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## “Adapt yourselves to them as servants”

(Libermann, ND X, p. 330)

Inculturation is becoming a preoccupation. It keeps cropping up – but without ever a clear definition. It is fast becoming a catchall for any number of sundry agendas. It takes on different tints depending on the cultural or ideological matrix in which it is used. Nevertheless, to dismiss it as transitory or inconsequential would be disastrous. It is a worrying issue in local Churches, and a challenge to missionary institutes.

The dimensions of the inculturation question demonstrate that we are now in an age of a new emphasis on mission. We are living in a time of major transition. Karl Rahner called this age the third period in his tripartite division of the epochs in Church history. It is the period when the Church is becoming really, not just theoretically, in fact, not just in word, Catholic; when the Christian faith is finding expression in a world where western culture and thought-forms no longer have hegemony. *Proclamation, dialogue, inculturation and liberation* (Sedos Seminar 1981, Grottaferrata, Rome) – these four key words are used today to delineate the essence of this age of new emphasis on mission.

However, there are close links existing among these four principal activities in the actual missionary practice of the Church. Inculturation is generally regarded as an African issue, for the simple reason that today we are able to see that “*Christianity should be Africanized*” (Bishop Sarpong of Kumasi, Ghana). Or, as Bühlmann puts it, “*having Christianized Africa, we now have to Africanize Christianity in Africa*” (W. Bühlmann: *Forward, Church!*, St. Paul Publications, 1977, p. 49).

Africanization, Asianization, Latin Americanization, Europeanization and Oceanization of Christianity challenge us Spiritans today. *We are called to be catalysts or avenues of this process.* To achieve this we must be willing to open ourselves voluntarily and positively to the culture or cultures of the people among whom we live and work. “*The path of culture is the path of man*” (Pope John Paul II, Lagos, to Bishops). This openness to culture or cultures was a fact of life in the days of the Apostles (Acts 15). The Gospel was proclaimed and the faith was lived successively in different cultural contexts: Palestinian-Aramaic, Diaspora, Hellenistic, etc. At the Areopagus of Athens, Paul adopts the values of Greek religiosity to express some basic aspects of the Christian mystery.

He makes of the altar dedicated by the Greeks to unknown gods, an altar “*to the unknown God*” (Acts 17:23). Saints Cyril and Methodius are regarded as pioneers of the use of the vernacular in the liturgy and as inventors of the Glagolitic (Cyrillic) alphabet. This enabled them to insert the Christian message into the Slavonic culture. In Spiritan history examples abound of conferes who had profound knowledge of their host cultures, and their monumental success (often *unsung*) accrued from this.

### Culture

The Congregation is not just international. It is intercultural as well. Our meetings, councils, seminars, congresses and commissions bring to sharp relief our diversity of cultures. This raises problems in questions of formulations that are acceptable to all in our documents. This is evident in issues like Community Life and Formation. The projected revision of our Rules and Constitutions, which should accommodate and reflect our multicultural membership, proved knotty at the 1983-84 Carcavelos meeting. The acid test of this project will be the attention it pays to our multifaceted culture.

What is culture? It is needless to rehearse here the far-reaching debate on this topic which began practically with the rise of anthropological theory in the late 19th century and has continued ever since. In this I/D we take *culture* proper as: “*the set of meanings, values and patterns which underlie the perceptible phenomena of a concrete society*” (Fr. M. Azevedo, S.J.). Culture is the most profound code to reveal a human, social group and to make it comprehensible. It is the whole range of human achievement within which we live. It is the human setting of our lives (M. de Verteuil). Some anthropologists call it the ‘artificial environment’ as distinct from the natural environment.

The notion of ‘culture’ as it is understood by sociologists and anthropologists is a relatively new one. The Church describes it as a means of expression, of communication and of conservation of great spiritual experiences (*Gaudium et Spes*, 53). Pope Paul VI spoke of the great variety “*of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguishes this or that human gathering*”. Our culture shapes both our acting and our thinking (Kraft).

Culture is a factor that faces missionaries today. The prevailing mode of evangelization and Church development is one of finding Christ in the situation rather than concentrating on bringing Christ into the situation. The study of culture is necessary. Otherwise one runs the risk of introducing and maintaining Christianity as an alien body in the culture. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* points out that the force and effectiveness of the missionary's apostolate is measured in the light of knowledge of the culture of the people (no. 63).

