

CATECHESIS AND INCULTURATION

By

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus is the Incarnate Word, took flesh from the womb of the Virgin Mary, chose Bethlehem as his birthplace and adopted Himself to the culture of the place, spoke the language of the Jews.

Suppose, I often ask myself, Christ had been born in Tondo instead of the Holy Land, and suppose the Last Supper had taken place in Balut, what would have happened? For one thing, the Mass would be different in this sense: instead of the unleavened bread and grape wine that priests now use all over the world, they would probably be using puto and tuba.

The reason is simple: Christ selected unleavened bread to become His Body, and He chose grape wine to become His Precious Blood at the moment of transubstantiation because these were what the people of the Holy Land were eating and drinking; these were the materials most readily available. To put it in another way, Christ made use of the things that were indigeneous to the Jewish culture.

My friends, please do not misunderstand me. When I spoke earlier of puto and tuba, I certainly was not advocating that we should use them in our Masses. I make a very clear distinction between what is essential and what is not essential. Unleavened bread and grape wine are essential. There is no question about that. Hence, their use must be continued wherever Masses are solemnized, be that in Manila or Rome, Timbukto or Alaska. Because of this essentiality, the Church in the Philippines made no move to change them even during the darkest days of the Japanese occupation when wheat flour was scarce and grape wine almost unavailable.

Let me cite another example, this time in the purely secular sense. Let us take the jeep. This most practical of all vehicles was brought to the Philippines by the Americans during World

War II. It was a stark and austere vehicle, but it was efficient and, for the warlike functions that it was intended to perform, it served its purposes well.

But, after the Liberation, when the departing Americans left surplus jeeps in large quantities, the Filipinos adopted it as their own. They stripped it of its olive drab coloring and repainted it in diverse colors. They gave it the flamboyance of their nature, and they reshaped its body so it would be a passenger transport. And they called it a jeepney. The jeepney is still basically the jeep — no one can deny that — but it has been indigenized. Or, to use a word more relevant to the topic assigned to me today, it has been inculturated.

Regarding the non-essentials, however, a more flexible attitude can be — and has been — adopted. The music sung at the Mass, for instance, has been inculturated. Thus, in Africa, they use tom-toms. And, in the Philippines, we use the guitar, the *banduria* and, in some missionary areas, the *kudyapi*. And because of the employment of these indigenous instruments, the Mass has become more interesting and more meaningful to the churchgoers. This, we must all agree, is a step in the right direction. Masses could be said in any dialect or language.

With that as a backdrop, allow me now to tackle the subject you have given me.

It must be clearly understood that inculturation deals with accommodating revelations to the concepts or signs of a particular culture, rather its the other way around. It deals with accommodating the concepts or signs of a particular culture to the revealed truths.

Every catechist or evangelist should always bear in mind that the Gospel or the revealed word of God is unchangeable. It can not be modified. It is the absolute norm. It is not the one that should be accommodated to anything, rather it is the understanding, the will, the affections, the conduct, the customs, society itself; in short, the whole life of man that should be accommodated to it. It is the task of the catechist to adapt the means of evangelization to ways that would make the doctrine of the faith intelligible and understandable to modern man, to the man of a specific and determined culture. Making the doctrine of the faith understandable means making human reason grasp it and digest what it means. But one thing is the truth of the doctrine itself and another thing is the revealed sense of that doctrine. The truth of the revealed doctrine is Christ Jesus, can never be understood by human reason alone. Precisely, it is a doctrine of the faith because human reason

alone cannot grasp it. It can only be understood by human reason in an obscure way and only by means of submitting the human intellect to the authority of God who reveals it. Otherwise, if the revealed doctrine could be understood clearly by the intellect, it ceases to be a doctrine of the faith — it becomes science or philosophy. St. Aug.: "Believe first in order to understand..."

On the other hand, the sense of the revealed truth can be made understandable and intelligible to human reason. In this case, the one teaching, the catechist or evangelist, should see to it that the listener grasps and sees the meaning of what is being taught him. It is not enough just to talk or move the lips, but to convey, to transmit the sense or the meaning to the listener, otherwise he would be wasting time.

As could be seen, we deal here essentially with the task of translating, of conveying the Christian doctrine in a language that is understood by the listener. And by language is meant not only words, but all the other psychological instruments and processes — concepts, images, experiences, feelings, etc. The teacher has to dig from the listeners' treasury of ideas, images, words, experiences to express the meaning of the revealed doctrine.

And like every translation work, the supreme norm or criterion is what the author really wishes to convey, and in this case, the author is God. Nobody, not even the Church, can take away from or change the least thing in this revealed doctrine. The Church, with the aid of the Holy Spirit is only the faithful keeper and interpreter of this revealed truths. That is why, to be unfaithful to or to betray the revealed sense of the Word of God is a fundamental sin in today's effort of "inculturation."

