



# Constructing Intercultural Dialogues

## Case Study #2

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## Reconciliation

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## Context

The episode of intercultural dialogue presented in this case study comes from the course on transcultural dialogue which I teach in an Italian philosophical-theological faculty, the “St. Peter's Philosophical-Theological Institute” of Viterbo (Italy). “Transcultural” means the course is focused on dialogue among, across and beyond cultures. The approach which I propose to the students is both transcultural and transdisciplinary, mediated by dialogue. This course is addressed to undergraduates drawn from different cultures in the first and second years of the bachelor’s degree in philosophy. Mostly students come from non-Anglo-European countries to complete their religious training and become nuns, priests, and friars, mainly for the Catholic Church.

## Participants

This episode occurred a few years ago, in a class with 16 students from five countries: Brazil, Poland, the Philippines, Zambia and Italy. The class consisted of mostly religious but some lay students. The language of the course was Italian. The episode refers to a Polish religious student in the second year of coursework.

## Description

The transcultural and transdisciplinary perspective which I propose to the students implies a theoretical and practical approach to dialogue. Therefore, they are requested to concretely contribute to the content of the course from their cultural perspective through written assignments, which they present and discuss in class. This exercise allows them to build a space of relationship among, across and beyond their cultures mediated by dialogue. One of these written assignments consists in group work discussing the term “hospitality,” linking publications by authors drawn from the students’ cultures to an essay by Jacques Derrida, *On hospitality*. At the end of the class presenting this assignment, a Polish student complained about the topic I proposed to their group: “You cannot imagine what



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the Russian army did to our people. My grandparents told me, and I do not want to betray their memory. I truly cannot give hospitality to a Russian author". I explained to this student the logic behind my choice in proposing a Russian author to his group. I suggested they work on Pawel Florenskij's essay *On friendship*, written while he was imprisoned during the Russian communist period; he was later executed. Therefore, he received the same persecution as the Polish people, although he was Russian, but he continued to practice forgiveness even during his detention. During the same period as this course, the news about the civil war in Ukraine and the disorders at the Polish borders dramatically involved this student and his religious community, which consisted mainly of Polish people.

In a conversation with this student before class, he confessed his desire to return to Poland and defend his country, if it proved necessary in an eventual conflict against Russia. I was impressed, and I proposed to him to deepen the dialogue by making a concrete step towards the other, in his case, toward the Russian people. I suggested he contact a Russian student, through the social networks, as many of them were expressing their solidarity with Polish and Ukrainian citizens on the Web.

The following week, before class, he told me he had met a Russian tourist who visited his religious community: "You cannot believe! I spoke with a Russian guy of my age: he defends the Ukrainian people and peace, and refuses the war. You were right. I experienced dialogue, and I wish to continue to practice it."

### Dialogic features

This Polish student had to make an effort to read a Russian author, thus, to give him hospitality despite his personal, family, and cultural histories. He did it. At the beginning, he probably felt obliged to do it for an assignment. But he appreciated the essay, finding the author's words and experience close to him. For the first time, he discovered that it was possible to approach the other, who used to be an enemy for him, without losing or betraying his own identity. This awareness allowed him to take a step of hospitality also towards the Russian whom he met by chance, as a tourist who visited his religious community.

The student could overcome his initial resistance and be reconciled with his wounds through dialogue, which allowed him to encounter the other, across the pages and alive. He could discover he had some things in common with "the enemy" - Florenskij and the Russian tourist - in fact, much more than he expected. This awareness helped him to make a further step, beyond himself and towards the other, who was no longer an enemy for him.



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### **Lessons learned**

The point of the assignment dedicated to the term “hospitality” is to practice the invitation to take the step of hospitality towards the other as suggested by Derrida. The students are in fact requested to take several steps of hospitality: first, towards their peers; second, with several authors and the perspectives they propose; third, towards the approach I present to them. The aim of the exercise is to try to practice hospitality, thus to give and (to accept) it to (and from) their peers, and the authors in the short term, and other people in the long term. This implies an attempt to learn about “bridging differences” among cultures, authors, perspectives and, often, also beyond themselves, as the Polish student experienced. This bridge is mediated by dialogue. Such dialogue can result from an unpredictable, unexpected and fortuitous event, meeting the other and entering into relationship with her/him. But the choice to answer to the call of the other depends on us: it often changes our perspective so that we continue to practice it, not just in the classroom but in everyday life.