## Inculturation

To know the culture or be part of a given culture smooths the path of inculturation. The notion of inculturation as the dynamic relation between the Christian message and culture or cultures is usually advanced. Culture is attended to in so far as it helps with the transmission of the message. This message can be heard only if spoken in the accents of the hearers. "We hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God" (Acts 2:11). Hence the speakers must first conform themselves to the contours of the hearers' world or to the reality in which the hearers find themselves before enacting the event of the Word. In this, inculturation is not just a step that might be helpful in a deeper understanding of the Gospel; it is imperative in order that the event of the Word may take place at all. What this means is that God has chosen to reveal himself fully to us only when his Word is incarnated in concrete historical and social circumstances. When we try to escape that reality in our evangelization, we are like a message full of static noise, not yet tuned exactly on a cultural receiver (R. Schreiter).

*Ad Gentes* stresses that the Church borrows from the customs, traditions, wisdom, learning, arts and sciences of peoples all the things which can contribute to the glory of the Creator (no. 22). Inculturation is an option of prime importance for Africa, indeed for the whole Church, because the need for it is universal. There is need of a new and continuous inculturation of the faith everywhere. It is triumphalistic to think that only the local Churches of the Southern Hemisphere need inculturation. It is a dangerous error to deny that the Churches of the Northern Hemisphere need a re-inculturation of the faith. However, since the map of our presence throughout the globe tilts more to the South, inculturation for us concerns inserting Christianity more profoundly into the Southern Hemisphere reality. For evangelization has not yet penetrated the depths of its cultures. This puts in perspective Pope John Paul II's address to the Bishops of Cameroon on their *ad limina* visit (November 1982): "In particular, a second stage remains, that of evangelization of the culture in depth, the African cultures, customs and mentality, so that the Church gradually acquires its African features on the basis of the one foundation, Jesus Christ. . . ." It is clear from this papal advice that Christology is at the very heart of any theology of inculturation. There is little wonder then that the Pope affirmed that "not only is Christianity relevant to Africa, but Christ, in his members, is himself African" (Pope John Paul II, 1980, in Nairobi to Kenyan Bishops).

With these in view, we can now venture to answer the question: what is inculturation? It is "the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about "a new creation"" (Fr. P. Arrupe, S.J.).

In other words, we understand by the term that effort which the Church makes to present the message and values of the Gospel by embodying them in expressions that are characteristic to each culture, in such a way that the faith and Christian experience of each local Church is imbued, as intimately and deeply as possible, in its own cultural context. This process enables the Christian message to penetrate that culture, to take on local colour, to cease being exotic and to become more intelligible. It simply brings the reality of Christ closer to a people's reality.

## Libermannian Perspective

Fr. Libermann never went to the missions but he had an admirable intuition. He gave very judicious instructions to his missionaries *in situ*. He insisted on the planting of local Churches that were truly and authentically rooted in the local people. He hoped that "all missionaries will work seriously to establish solidly based Churches in foreign mission countries and that hereafter they will employ every valid means for putting them into the same canonical situation as the Churches of Europe and America" (Letter of 7 Jan. 1846, ND Compléments, p. 68). He considered this a safeguard for the future, for "you are not there for the present but to build for the future". Libermann's insistence on local Churches necessarily implied that there be "from the very beginning. . . a stable organization indigenous to the ground we have to cultivate" (ND VIII, pp. 242-243). Religion must be "fixed in the native soil, inherent in the earth".

Only one way seems practical: the formation of the native clergy, which is one of the necessary means "whereby the light of the holy Gospel can be widely diffused and the Church solidly established in the countries where we are called to work" (ND X, p. 519). Fr. Libermann termed a Church without local hierarchy and clergy abnormal. In 1846, November 2, he wrote about Haiti: The present situation is abnormal, as long as there is no Haitian bishop with Haitian collaborators, and we "moreover, do not have sufficient knowledge of the spirit and the customs of the country" (ND VIII, p. 337). Incisively, he summed up the situation by saying: "Haiti needs a bishop and clergy who come from the country itself; for this, a seminary is needed" (ND VIII, pp. 340-341).

However, Fr. Libermann did not view the establishment of new local Churches as the sole function of the native clergy. The clergy is not enough. He strongly believed that the laity must be involved as catechists in order "to spread the true doctrine and educate their fellow countrymen in the faith and in Christian living".