The last Synod in Rome, as all of you know, focused on catechesis as a means of evangelization. I will talk on the particular role I played during the Synod and why I stressed the need for inculturation in the catechetical process if catechesis is to become meaningful and effective.

To start with, let me say that if I was single-minded in my efforts to espouse the cause of inculturation, it was not for political or nationalistic considerations. I am aware that, in some segments of the Western world, the move toward inculturation has been misunderstood. These quarters have interpreted it as a reaction to colonialism because the advocates are all from the Third World countries, and these countries have only just recently been liberated from the colonial yoke.

I repeat neither politics nor nationalism impelled me to insist on inculturation. My insistence was based exclusively on my conviction that if the people of the Third World are to be properly catechized, if they are to be taught their faith, to grow in their faith and to live that faith, then it should be taught in terms that are not alien to them, in ways that are part and parcel of their lifestyle, and with means that are compatible with their customs and traditions.

Again, let me cite a concrete example that all of us are familiar with.

We live in an atmosphere where, as a matter of course, we make use of *padrinos* or intermediaries. If we are looking for a job, we do not apply directly. Instead, we go to a person of influence and ask his help to get us the job. If a young man is attracted to a girl and wishes to court her, he looks for a go-between — maybe another girl who is close to her — and solicits her assistance.

This reliance on intermediaries has colored the practice of our faith. We never talk to God directly when we need His divine help. Instead, we run to our favorite saint and say countless novenas. To Saint Jude when what we ask seems impossible, to Saint Pancratius when we want a job, to Saint Anthony when we have lost anything, and to him also when a girl wants to find a boy friend.

Now, suppose a catechist — let us say an American missionary — tells our people that it is better to go to God directly, to establish our own hot line to Christ, what would happen? The people would think he was downgrading the saints. They would be turned off by him and they would refuse to listen to him. As a result, all his efforts at catechesis would prove unavailing.

I beg your indulgence in giving still another example. One of our most treasured practices during the Christmas season is the *Misa de gallo*, the dawn Mass. All over the country, the people look forward to this novena of Masses. It is a big event to them and, in many towns, the people are roused from their sleep by a brass band parading through the streets of the town.

If a Western catechist, who comes from a cold country where dawn Masses are impractical, is to say that there is no sound liturgical or canonical reason for the *Misa de Gallo*, the results could be disastrous.

Again, I ask you please not to misunderstand me. I have nothing against Western catechists and will go so far as to admit that, without the help of foreign priests, the Church in the Philipp-

pires would be severely handicapped. If, in my two examples, I cited Western catechists, it is because the first catechists in the Philippines were Western, and they in turn trained the Filipino catechists. Trained them, I might add, in the Western Way.

It was, of course, not the fault of those catechists. History tells us that most of the catechisms used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries — and this was the period when the Spanish missionaries were beginning to be most active — were made in Europe in the context of the Counter-Reformation. As a result, the emphasis was on the orthodoxy of doctrine and the need for its clear and unequivocal presentation to the catechumens.

These missionaries, therefore, were most eager to draw up a catechism that would present, as clearly as possible, the principal points of the Christian doctrine as it was understood at that time in Europe.

Thus, the image of the "good man", of the perfect Christian gentleman, as presented to the Filipino catechumens, was drawn from the European gentlemen of the classical period. I need not tell you, of course, that this image was completely alien and, therefore, unintelligible to our ancestors. For it was a portrait that was strange — sometimes even hostile — to the values, the traditions and the religious attitudes of the people.

The people accepted the image, but it was meaningless to them. And if it was meaningless, then they had no particularly strong incentive to emulate the Christian gentleman.

Fortunately, Vatican II dramatically changed the scenario. The Council Fathers came to the realization that while the "world was one" specially under the influence of Christianity, its multiplicity had to be admitted as an undeniable fact. Besides the Christian, Westernized culture, there were other cultures. And since the confession of faith is "social" by its very nature — social because it was born in a community — then culture must be considered as very important factors in the way is born, the way it develops, and the way it thrives.

As a result of Vatican II, the existence and validity of cultural pluralism has become an accepted fact. And this acceptance destroys the principle, admitted at least implicitly in the past, that European or Western culture was the norm of other cultures, cultures whose degree of perfection was judged by the degree of conformity or non-conformity with the Christian West.

We all know that catechesis must take man "as he is and where he is." It is obvious, therefore, that the way of approach-

ing man in catechesis should follow no set, standardized pattern. It would simply be wrong to lead all those who are so different through the same path. The wise parent — to use an analogy — has the same goal for all his children: that they grow up to be strong and useful citizens in this world and in the next. But he knows that every child is different, so he handles each one differently. The sensitive child must be treated with gentleness, for roughness or the unsparing use of the rod could ruin him.

