affects the process of transmission of religious faith within religious families and faith communities.

All of this brings fear and violence. Fear is felt when faced with unfamiliar means of expression and unfamiliar narrative codes. And this fear leads to a defensive attitude: we attempt to take refuge in new forms of tribalism, in ghetto mentalities, in whatever can give a certain sense of security. In this situation, technology offers possibilities to form networks that increase communications without forcing us to form real social bonds, and can easily result in the reinforcing of a tribal or ghetto mentality by which we attempt to defend ourselves.11

In conclusion, the situation in which we find ourselves is one characterized by a culture of individualism and mediated by new technologies, which on the one hand puts us in a position to enter into communication with many, but on the other can reinforce cultural isolation and fragmentation.

What is asked of the Church in this context?
The Church is called to be a sign of hope and leaven in the midst of humanity. It must therefore bring its own precise culture, a

10.”[A]n isolated space on the web, where the ideas being exchanged essentially just confirm one another. It can be a space of likeminded people sharing similar political views, or a page about a specific conspiracy theory. Once inside one of these spaces, users are sharing information that is all very similar, basically "echoing" each other” Walter Quattrociocchi, “How Does Misinformation Spread Online?,” in World Economic Forum, 2016, https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/q-a-walter-quattrociocchi-digital-wildfires/.

11.”A decisive role in producing the new relational society will be played by the Internet and the new information and communication technologies (ICT). This new world will be divisive for the future of human relations, i.e. for their quality, characteristics and powers, because ICTs are not only an ‘environment’ external to social relations and are not only their tool, but they change the ‘internal’ nature (structure) of interhuman relations.” Pierpaolo Donati, Sociologia Della Relazione (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013), 157.
culture that emanates from the gospel. According to the concept of culture proposed by Pope Francis, it should therefore propose the kind of relationship brought by Jesus, one of a communion of love, whose concrete historical implementation is expressed in the new commandment “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). This commandment cannot be implemented by the isolated Christian missionary. It is the task of the Church itself, which, however, “is more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God.”

If we take this commandment as foundational, the subject of mission is the people of God as such. This people of God, however, is comprised of persons who inhabit the very same world as everyone else: men and women, members of today’s networked society. The Church is multicultural and connected by technologies that permit a continuous and exponentially growing communication. In this context, the new commandment – the culturally distinctive feature of God’s people – must be lived by men and women coming from different cultures and traditions, yet also persons who feel called to confront one another’s sense of alienation.

This is because the gospel presupposes culture, which is a manifestation of human dynamism. These various cultures present in the Church are illuminated by the light of the “new commandment,” a light that is an invitation to love the culture of the other. In fact, Christian values will continue to impact society only in the measure in which the Church recognizes the cultural diversity present within herself.

Thus, the Church must generate authentic intercultural relationships within itself. Pope Francis has written: “We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural.”

Every culture is both unique and universal. Each is unique because of the specific traits that it exhibits, but also universal inasmuch as those traits are a dynamic, potential expression of the whole human person. In this sense, interculturality not only means different cultures sharing a given territory nor even just developing tolerance, or respect and recognition of diversity. It means building communities capable of balancing the different relationships and diverse life experiences. In the fullest and most original sense of the term, communication can constitute the space, the place where fear can be overcome by the dimension of encounter, by generating new scenarios, practices and narratives. As Donati has written:

Intercultural communication affirms that there is an intermediate space between the full understanding that is supposed to be within each individual culture, and the total alienation between cultures that are segmented into non-communicating cultural universes. In this way it avoids the idea that a common world is impossible because of the dualism between total understanding (which can only be achieved within the same cultural community) and

13.Pope Francis, “General Audience” (Saint Peter’s Square, 2013).
alienation (total otherness between different cultural communities), which is supported by cultural relativists.\(^{15}\)

In order to fulfill the joyful duty of mission, one must begin first from the certainty that modern day culture is the place where God continues to make himself “present” and encounters the men and women of our time. Benedict XVI admonishes:

> We must take care to perceive the signs of the times in our epoch, namely, to identify the potentials, aspirations and obstacles we encounter in today’s culture and in particular the wish for authenticity, the yearning for transcendence, and concern to safeguard Creation and to communicate fearlessly the response that faith in God offers.\(^{16}\)

### Recognition

One important step in building relationships within the Church that allow for an effective witness today, is that of approaching cultural diversity by means of a praxis of “recognition.” This involves a new way of looking at the other, valuing him or her and discovering this other as a gift. This entails both a recognition of the other’s dignity and the fostering of a dialogical relationship defined by positive communication. Recognition, according to Alex Honneth, is a precise category which characterizes relationships that ensure the moral infrastructure of such society, one by which individuals can both acquire and preserve their integrity as human persons.\(^{17}\) Pope Francis speaks of the culture of encounter in this regard: “If I do not look – it is not enough to see, one must look –, if I do not stop, if I do not look, if I do not touch, if I do not speak, I cannot make an encounter and I cannot help to make a culture of encounter.”\(^{18}\)