Quite obviously, Fr. Libermann never used the word 'inculturation'. But the theological content of this term is present in his writings. If evangelization is to lead to the implantation of the Church in a new region as a self-sustaining Christian community, it must be rooted in the mentality, customs and culture of the people and not in the culture proper to the missionary's home country (Koren). Apropos of this, Libermann wrote to his missionaries with a deep sense of urgency: "Do not judge according to what you have seen in Europe, according to what you have been used to in Europe. Cast Europe aside, its customs and its spirit. Become authentically black so that you may form them as they should be formed, not in a European way, but leave them what is theirs, adapt yourselves to them as servants have to adapt themselves to their masters, their customs, their taste and manners, in order to perfect and sanctify them, to raise them up and transform them slowly and gradually into a people of God" (ND IX, p. 330). His revised Rules contain several pages on the way the missionaries should act towards the populations to be evangelized. They should know the character of the people and the geography of the country. They should scrupulously avoid disturbing the habits of the people (as long as they are not opposed to the law of God). They should avoid forming them in the European way of life (ND X, p. 452).

These well-known words cannot help but strike us by their similarity to certain expressions of the Second Vatican Council and of the Synod of 1974, concerning the need for the Church to inculturate itself into each human culture, while leaving to each that which is its own (*Ad Gentes*, 10; *Gaudium et Spes*, 44; Final Statement of the Bishops of the 1974 Synod, nos. 2 and 9). The Libermannian concern for solidly founded local Churches indicates that there is no need for the African, Asian, Latin American or Oceanian reality to be replaced by a foreign western form of Christian reality: the need is for the African, Asian, Latin American or Oceanian reality to be interpreted and made complete by the Christian revelation. Christ was semitic by race. This should allow that Christianity in Africa, Asia, Latin America or Oceania be best understood in an African, or Asian, or Latin American or Oceanian dress.

## Spiritans Perspective

"We see the importance of a new incarnation of the Word of God, so that this Word may penetrate all cultures" (SL, 50).

In the litany of Spiritan traits, evangelizing skills, sense of physical hard work and dedication to duty should be singled out. Evangelization that spans over two hundred years and includes sixty nations; the multitudes of converts that we have registered; the network of schools and churches that we have built; the formation of local clergy and hierarchy that we considered an option of immense importance and the web of particular Churches that we have established, are eloquent testimonies of Spiritan missionary endeavours. However, in this galaxy of our pre-Vatican II work and achievements, it would be a sad mistake for us to be complacent. If inculturation is something as old as the Church itself, it may be asked why at the present time it engages the attention of the Church with urgency. The last twenty years have seen the emergence of new theological appreciations in ecclesiology, mission and evangelization. There is now a call to a "paradigm shift" (Kuhn, 1970) or a change of worldview, a shift of perspective. There is a time for everything (Eccl. 3:1-8). We have planted. It is now time to water and nurture what is planted. This is an imperious need.

Since the 1974 Synod, some African ecclesiastical leaders like Cardinal Malula, Archbishop of Kinshasa, have begun projects whose aim is "to promote the birth of an authentically African local Church... We say pointedly that it is the ultimate objective...". In Latin America, the word is liberation, called normally "insertion among the poor". At the appeal of Pope John XXIII, a considerable number of missionaries was sent to Latin America. They put themselves in contact with the poor, initiated new programs among them, inserted themselves in their slums, shared their life, their lack, their misery, their fears, their hopes. In Asia, it is dialogue. No one can fail to see the importance and the need which this assumes in Asia today. The recent document on *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of other Religions* (Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission), issued by the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christians, Pentecost 1984, is a useful book for all Spiritans. An I/D on 'Dialogue', illustrated with lived experiences and witness of our confreres, is in the offing.

In the 17th century Propaganda Fide issued definite instructions on mission methodology to missionaries: "Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear upon the people, to change their manners, customs and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals... There is no stronger cause for alienation and hate than an attack on local customs, especially when these go back to venerable antiquity. This is more especially the case when an attempt is made to introduce the customs of another people in place of those which have been abolished" (Instructions to Missionaries, issued in 1695 by the Roman Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples). "Accordingly we must devote all our resources and all our efforts to the sedulous evangelization of human culture or rather of the various human cultures. They must be regenerated through contact with the Gospel" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20). This is what it means for Christianity to be relevant to them. In this context, the scope of its influence is judged.

To be real catalysts or passageways of inculturation, we need "personal interior inculturation". As men involved in this work, we allow ourselves first of all to be re-evangelized (SL, 50). This necessarily precedes, or at least accompanies, the external task of inculturation. All changes arising from Vatican II, from *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, from our last three General Chapters and Enlarged General Councils have precisely this objective: to make us effective agents of a genuine inculturation of the Gospel. In theory we admit the necessity of inculturation. But, if we want to let ourselves be caught up in this process, theory is insufficient. We need the "shock" of deep personal experience (Fr. Arrupe). For Spiritans who are called to live in another culture, a rigorous asceticism is required. We have to be assimilated to the

