

EVANGELIZING

New Vision - New Directions

CATECHESIS

A SERIES OF ARTICLES ON THEMES FROM THE GENERAL DIRECTORY FOR CATECHESIS

"Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways."
(GDC, #105)

"The definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch, but also in communion and intimacy, with Jesus Christ."
(CT5) All evangelizing activity is understood as promoting communion with Jesus Christ."
(GDC, #80)

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Opening Prayer

Take a moment to place yourself in the presence of God's Spirit, then prayerfully read and reflect on the following passage:

On the following day he [Peter] entered Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. When Peter entered, Cornelius met him and, falling at his feet, paid him homage. Peter, however, raised him up, saying, "Get up. I myself am also a human being." While [Peter] conversed with him, he went in and found many people gathered together and said to them, "You know that it is unlawful for a Jewish man to associate with, or visit, a Gentile, but God has shown me that I should not call any person profane or unclean. And that is why I came without objection when sent for. . . ." Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.

(Acts 10:24-29, 34-35)

Article 5

Faith in Cultures: Inculturation and Catechesis

by Peter C. Phan

Based on paragraphs 109-110, 193-196, and 203-207 in the *General Directory for Catechesis*

Preparing to Read

In preparing to read the following article, reflect on and discuss with others the following:

1. How has your ethnic background and culture impacted the way you live and practice your faith?
2. What is your reaction to this statement: "A faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived."



NATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR CATECHETICAL LEADERSHIP

Though "inculturation" is a new word, what it implies has been the constant preoccupation of the Church ever since it attempted to fulfill Jesus' command to preach the Gospel to all nations. Originating within the Jewish religion and culture, the Christian faith was successively translated and adapted to Greek, Latin, and Franco-Germanic peoples, and since the sixteenth century, thanks to the burst of missionary activities, to peoples outside of Europe. Today, because of the widespread phenomenon of cultural pluralism, even within Europe and North America, the Church has a much sharper awareness of the necessity to "inculturate" the Gospel into different cultures.

By inculturation is meant "the penetration of the deepest strata of persons and peoples by the Gospel which touches them deeply, 'going to the very center and roots' (EN 20) of their cultures" (*General Directory for Catechesis [GDC]*, #109). There is, as Pope John Paul II has pointed out, a double movement in this process: penetration of the Gospel into a particular sociocultural milieu and introduction of the people of this milieu, together with their culture, into the Church (see *On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate [Redemptoris Missio]*, #52). As a result, there is a *mutual* enrichment and transformation between the local culture and the Christian faith. Clearly, then, inculturation is not just a passing fad but rather a permanent and crucial task of evangelization and catechesis. As John Paul II has said, "A faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived" (Address to the Italian National

Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment [16 January 1982], 2: *Insegnamenti* V/1 [1982], 131).

Theological Foundations of Inculturation

Inculturation is deeply rooted in and governed by four fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith: creation, incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and Pentecost. The biblical stories of *creation* represent God as not only bringing all things into existence but also ordering humans to "be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28). By carrying out this mandate, humans create their cultures and in this way share in God's creative power. Christians have the added task of imbuing this culture-making process with Gospel values so that their faith may be inculturated into their cultures and their cultures transformed by faith. This incultur-

ation is therefore an essential part of the mission of "cultivating" the earth, which God entrusted to humanity at the dawn of history.

The goodness of God's creation has, however, been marred by human sin, and, as a consequence, humanity and its cultures need healing and restoration. God's redemptive plan reached its climax in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The *incarnation* of the Word has been regarded as the theological foundation and model of inculturation, insofar as it took place in a particular history, in a clearly circumscribed time and place. The Word of God did not assume a human "nature" abstractly conceived but became a first-century Jew, living out with his people all the things that made up their Jewish culture. As the *GDC* says, "this is the original 'incultur-

ation' of the Word of God and is the model of all evangelization by the Church, 'called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures'" (CT 53) (#109). Like the incarnated Word, catechists must empty themselves of their own cultural assumptions and customs in order to enter fully into the cultures of the people they evangelize, live like them as far as possible, and announce to them the Gospel in terms taken from their cultures.