This type of recognition favors the necessary confidence in oneself, in order to establish healthy relationships. Such recognition, if it is to build the social nexus, needs to become mutual. Every man and woman learns to recognize themselves from the perspective of the other as bearers of their own riches, and therefore legitimized in their rights. “Recognizing a relationship with the other as constitutive of being, and of one’s own identity, means self-realization cannot be favored without also favoring the autonomy of the other.”\(^{19}\)

Thirdly, “recognition” also makes room for and gives value to the other’s abilities, acquired over the course of his or her life, and it is this recognition that takes into account memory, achievements and openness to the future. It is “a relationship of approval in solidarity towards other lifestyles; in it the subjects, in their individual particularities as biographically identified persons, would find the recognition of mutual encouragement.”\(^{20}\) These three aspects of recognition guarantee a person’s ability to live with self-confidence, self-respect, self-esteem, and on a foundation that enables him or her to give the best of themselves.


\(^{16}\)Pope Benedict XVI, “General Audience.”


\(^{18}\)Pope Francis, “Per Una Cultura Dell’incontro.” (Cappella della Domus Sanctae Marthae, 2016).

\(^{19}\)Silvia Cataldi, Gennaro Iorio, and Vera Araújo, eds., *L’amore al Tempo Della Globalizzazione (Verso Un Nuovo Concetto Sociologico)* (Roma: Città Nuova, 2015), 261.

The first step in welcoming the migrant, as Pope Francis himself expresses it, is the realization that migrants “do not arrive empty-handed. They bring their courage, skills, energy and aspirations, as well as the treasures of their own cultures; and in this way, they enrich the lives of the nations that receive them.”\(^{21}\) For the arriving migrant, it implies first and foremost, finding a listening ear and having a voice, a way to express themselves and be deeply valued for their own identity and singularity.

All this is traversed by a crucial aspect that makes sense precisely in the kairos of history, in the figure of Christ who lived as a stranger among us, “unrecognized” by many (Jn 1:10). Similarly, it means not only hearing but truly listening, letting oneself be confronted with different visions of the world offered to us by others. It can even mean questioning one’s own certainties. It is a matter of generating simple and powerful communicative acts that are not only referential or symbolic, but also binding and generative.\(^{22}\)

The first two aspects of recognition would already be enough to trigger a real counter-cultural process. But in order to be an authentic valuing of cultures, it is necessary to arrive to the third aspect. This way of recognition, as noted previously, values memory, welcoming the other with all their life heritage. Whoever arrives in a new territory is as if uprooted from his own, not knowing how to do things and often sees herself forced to learn even the simplest and most everyday actions, often generating feelings of marked fragility. A quality of communication that makes one able to participate in the new reality in which one finds themselves, can lead him or her to similarly commit themselves in turn, concerning themselves with the reality in which he or she enters, because he or she has been brought within it. This is the meaning of “promoting” as Pope Francis indicates, because it allows one to cultivate and make use of his or her own abilities, and to “better equip them to encounter others and to foster a spirit of dialogue rather than rejection or confrontation.”\(^{23}\)

For Christian communities, this act should be facilitated by the look of faith that sees in each individual first and foremost as a brother or sister (even indeed another Christ), and only secondarily as someone from this or that culture. Differences often bring with them a dimension of mutual suffering, but if this suffering is assumed, it can be the condition for dialogue. For those who do not have faith, all this implies a greater anthropological availability. It is a matter of taking generative communicative action, of creating scenarios of trust in which not only do we hear what the other person says, but we welcome it as a gift, we take it seriously, we value it even if it is something new, whether meeting face to face (at work, at school, in your community) or through social networks. This type of recognition leads to regeneration of the social nexus.


\(^{22}\) But for intercultural communication processes to be successful, it is necessary to understand communication in a relational sense, i.e. to take into account not only the interactions that can take place between different subjects, but also the structures and nature, as well as the means. See Ana Cristina Montoya, Comunicazione Ed Enigma Della Relazione (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2019), 88–93.

If Christian communities manage to live fully this culture of recognition and encounter rooted in the gospel, to bear witness to the love that builds bonds, they can become a countercultural movement for today’s society, offering Christian witness as a basis for the re-foundation of the social fabric. In fact, the Johannine expression “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (Jn 13:35) is also the missionary mandate of the Fourth Gospel. To proclaim Christ in this network society therefore coincides with the witness of a love capable of welcoming the different, of transforming into a brother the one who is a stranger in all relationships, mediated or not by technology.

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