Lord in his 'kenosis'. This self-emptying is a *conditio sine qua non* because all inculturation presupposes a de-culturation. This is the law of life. This enables us to see things in a very different perspective. Inculturation entails a change of attitude, an altering of values. We are affected by Kenya, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Brazil, Pakistan etc., their people, their cultures. We become attuned to the new one. We do not become Kenyans, Cameroonians, Sierra Leoneans, Brazilians, Pakistanis etc. However, we do become very different Frenchmen, Irishmen, Englishmen, Americans, Nigerians, Tanzanians, Dutchmen, Germans, Portuguese etc. than we were upon our arrival at our places of apostolate. Our values are enhanced. We do not forget who we are but our entrance into a new way of life does have a profound effect. We become a dialogue between our respective cultures and our host peoples.

This section would be incomplete without mention of stalwart Spiritans whose insertion into their host peoples launched them into greatness. How many know Laval's place of origin? Very few. The Mauritians were his "children". "Father Laval is a Mauritian, sir," contested a Mauritian taxi-driver. Mauritius pulsates with Father Laval. Canon Coubé said of Father Brottier, "an epic in three melodies": African missionary, military chaplain, father of orphans. The Father of orphans indeed! Father Brottier was fully identified with Auteuil. Some outstanding pioneering missionary bishops: Joseph Shanahan of Southern Nigeria, Mgr. Vogt of Bagamoyo and Cameroon, Mgr. Bessieux of Gabon, and Mgr. Derouet of Loango, Congo, to mention a few, along with missionaries like Fr. Duparquet of Angola, were trail-blazers in evangelization in their respective territories and times. Their theories paved avenues or passageways for inculturation. Schools, formation and engagement of lay personnel and their pastoral zeal gave their missions an effective *élan*. May we be encouraged by these men!

## Foreign Missionaries: Heralds of Inculturation

"He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn. 3:30). This is the norm for the inculturation of Spiritan missionaries. Spiritans should favour the building up of the self-confidence and the development of native values. Our task is evidently to adapt ourselves, to render ourselves sensitive to the values, priorities, wishes, ways of conduct, of communicating, of relating to the other of our host countries. To be well acculturated is the clarion call. The degree of this acculturation aids the extent to which we pave the way for inculturation. For we are solely its heralds. The principal elements for the Spiritan missionary to make possible the achievement of inculturation are sensitivity, which shows itself in learning and really mastering the language of the host people, respect and love. Persevering patience is indispensable. Fr. Libermann enjoins us to value, respect and love all men, and this with all the sincerity of our hearts, and to behave accordingly (ND II, p. 112).

## Inculturation by Indigenous Spiritans

"The Gospel is put into practice by men who are imbued with their own particular culture" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20).

Fr. Libermann viewed the formation of native clergy as vital: "If we do not form a native clergy, we shall never succeed in this mission" (ND VI, pp. 121-122, to Fr. Le Vavasour, 10 March 1844). He wrote to Mother Javouhey on 22 July 1844: "Form a native clergy. It is the most useful thing, the most important... I do not think it is possible to get good results without this." He adds that "the local priests will have the advantage over the Europeans in many aspects of dealing with their compatriots" (ND VI, p. 285). We can therefore distinguish between inculturation by 'expatriates' and inculturation by nationals.

Inculturation is primarily the task of the local Church (Fr. M. Amaladoss). Evangelization of peoples is best carried out by Christians of the same races. This is so because there has to be an entry or insertion into the culture, for the most intimate values can be perceived only from within. No one is more 'inserted' into a people than one who belongs to it by birth and culture. Local people would know how to avoid certain transplants which the cultural soil of the place will reject. Hence the fundamental importance of our young Provinces and Foundations, and the present efforts at regionalism in formation in the Congregation at large. *Spiritana Life* and indeed most Provinces advocate this cultural regionalism or training *in situ* (SL, 111). This process aims at forming people who are secure in their own culture despite the idealism and shortcomings inherent in this policy.

It is regrettable that some of the past generation of non-Euro-American Spiritans tended to be unacculturated. They fall between two stools while trying to sit on both. Like the African proverbial bat, they belong neither to the quadruped realm nor to the winged kingdom. For authentic inculturation, this breed of Spiritans runs the same gauntlet of problems as the 'expatriates'. In the same vein, we must abandon the illusion that a Tanzanian (because he originates from the East African region) or a Nigerian (because he is African) who is missioning in Zambia, for example, can effortlessly effect this process. Hence the fundamental role to be played by Spiritans of the culture in question with their intuition, their ability to identify that which best expresses what they are, to pick up what is genuine. Fortunately, in countries where the problem of inculturation is urgent, the Congregation can rely on Spiritans from these areas, since inculturation, now a missionary imperative, is best realized by "men who are imbued with their own particular culture" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20).