God's redemptive acts, however, include not only the Word's incarnation but also his *death* on the cross and *resurrection*. The Son of God did not simply assume human culture but in his death also saved it from its sins by vanquishing the enslaving power of evil and liberated it for a new life in his resurrection. Like

Jesus, in inculturating the Gospel, catechists must not uncritically take on each and every element of a particular culture but must also purify it of its dehumanizing aspects and transform it according to the values of the Gospel. Hence, catechists "must discern, on the one hand, which riches to 'take' up as compatible with the faith; on the other, . . . [they] must seek to 'purify' (LG 13) and 'transform' (EN 19) those criteria, modes of thought and lifestyles which are contrary to the Kingdom of God" (*GDC*, #109).

Finally, the paschal mystery also includes *Pentecost*. At his visible descent upon the world, with his diverse gifts and by the power of his unifying love, the Holy Spirit created the one Church out of different peoples. Guided and sustained by the Spirit, catechists will be able to recognize the presence of

From the General Directory for Catechesis

" 'Inculturation' of the faith, whereby in a wonderful exchange are comprised, 'all the riches of the nations which have been given to Christ as an inheritance,' it is a profound and global process and a slow journey. It is not simply an external adaptation designed to make the Christian message more attractive or superficially decorative. On the contrary, it means the penetration of the deepest strata of persons and peoples by the Gospel which touches them deeply, 'going to the very center and roots' of their cultures." (*GDC*, #109)



divine grace already at work in all cultures, even before the preaching of the Gospel. They will be able to gather up all the elements of truth and goodness and beauty present in those cultures and integrate them into the Christian faith, so that all the peoples of the earth can profess in their own tongues the one faith in Jesus.

From the preceding reflections on how inculturation is rooted in the mysteries of creation, redemption, and Pentecost it is clear that the process of inculturating the Christian faith into local cultures is governed by two basic principles: "compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church" (RM 54a) (GDC, #109). Without the first criterion, inculturation will lead to the loss of Christian identity and syncretism; without the second, it will destroy the unity of the universal Church.

Catechesis and Inculturation

What are the tasks of catechesis in the process of inculturating the faith and how should they be performed? Before tackling these questions, it would be useful to note that inculturation is "a profound and global process and a slow journey" (GDC, #109). Therefore, it must not be done hurriedly and superficially, since, as John Paul II has said, "inculturation includes the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelization. It includes theology, liturgy, the Church's life and structures" (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* [1995], #62).

Furthermore, inculturation must involve the whole local church and not just a few experts: "It must be an expression of the community's life . . . and not be exclusively the result of erudite research." The thrust to incarnate the Gospel, which is the specific task of inculturation, requires the cooperation in catechesis of all who live in the same cultural condition—clergy, pastoral workers (catechists) and laity" (GDC, #206). All God's people "must be involved in this process which . . . needs to take place gradually, in such a way that it is really an expression of the community's Christian experience" (GDC, #109). As a result inculturation will not be something forced upon the community and will thus avoid arousing opposition.

With regard to catechesis in particular, the following tasks are necessary for the process of inculturation:

1. "Recognize a cultural dimension in the Gospel itself" (GDC, #203) by identi-

fying the elements of Jewish and Greek cultures present in the Bible itself.

2. Identify the elements of European cultures in the Church's theology, liturgy, organizational structures, and life.
3. Continuously learn "to know in depth the culture of persons and the extent of its penetration into their lives" (GDC, #203).
4. Identify those elements of American culture that require redemption and transformation by the Christian faith.
5. Identify those elements of American culture that are true, good, and beautiful that can be used as "functional equivalents" to express, celebrate, and to live the Christian faith.
6. While respecting biblical language as well as the doctrinal language of the Church's tradition, "enter into dialogue with forms and terms proper to the culture of those to whom it [catechesis] is addressed" and "stimulate new expressions of the Gospel in the culture in which it has been planted" (GDC, #208).

Areas of Inculturation

Religiously speaking, the United States has always been marked by extensive pluralism. Catholics not only constantly rub shoulders with Christians of other denominations but in recent times also come into frequent contact with followers of other religions, particularly Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Furthermore, the American Catholic Church, originally constituted by European immigrants, has recently been swelled by waves of Catholic immigrants from Central and South America, Asia, and Africa. These Catholics bring with them, besides different cultures, distinct ways of living the Christian faith.

