

## THE ENCOUNTER OF THE GOSPEL WITH CULTURE

### *Reflections on the Problem of Inculturation*

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The encounter of the Gospel with culture has always been a problem for the Church. She realizes, on the one hand, that such an encounter is necessary if the Christian faith is to be meaningful and effective in the lives of men, and on the other, that it is all but impossible to achieve a fully satisfactory measure: „The split between the Gospel and culture”, says Pope Paul, “is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was at other times”. (EN 20)

*What is the tragic impediment that comes in the way of a fruitful encounter and that has been a problem at all times?* We have a clue to the answer in the realization that in fact it is not the Gospel as such that meets culture as such. The meeting is between people, human beings, men and women: people who have found faith in Christ and want to share that faith with others by proclaiming the Gospel, and people who have evolved a way of life that gives them the means of self-expression and development, and which conditions their response to any experience. Moreover, the people who have found faith in Christ also have a way of life of their own which provides them with the means for developing and expressing their faith, and which conditions their activity for the spread of the Gospel, and the people who have evolved a way of life, which we call culture, also have a faith of their own which is deeply embedded in their culture and is not altogether unrelated to faith in Christ.

*Consequently, the dialogue is between people who have, all of them, both a faith and a culture, intimately united.* If the dialogue were to take place just at the deepest level of faith, there might perhaps be instant mutual recognition and mutual acceptance, with a sense of being meant for each other, to use the popular phrase. But almost inevitably, at least in the initial stages, this deepest level is accessible only to the extent that it finds expression, and this expression is determined by culture and much affected by cultural differences, with a resulting difficulty in mutual communication and comprehension, and a possible mutual rejection.

It is like people who have no common language: they may in fact be saying the same thing, but they do not understand each other and cannot reach an agreement. What is true of language in the strict sense is true of the whole complex or system of ways of thinking, an acting among men which is included in culture: “The word ‘language’,” Pope Paul reminds us, “should be understood here less in the semantic or literary sense than in the sense which one may call anthropological and cultural.”



(EN 63) Cultural differences are among the greatest obstacles to satisfactory communication among men, and the communication of the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, which is the Gospel, does not escape the difficulties. Even if the messenger of the Gospel can surmount psychological obstacles and overcome prejudices, there are still many objective practical problems, the greatest being that of *disengaging the content of the message from its concrete expression*.

Pope Paul tells us that "the Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures". (EN 63). But the evangelizer, the messenger of the Gospel and indeed the Church as a whole, is not independent of culture, for as the Pope himself has explained, "this universal Church is in practice incarnate in the individual Churches made up of such or such an actual part of mankind, speaking such and such a language, heirs of a cultural patrimony, of a vision of the world, or an historical past, of a particular human substratum." (EN 62).

Obviously the Christian faith must be a vital and active reality in the hearts and lives of people; it cannot remain as a lofty abstraction enshrined in a neat set of doctrinal formulae. Hence a concrete expression in human culture — that is, in the way that men actually conduct their lives — is essential to the faith; yet no particular concrete expression is essential; rather it is essential that the expression change according to circumstances, so that it is always adequate and effective. *So, on the one hand, faith must never be separated from its living manifestation, and on the other, it must always be distinguished from it.*

It is fairly easy to see this in theory but almost impossible to realize it satisfactorily in practice; and the problem becomes all the greater when it is a question of evangelization, of communicating the Good News. For our desire and capacity to communicate presuppose a faith that is lively and deep in us, a faith that is very much our own, very much at the heart of what we are, with all our background and experience; yet in sharing it, we cannot transpose to others what is peculiarly our own; they must receive the faith and in their turn express it in the context of their own background and experience.

*This is the problem of inculturation.* It affects not only evangelization, that is, the conveying of the Gospel to others, but the ongoing fidelity of those who have already accepted the Gospel and must live it in the midst of constantly changing circumstances. Today particularly, culture changes very fast, and the faithful Christian must keep pace with changes precisely in order to remain steadily and totally faithful and to give witness that is relevant and meaningful in the situation in which he lives.

"The question is undoubtedly a delicate one", says Pope Paul. "Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does



not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life. But on the other hand, evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the pretext of translating it." (EN 63)

Elsewhere in the same context the Pope speaks of „the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth" (EN 63). The idea is simple enough, but it raises yet one more and very fundamental difficulty, which is this: the essential truth of the Gospel message is not an abstraction but a concrete reality: it is Christ himself, who is the Truth, and who is a particular man, a Jew of his day, who thought and acted as a Jew, who spoke and made disciples among the Jews. Do we abstract from the Jewishness, of Christ and of his whole way of being when we transpose the essence of the Gospel? Many of his disciples did in fact think that in order to be a Christian one must first of all have the mind and manner of a Jew. The Apostles rejected this view at the Council of Jerusalem, but the underlying problem has remained with the Church; and the difficulties it raises have increased as the passage of time has added many particular features to the understanding and practice of the saving message of Christ. It is enough to recall, even briefly and inadequately, some moments in the ecclesiastical history of the modern age, to get an idea of the present state of the question.