## The Formation of Spiritans

The contribution which Spiritans can make to this work of inculturation depends, in the long term, on the level of the consciousness for inculturation to which young Spiritans can attain now. The 1980 General Chapter stressed the importance of this awareness during formation. It singled out, among other things, a genuine preparation for encounter with other cultures by study of the human and social sciences and some practical notions of linguistics (SL, 173). Language is vitally important. "This is a question which calls for no small measure of prudence, because evangelization will lose much of its power and efficacy if it does not take into consideration the people to whom it is addressed, if it does not make use of their language, their signs and their symbols" (*Evan. Nunt.*, 63). Apropos of internationality, *Spiritana Life* insists that during the time of formation, study of another language is required of candidates (SL, 204). The Draft of New Rules and Constitutions, 1984, if it survives the scrutiny of the 1986 General Chapter, points out that we integrate ourselves into the host culture through learning the language (no. 32).

The missionary can reach the heart of his people and gain their confidence only if he can sit down and speak with them. "Interpreters are no substitute. It is not possible to understand what is in the mind of other people without understanding their language, and without understanding their language it is impossible to be sure that they understand what is in our minds." To assure this, Fr. Simon E. Smith, S.J., adopts a ruthless position. "Ability to speak the language of the host people," he says, "is an absolutely indispensable element of inculturation. If the missionary is not gifted with this talent, he should not be sent. . . . If, after several years in the mission country or region, it is obvious

that he cannot learn the language, he should be recalled to his home country" (*The Future of Mission*, Sedos Bulletin, 1 Nov. 1983, p. 304). On the other hand, St. Ignatius orders that penances be given to those who do not learn the local language (To the Superiors of the Society, Rome, 1 Jan. 1556).

It has to be pointed out that creditable achievements have been made by Spiritans with minimal knowledge of the local language. It can be argued that someone can have perfect knowledge of the language and yet be a failure apostolically. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that we achieve more by knowing the language. It is sheer courtesy to our host people. Our confreres who live and work in French-speaking territories, in the Kiswahili-speaking regions, in Chichewa, Tonga and Shona tribes and in Portuguese-speaking countries, find that language is an absolute in their apostolate. The monumental *Swahili-French Dictionary*, which is still regarded as a standard work even today, was produced by a Spiritan, the legendary Fr. C. Sacleux. Fr. Alphons Loogman's *Swahili Grammar* remains a household book in East Africa. Last year, Fr. Alphonse Lenselaer of Kongolo District produced a modern *Swahili-French Dictionary*. In the early '50s, Fr. Bernard J. Kelly published an *Igbo Grammar* for the language orientation of new missionaries to the region. This is still valued as an indispensable reference book and a model for recent editions. Fr. Leo van Kessel has turned out a seven-volume corpus in Kiswahili on Religious Knowledge for Schools in Tanzania under the aegis of the Tanzanian Episcopal Conference.

These endeavours of the present and past are appreciated. They are approval of the primacy of language in the apostolate. Particular attention and assiduity, therefore, should be shown and developed in the ability to learn languages. Our formation period, the Overseas Training Program and the practice of one or two years of anticipated first appointments are propitious times to introduce our students into the language of the region where they will work. Candidates ought to have the capacity and disposition to achieve this objective, which is of cardinal importance for fostering inculturation. In the missions, Spiritans who are unable to learn the local language, and consequently have no feeling for the 'ethos' and way of life of the local people, will find their ministry unnering.

## Conclusion

An African prelate, Maurice Cardinal Otunga, made a statement in *AFER* (Feb. 1978) that "African culture possesses seeds that can produce flowers which have never been seen before". This cardinal remark can be applied to all cultures. These "seeds that can produce flowers which have never been seen before" can be found if we build upon the cultures of the peoples being evangelized or evangelize the cultures themselves. This is a high ideal. The Congregation calls us to strive to reach this high ideal with greater intensity. This demands personal and profound convictions about the capital importance of inculturation, for which the Church asks us to be prime movers. *A fortiori*, we must realize that concern for inculturating, interculturating or contextualizing the Gospel message is not just a side dish but the main course of the meal. Surely, this is a delicate task, but indispensable. It is one of the best services which the Congregation today can render in the cause of evangelization. All of us, sons of Poullart des Places and Libermann, should be conscious of being sent as heralds and agents of a communion that not only gathers together people of our own countries, but brings to unity, while respecting distinct identity, "all God's children scattered far and wide" (Jn. 11:52).