In the light of this, reasonable and adequate responsibility must be given to the pastors of the local Church so that, while maintaining the unity of the faith, they could be free to improvise, to use those methods and approaches that lead more directly to the hearts of the people they want to catechize, people who are often totally ignorant of Western thought and who are children of specifically different cultures.

When the plurality of cultures is accepted and respected, the logical consequence is indigenization. And indigenization is merely another word for the adapting of the Christian message to the catechumen "as he is and where he is."

This process of adaptation includes emphasizing the customs and way of life to which people attach great importance. It also means dropping those Western considerations which are less relevant to the way the people live. It is wishful thinking to expect meaningful and fruitful catechesis unless it is carried out with great respect for the religious and cultural patrimony of those to be catechized.

We must admit, whether we like it or not, that the Spirit is always alive and active in the culture, life and heart of all people, even though some of these people may not be directly illumined by the light of the Christian faith. And precisely because the Spirit is in them, then they are entitled to respect even though they may at times be indulging in pagan or even animistic practices. After all, even these pagan practices can be used to bring them to a deeper spirituality.

There is still another strong argument for inculturation, and it is this: the mission of the Church does not solely consist in giving of what she has. It also means receiving what she does not yet have. For this reason, she must enrich the patrimony of the faith she already possesses in everything that is true and good in other cultures and religions. She must do this so that, in accordance with other peoples and other faiths will make her grow and to achieve, in the fullest measure, the actualization of her catholicity.

Permit me to mention yet another argument for inculturation. We all must admit, whether we like it or not, that it is impossible to set up a monolithic, universal model for catechesis. Even if it could be set up, it is doubtful whether it can ever be implemented. For catechesis deals with concrete situations and we cannot implement a model where situations differ, not just from region to region, or country to country, but even from community to community.

Besides, all cultures, whether young or old, are constantly evolving. Consequently, a progressive consciousness of the integral meaning of revelation is gradually emerging from the rhythm of experience. Now, since the fidelity of the Church to revelation is dynamic and not static, then there is a need to integrate today's more technological and democratic mentality with the primitive and somewhat patriarchal mentality of yesterday.

Inculturation, however, must begin with the catechists themselves. It is a fact that many of them are familiar with salvation history as expressed in categories belonging to Western culture. But it is a fact also that they are quite ignorant of salvation history within their own culture. Moreover, they often see their own culture as an obstacle to rather than an instrument of proper catechesis. And if they are not prudent, if they show themselves extremely critical of local forms of popular religiosity — for example, the widespread practice among people who walk on their knees from the door of the church to the altar — then they can become alienated from their own people. And there is no sight more appalling than to see a catechist who has lost his credibility with his catechumens.

While I am on this subject, let me say that if Philippine or Asian catechesis continues being subservient to Western categories — categories, moreover, that are now becoming obsolescent — then the Catholic Church will prove incapable of keeping pace with other Asian religions. And all of us who pride ourselves in being concerned Catholics would not wish to see this happen.

In the Position Paper issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines which was sent to the Synod, the Philippine hierarchy made its stand very clear in these words:

"What can be considered an integral part of traditional Filipino culture, in the strict sense, are the devotional practices to honor Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Saints. There is always some quasi-religious or religious ritual for nearly all occasions from birth to burial, through marriage, baptisms, construction of residence, etcetera. These should be viewed as *apertura* or openings to a

deepening of faith. Modernizing agents — principally oriented towards material prosperity, efficiency and scientific rationalism — are attempting to introduce new values into the system.

“However, there is a surprising degree of syncretism which makes it easy for the host culture to assimilate foreign cultures. In the process, neither culture survives in its original form although the devotional practices mentioned earlier have survived for a long time. In fact, it is the ritualization of many of these devotions which could account for their resiliency over time.”

The catechist who is inculturated, therefore, sees these practices, not as superstitions that must be eliminated, but as doors for the deepening of faith, as instruments by which the people can make the transformation from popular religiosity to witnessing. The catechist who indiscriminately condemns all these quasi-religious observances will merely alienate the people and render him completely ineffective.

At this point, it may be apropos to direct our attention to divine pedagogy as shown to us in Holy Scripture, particularly the Old Testament.

For two thousand years, Yahweh prepared his people for the reception of the complete revelation. In doing so, he used the rites and the myths of the people around Israel. At the same time, he sent prophets to explain the new meaning of the old pagan symbols. Thus, he purified the rites of the Canaanites and used their culture to prepare his people for the coming of Christ. He also sanctified the laws and customs of the people around so that he could communicate his message.