At the Council of Trent the Roman Catholic Church opted for a highly specified way of being a Christian, which became the officially approved way, practically the only way. Since the sixteenth century also inaugurated an age of great missionary expansion, for the Western Church, following upon the discovery of new lands or new ways to old lands, this one way of being a Christian spread and was cultivated all over the world. In the seventeenth century, in 1659 to be exact, the recently established Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, addressing the Vicars Apostolic of China gave a strong and clear directive to missionaries with regard to the people they were evangelizing: "Do not waste your zeal or your powers of persuasion in getting these people to change their rites, customs, or ways of life, unless these be very obviously opposed to faith and morals. For what could be more ridiculous than to import France, Spain, Italy or any other part of Europe into China? What you carry with you is not a national culture, but a Message which does not reject or offend the sound traditions of any country, but rather wants to safeguard and foster them."

Realizing that difficulties arise not so much from principle as from almost inevitable prejudice, the Sacred Congregation also warned of the psychological problems involved. But the tragic story of the Chinese rites at the dawn of the eighteenth century shows how little the Church was able to practice what she preached. The nineteenth century witnessed



a new upsurge of missionary zeal, with the foundation of many new missionary congregations of men and women. More movement and better communication, the progress of science in general, and of the human sciences in particular, a new sense of national identity in many parts of the world, and many other factors, too numerous to be mentioned, contributed to a deeper understanding of cultural differences and their importance. There was more and better organized effort to learn about peoples and their ways of life, and some account was taken of the knowledge thus acquired when the Gospel was presented to them. But in the Catholic Church at least, a maximum of uniformity was regarded as the ideal, and there was a tendency to identify the Western Church with the Universal Church.

In the early part of the twentieth century the idea gained ground that *the missionary task was to plant the local Church* — that is, the effort should not be conceived as that of saving individual souls by bringing them over to a Church that was and remained foreign, but rather as of establishing a native Church, with its hierarchy and structures suited to the need of the people, wherein they might recognize and find salvation. This marked a theological and practical advance; adaptation was the favorite word in the missionary vocabulary of the day, and the policy that it implied gained impetus with the rise of so many new nations in Asia, and Africa after the last World War.

At this time, the encounter of the Gospel with culture did make some progress in the so-called mission territories, but it was a very limited progress, the most fundamental deficiency being that the point of reference for introducing any new feature was not the Christian message as such but the Western Church, with its scholastic theology, its tridentine liturgy and its more recent Code of Canon Law and its multitudinous devotional practices: implicitly or explicitly these were regarded as the norm, as the normal and proper way of being a Christian, from which one departed only by way of exception granted as an indult or a grudging concession. Moreover, effort in this direction was confined almost exclusively to what was regarded as the specifically religious sphere — and indeed to rather superficial aspects — and did not extend to the secular concerns of Christians who often found themselves involved in the nation-building activities of their fellow citizens.

Today, a decade after the Second Vatican Council, we would rather see the encounter of the Gospel with culture in the following way: the *Church is indeed like a tree, as the Gospel itself tells us* — a large tree that harbours many and varied birds — but it is not transplanted from one soil to another with just the necessary adjustments to enable it to survive and thrive in its new surroundings; *rather it grows a new in each soil, from a seed that is sown*. The seed that evangelization sows is the word of God; falling on the ground, even on good ground and precisely because the ground is good ground the seed must die if it is to bear fruit.



This, too, we know from the Gospel; and we have the seed which in dying does not lose its life and identity; rather it manifests a new power, it draws elements from the native soil, and grows into a tree that has an appearance all its own but is in perfect continuity with the seed from which it springs. It may not look exactly like other trees that have grown elsewhere from the same seed, but it has the same life and bears the same fruit as they do.

*It is this new understanding of a very old problem that justifies the use of a new word, "inculturation".* It is now found in standard dictionaries and it is gradually gaining acceptance. Obviously it is not a magic word that automatically solves the problem of the encounter of the Gospel with culture; but the new understanding that it implies does throw light on some practical aspects of evangelization, and the most important insight that it provides is that the messenger of the Gospel is faced with the mystery of death and new life. The older idea of planting the Church drew inspiration from the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word made Flesh: the Church, it was said, is a prolongation of the Incarnation, and the Word must take flesh in every culture. This is true, but in this process also, we now realize, the Incarnation finds fulfilment in the Paschal Mystery.

