



North Thompson Catholic Parishes

Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops

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IV. THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND INCULTURATION

IV.1. The Necessity of Inculturation

Both as “mystery” and as “historic subject” the new people of God “is a community composed of men ... who, united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, press onward toward the Kingdom of the Father and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all men. That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history” (GS 1). Since the mission of the Church among men is to “lend embodiment to the Kingdom of God”, the new people of God “does not take away anything from the temporal welfare of any people. Rather, she fosters and takes to herself, insofar as they are good, the abilities, resources, and customs of peoples. In so taking them to herself she purifies, strengthens, and elevates them” (LG 13).

As *Gaudium et spes* suggests, the general term “culture” seems able to gather together the totality of personal and social traits that characterize man, allowing him to take up and become master of his condition and destiny (*GS* 53-62).

Thus the Church in its evangelizing mission must “bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture—and cultures” (John Paul II, *CT* 53). For without this, the Church’s message of salvation would not truly reach those to whom she communicates it. Reflection on what is involved in the process of evangelization makes one aware of this in an ever more lively way to the degree that humanity grows in the knowledge that it has of itself. Evangelization only hits its mark when man, both as unique person and as member of a community (and one profoundly touched by that membership) receives the Word of God and makes it bear fruit in his life. So much is this so that Paul VI was able to write in *Evangelii nuntiandi* of “sectors of the human race that must be transformed, for the purpose of the Church is not confined to preaching the Gospel in ever-extending territories and proclaiming it to ever-increasing multitudes of men. She seeks by virtue of the Gospel to affect and, as it were, recast the criteria of judgment, the standard of values, the incentives and life standards of the human race that are inconsistent with the Word of God and the plan of salvation” (*EN* 19). And indeed, as the Pope remarks in the same document: “The rift between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly an unhappy circumstance of our times” (*EN* 20).

To designate this perspective and action whereby the Gospel can be inserted into the very heart of human culture, it has become usual nowadays to invoke the word “inculturation”. Pope John Paul II wrote: “The term ‘acculturation’ or ‘inculturation’ may be a neologism, but it expresses very well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation” (*CT* 53; cf. speech to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 26 June 1979; speech to the bishops of Zaire, 3 June 1980; allocution to Korean intellectuals and artists, 3 May 1984). And while in Korea the Pope underlined the dynamic nature of this inculturation: “The Church must take to herself everything in the peoples. We have before us a long and important process of inculturation, ordered to the Gospels penetration to the very heart of living cultures. To encourage this process is to respond to the profound aspirations of the peoples and to help them enter the sphere of faith itself”.

While not at all claiming to offer here a complete theology of inculturation, we simply wish to recall its foundation in the mystery of God and Christ in order to seek out its significance for the present mission of the Church. No doubt the need for inculturation is felt by all Christian communities. Yet we today should be particularly attentive to the situations experienced by the churches of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and North and South America—whether these churches are young churches or, on the contrary, already long established.

IV.2. The Foundation of Inculturation

The doctrinal basis of inculturation is found firstly in the diversity and multiplicity of created beings, an expression of God the Creator's own intention, desirous as he was that this diversified multitude should illustrate the more richly the innumerable aspects of his goodness (cf. St. Thomas, *STh* 1a, q. 47, a. 1). But that foundation is situated more deeply still in the mystery of Christ himself: in his Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection.

Just as God the Word assumed a concrete humanity in his own Person and lived out all the particularities of the human condition in a given place and time, and in the midst of a single people, so the Church, following Christ's example and through the gift of his Spirit, has to become incarnate in every place, every time, and every people (cf. Acts 2:5-11).

In the same way that Christ proclaimed the Gospel making use of all those familiar realities that made up the culture of his people, so the Church cannot dispense herself from borrowing elements drawn from human cultures for the construction of the Kingdom.

Jesus said, “Repent and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15). He confronted a sinful world right up until his death on the Cross, so as to make men capable of this conversion and this believing. It is the same with cultures as with persons: there is no achieved inculturation unless there is also denunciation of the limitations, errors, and sin that indwell them. Every culture must accept the judgment of the Cross upon its life and its language.