In other words, he took the myths with which the people were familiar in order to reach their hearts. Wasn't this inculturation? And why cannot the same method be used in our catechesis today?

Of course, it must be clearly understood that inculturation must be selective. All those elements that are foreign to the substance of the message and completely alien to the mentality of the people must be carefully excluded. And they should not be allowed into the lives of those to be catechized. Any form of syncretism that would endanger the purity of the faith must be eliminated.

Returning to the Scriptures, to my mind, is one good way of making catechesis both fruitful and inculturated. For the Scriptures present the divine message in a way that transcends all philosophical systems. Thus, even those cultures which are not familiar with Western philosophy can get the message.

I must tell to you, of course, that the idea of using inculturation in catechesis is neither new nor original. As early as September, 1976, the East Asia Region of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences issued this strong statement, and I quote: "As the occasion demands, we propose a flexibility in the Liturgy of the Word and of the Eucharist. We should consider requesting the Holy See that the Eucharistic celebration should contain, besides Scriptural readings, other cultural and religious readings, and use the symbols of the present indigenous culture."

Father Pedro Arrupe, the superior general of the Society of Jesus, also has expressed very strong views about the imperative necessity of inculturation in catechesis. He said, and I quote:

"The diversity of cultures creates for catechesis a great plurality of settings. As indicated by the Second Vatican Council and as reaffirmed by Paul VI in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the Christian message must plant its roots in human cultures, assuming and also transforming these cultures. In this sense, we can say that catechesis is an instrument of 'inculturation.' This means that catechesis develops and at the same time enlightens from within the ways of life of those to whom it is addressed. Through catechesis, the Christian faith must be inserted in all cultures. A true inculturation of faith through catechesis supposes not only a process of giving, but also of receiving."

And Proposition 16 of the Synodal Document, *Instrumentum Laboris*, declares:

"In cultures not permeated with Christian values, the 'seeds of the Word' should be sought and made explicit. In cases where there is opposition between the Gospel and the cultural expression, the Gospel does not yield. Christ can fulfill his word of salvation in every culture, offering to everyone the possibility of thinking, judging and acting according to God's will and the actual situation of a given people."

From all that I have said thus far, my friends, you probably have acquired an idea of what inculturation means. You may have noticed that I have not given you a formal definition of the term. This was deliberate on my part because I felt that you would understand the term more if I gave you the explanation before the formal definition.

I shall now give you the formal definition by telling you, again in the words of Father Arrupe, what inculturation is and what it is not. Here is Father Arrupe:

"Inculturation in catechesis is not merely an adaptation of older forms of catechetical instruction, rejuvenated by the introduction of new terminology and by the use of modern pedagogical techniques. It is not just an effort to bridge the generation gap by making a few concessions to the demands of youth.

"It is not a strategy adopted to make Christian doctrine more attractive. It is not a subtle means of destroying the preponderance of the West. It is also not a simplistic acceptance of the past to the detriment of the future.

"Inculturation in catechesis is not such an accommodation of faith to culture as would damage the substance of Revelation. It is not a kind of benevolent, almost folkloristic approach which the West substitutes for the criticism of other cultures. And finally, it is not some sort of ethnocentrism, a false theory which tries to construct a Western model as the type towards which other cultures ought to evolve.

"Rather, inculturation in catechesis is the practical corollary of that theological principle which asserts that Christ is the one and only Savior and saves only what he assumes to himself. Hence, Christ must assume in his Body (which is the Church) all cultures, purifying them and removing everything which is contrary to his Spirit, thus saving them without destroying them.

"It means faith reaching man in his most profound experience of life, even to the extent of influencing his way of thinking, feeling and acting under the inspiration of the Spirit of God.

"It makes possible the widespread contribution of all cultural values in the service of the Gospel.

"Inculturation means a continued sharing between the Word of God and the rich varieties of human expression. Hence, it enables us to speak with (not just to) the men and women of our times about their problems, needs, hopes and desires."

Before concluding, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, allow me once more to go back to my original statement about the Last Supper.

In instituting the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, Christ, I repeat, used the materials available — unleavened bread and grape wine. To enable us to eat His Body and drink His Blood, He took what was on hand; He did not have to import more expensive or

more delicious ingredients from another country. But the message was received by the apostles present, and they in turn transmitted the message to all of us all over the world and through the centuries to the end of time.

Similarly, in catechesis, which is actually the spreading of the Good News, we do not have to import the materials from other countries in the Western world. We can use whatever materials are on hand. And those materials are to be found in our culture, materials which are rooted in the people and an inextricable part and parcel of their tradition and way of life.

This is my message for you today, I close with the hope and prayer that this new year will find you growing richer in Christ's choicest blessings. God love you and remember, I love you all very dearly.