There is already a self-annihilation in the Incarnation, the kenosis in which the Son of God empties himself, taking the form of a servant; but having become like us in all things he humbled himself yet more submitting to death on the cross; and it is in being raised up by the Father's will and power that Jesus is constituted Lord of the Universe and of human destiny. In the Paschal Mystery the particularity of the Incarnation is transcended and Christ fills all creation with his life-giving presence. It is this mystery that is at the heart of the Good News that the Gospel proclaims and that the Messenger of the Gospel must carry to the ends of the earth. But in this process both the messenger and the message itself must not only become incarnate in the lives of the people to whom Christ brings new life; they must also die and rise again in these people.

That both the evangelizer and the evangelized must make sacrifices for the Gospel is not a new idea; that they can be called upon to die for the faith is neither new nor just an idea; it has been a heroic reality in the history of the Church throughout the ages. What comes to us today as a fresh realization is the startling truth that in some mysterious way *the Gospel itself must die as Christ died: the word of God, like good seed falling on good ground, must die that it may bear good fruit.* No formulation in human terms of God's message is exhaustive or even adequate; hence this message, which ultimately is Christ himself, must constantly find new expression in the language and life of man: this is the mystery of the Church, which is "the fullness of him who fills the whole creation" (Eph. 1,23).



Pope Paul reminds us that the Church does not become the fullness of Christ merely by numerical increase: "for the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographical areas or ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgement, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (EN 19). The human values that are upset by the power of the Gospel are not only those of the people who are evangelized and of their culture; they can also be those of the evangelizer himself and of the Church that he represents: these, too, can sometimes be in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation; for instance, to absolutize what is but one particular expression of the faith, to fence around what should be open and free, can also be a betrayal of the Gospel. It is not the enemies of the Gospel only but also its defenders and propagators that must realize that "the word of God is not shackled". (Tim. 2:9)

A Church that does not set bounds to God's message of merciful love for man but rather lives by the freedom and magnanimity of that message — such is the entrancing vision that Pope Paul puts before us, whilst at the same time recognizing that this vision will always be somewhat blurred by our own human limitations. "This is how the Lord wanted his Church to be: universal, a great tree whose branches shelter the birds of the air, a net which catches fish of every kind, or which Peter drew in filled with one hundred and fifty-three big fish, a flock which a single shepherd pastures. A Universal Church without boundaries or frontiers except, alas, those of the heart and mind of sinful man" (EN 61).

The realization of this ideal will undoubtedly lead to an ever wider pluralism which, in its proper dimensions, will in no way endanger the unity of faith but rather enrich and emphasize it. An analogy may help to elucidate this point. Just as we find not only any languages in the world, but also a constant evolution within the same language, as men strive to give adequate expression to their experience — an experience which is basically human, and hence common to all men, yet varied according to an endless variety of situations, so, too, our response to the word of God will be varied, though fundamentally we share the same faith. Moreover, we see that despite the multiplicity of languages, communication is possible even on the international level, though ultimately each one of us has his own peculiar way of expressing himself. So, too, with our faith: there will be a basic oneness in its expression; there will be broad lines of convergence within a culture; and finally there will be something that is unique to each believer if his faith is really a personal experience. *All these differences must be respected and even cultivated if the faith is to be a reality that is alive, meaningful, effective.*

It is Pope Paul, once again, who tells us: "Legitimate attention to



individual Churches cannot fail to enrich the Church. Such attention is indispensable and urgent. It responds to the very deep aspirations of people and human communities to find their own identity ever more clearly" (EN 63). As against this, there are those who lament that growing pluralism is responsible for the crisis of faith that so alarmingly manifests itself in every quarter. But one could argue credibly that the crisis is due precisely to insufficient pluralism: that is, there is reason to believe that *it is not the faith that has lost its meaning for many people, but rather the way in which they are expected to live it*, which does not correspond to their experience of life and its problems.

This is the challenge of inculturation that faces the Church everywhere, whether in areas and communities that have just been evangelized or in the traditionally Christian ones: new ways of living the faith must be found to satisfy new and more varied needs, arising from new and perhaps strange situations — ways that are rooted in the past but creatively alive to a present that is so quickly overtaken by the future; hence also, men and women must be found who can trace these ways for others, people who are solidly established in tradition but alive and vibrant to the Spirit as he acts in all the ambiguities of the present hour, opening out into the uncertainties of the future.