Christ has risen. He reveals man fully to himself, bestowing upon him the fruits of his perfect redemption. Just so a culture that turns to the Gospel finds there its own liberation and brings to light new riches that are at once the gifts of the Resurrection and its promises.

In the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the Gospel, a wondrous exchange is brought about: on the one hand, the Gospel reveals to each culture and sets free within it the final truth of the values which that culture carries. On the other hand, each and every culture expresses the Gospel in an original fashion and manifests new aspects of it. Thus inculturation is an aspect of the recapitulation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:10) and of the catholicity of the Church (*LG* 16, 17).

IV.3. Various Aspects of Inculturation

Inculturation has profound repercussions on all aspects of a church's existence. And so here we can usefully remind ourselves of how this affects a given church's life and language.

So far as ecclesial *life* is concerned, inculturation consists of a better correspondence between the church institution's concrete forms of expression and organization and those positive values that make up a culture's own identity. Inculturation also involves the positive presence and active commitment of a church in those areas of a culture where its deepest human problems dwell. It is not simply the appropriation of cultural traditions. It is also a service of man, of all men. It penetrates every relationship in a transforming way. Attentive to the values of the past, it looks toward the future as well.

In the domain of *language*, here taken in its cultural-anthropological sense, inculturation is primarily an act of appropriation of the content of faith in the words, concepts, symbols, and ritual behavior of a given culture. Accordingly, it requires the elaboration of a doctrinal response, simultaneously fresh yet faithful, open yet critical in its approach to new problems, both intellectual and ethical, attached to the aspirations and refusals, the values and the deficiencies of that culture.

But if cultures are various, the human condition is one and the same. This explains why intercultural communication is not only possible but actually necessary. Thus the Gospel, addressing itself as it does to what is deepest in man, has a transcultural value. Its specificity must, therefore, be recognizable from one culture to another. And this means the openness of each culture to the rest. We can recall here that the Gospel “has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue that is itself inevitably part of a certain dialogue of cultures” (CT 53). By presence and coresponsibility in human history, the new people of God is always encountering new situations. She must constantly recommence her task of bringing the power of the Gospel to bear on the heart of human culture and of individual cultures. Yet some situations and periods demand a special effort in this regard. This is particularly true today of the evangelization of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Oceania, and North and South America. Whether these churches are newly founded or already have a certain antiquity, they find themselves in a special situation where inculturation is concerned. The missionaries who brought the Gospel to these “non-European” churches could not avoid bringing with that Gospel elements of their own culture. By definition they could not do what could only be achieved by Christians belonging to those newly evangelized cultures. As Pope John Paul II remarked to the bishops of Zaire: “Evangelization has its own stages, and moments of deepening.” When such non-European churches became aware for the first time of their own originality and the tasks which that involves, they naturally seek to create new forms of expression for the

single Gospel in ecclesial life and language. Their efforts in this direction, carried out in communion with the Holy See and with the aid of the rest of the Church, will surely be decisive for the future of evangelization, despite the difficulties that these communities are encountering and the delays that are part and parcel of such an enterprise.

In this total task, the promotion of justice is not just one element among many, but a most important and urgent one. The proclamation of the Gospel must take up the gauntlet of local and worldwide injustice. It is true that in this area certain deviations of a combined political and religious nature have appeared. But such deviations should not lead one to neglect or suppress the necessary task of promoting justice. On the contrary, they point up the urgency of theological discernment, founded on as scientific an analysis as is possible and ever subject to the light of faith (cf. *Jesus Christus, vis liberationism* Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1984). Nor should it be forgotten that local injustice is often enough part of that worldwide nexus of injustice of which Pope Paul VI spoke so strikingly in *Populorum progressio*. The promotion of justice concerns the Catholic Church spread throughout the world: it needs the mutual assistance of all particular churches and the strong backing of the apostolic Roman See.