This new multiethnic, multicultural, and multireligious situation creates challenging areas in which inculturation must

be carried out in catechesis. First, there is the necessity of *interreligious dialogue*: Catechists must acquire some familiarity not only with the traditions of other Christian communities (see GDC, #197) but also with the beliefs and practices of other world religions, especially Judaism, (see GDC, #199-200) and "new religious movements" (GDC, #201). The primary task of catechists is, of course, helping students understand, celebrate, live, and pray the Christian faith as the Catholic Church has taught it. This task, however, can be adequately performed in contemporary America only by relating

Reflection Questions for Individuals and Groups

Select some of the following questions to help you assimilate your understanding of this article.

1. How is the Incarnation the theological foundation and model for inculturation?
2. What would it mean in American culture to purify it of its dehumanizing aspects and transform it according to the values of the Gospel?
3. What does it mean to you that "the process of inculturating the Christian faith into local cultures is governed by two basic principles: compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church?"
4. If you were to take seriously some of the thoughts and ideas in this article, what would it mean in your ministry and parish?
5. In what areas of catechesis is the work of inculturation most needed in your parish? In your diocese?
6. What questions are raised by this article?

the Christian faith to and enriching it by the faiths and practices of other Christian denominations and religions.

Second, catechesis must also incorporate the rich traditions of the so-called "popular piety" or "popular religion" that is often central in the lives of newer immigrants. This popular piety indicates a "certain thirst for God"; arouses "a capacity for self-dedication and for the exercise of heroism"; gives people "a keen sensitivity by virtue of which they can appreciate the ineffable attributes of God"; and develops "habits of virtue rarely to be found otherwise in the same degree, such as patience, acceptance of the Cross in daily life, detachment, openness to other[s] and a spirit of ready service" (GDC, #195). Among popular piety, devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, deserves special encouragement (see GDC, #196). In promoting popular devotion, however, catechists should take care to avoid the dangers of fanaticism, superstition, and syncretism (see GDC, #195).

Third, another area that requires a thorough and systematic inculturation is the *liturgy* of the Roman rite. Here the first step of liturgical inculturation, that is, translation of the Latin typical editions of liturgical books into English, has been undertaken. There remain, however, vast areas that call for adaptation to the American culture, such as the rites and texts of the sacraments of Christian initiation, marriage, funerals, blessings, the liturgical year, and the Liturgy of the Hours (see Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation* [January 25, 1994], #53-61).

Fourth, the *mass media*, which plays an increasingly important

role in contemporary culture, needs to be imbued with Gospel values through inculturation (see GDC, #209). Among the means of communication for catechesis, the local catechism assumes a preeminent place. There is the urgent need for "the preparation of appropriate local catechisms, incorporating those adaptations required by difference of culture, age, spirituality and in the social and ecclesial situations of those to whom catechesis is addressed" (CT 18) (GDC, #210). Finally, inculturation should also focus on areas where cultural exchanges occur most frequently today: "The Gospel seeks a catechesis which is open, generous and courageous in reaching people where they live, especially in encountering those *nuclei* in which the most elementary and fundamental cultural exchanges take place, such as the family, the school, the work environment and free time" (GDC, #211).

In a speech to the bishops of Zaire, Pope John Paul II asked: "How is it that a faith which has truly matured, is deep and firm, does not succeed in expressing itself in a language, in a catechesis, in theological reflection, in prayer, in the liturgy, in art, in the institutions which are truly related to the African soul of your compatriots?" (Discourse to the Bishops of Zaire, April 12, 1983, no. 5: AAS 75 [1983], p. 620). No doubt the pope's question can also be addressed to the Catholics of the United States at the threshold of the third millennium and illustrates well the paramount importance of inculturation for the American Catholic Church.

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Closing Prayer



Good and gracious God, you call us to be your people, echoing your Word and presence through our ordinary lives as we strive to bring about your reign in our world today. We pray that we will continue to recognize and respond to your presence as we go forth to evangelize our world with your good news and promote a new vision and new direction for the catechetical ministry of all people. We ask for your blessing and intimate presence on our ongoing journey of conversion, becoming disciples who will transform the world through proclaiming and living Gospel values. We ask this in your name. Amen.

For Further Reading

National Conference of Catholic Bishops. *Brothers and Sisters To Us, U.S. Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism in Our Day*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998.

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