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**Jesus Christ, the Sacrament of God: Source, Inspiration
and Model of Inculturation Today**

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**A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for
the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Theology**

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DEDICATION

To all the great men and women who promote and spearhead the movement of inculturation of Christianity in Africa.

May the message of Christ in all its richness find a home in their hearts that they may more authentically answer the all-time question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:27-32).

EPIGRAPH

“A faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived” (Pope John Paul II)

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Praise and thanks to God, who because of his infinite love sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world. He pitched his tent among us, showing us the way to the Father. He is our model of inculturation today.

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DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Ecclesiastical Degree of Baccalaureate in Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|--------|--|
| AFER | African Ecclesial Review |
| AG | Vatican II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church. <i>Ad Gentes</i> |
| AMECEA | Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa |
| CCC | Catechism of the Catholic Church |
| cf. | confer |
| CT | Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on Catechesis Today. <i>Catechesi Tradendae</i> |
| DV | Vatican II, Declaration on Divine Revelation, <i>Dei Verbum</i> |
| EA | Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa. <i>Ecclesia in Africa</i> |
| EN | Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Paul VI on Evangelization in the Modern World. <i>Evangelii Nuntiandi</i> |
| EP | Encyclical Letter of Pius XII on Promotion of Catholic Missions, <i>Evangelii Praecones</i> |
| FR | Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on Faith and Reason. <i>Fides et Ratio</i> |
| GDC | General Directory for Catechesis |
| GS | Vatican II Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. <i>Gaudium et Spes</i> |
| ie. | <i>id est</i> – that is |
| LG | Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. <i>Lumen Gentium</i> |
| MI | Apostolic Letter of Benedict XV on The Propagation of the Faith Throughout the World, <i>Maximum Illud</i> . |
| OE | Vatican II, Decree on the Catholic Oriental Churches. <i>Orientalium Ecclesiarum</i> |
| RE | Encyclical Letter of Pius XI on Catholic Missions, <i>Rerum Ecclesiae</i> . |
| RM | Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on <i>The Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate. Redemptoris Missio</i> . |
| SCC | Small Christian Community |
| SCCs | Small Christian Communities |

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

0.1 Need and Urgency for Inculturation

The Second Vatican Council (1962-5) was very conscious of the enormous task that still besets the Church in the twenty-first century. The Council thus “sought to renew the Church’s life and activity in the light of the needs of the contemporary world” (*RM*, 1) so that it may more meaningfully speak to the hearts of modern man and woman. It affirmed the Church’s “missionary nature,” called continuously to proclaim the Good News of Christ to all peoples (*AG*, 1), in obedience to the command of her founder, Jesus Christ (cf. Mk 16: 15). It is this mission, “the Mission of Christ the Redeemer entrusted to the Church,” Pope John Paul II says, that “is still very far from completion” (*RM*, 1, cf. *AG*, 10).

The Church, which “exists in order to evangelize” (*EN*, 14) must ask herself how she must carry on her evangelizing mission today (cf. *EA*, 46). She is called to respond to modern man and woman in the concrete cultural situations of their lives, in their joy and hope, grief and anguish (cf. *GS*, 1) so that she may continue to be the “sacrament of salvation” to the nations (cf. *AG*, 1). If the Church will succeed in this enormous task, which, according to Pope John Paul II, is only starting, inculturation, the process whereby

the power of the Gospel is brought into the very heart of culture and cultures (*GDC*, 109), becomes not just an option but an urgent necessity (cf. *RM*, 52; *EA*, 59).

Has the message of Christ in all its richness (cf. Col 3:16) penetrated the deepest strata of human society and persons? Has Christ gone into the very centre of every culture so that every person may authentically respond to Jesus' fundamental question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 15:16). In the face of such tough challenge to contemporary mission, Pope John Paul II recognizes that though the need for inculturation has marked the Church's pilgrimage throughout her history, it remains a particularly urgent priority today (cf. *RM*, 52). If not inculturated, Christianity runs the risk of remaining a "strange religion," not touching the deepest reality of people's lives. Indeed "just as 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (Jn 1:14), so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, *must take root* in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word" (*EA*, 60).

0.2 The Centrality of Jesus Christ

The fundamental fact of Christianity is that it is not an "adherence to an abstract law and to a commandment but above all to a *person* who is 'the way, the truth and the life' (Jn 14:6)".¹ At the heart of Christian life is the person of Jesus of Nazareth, "the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). He is the fullness of Revelation, (cf. *DV*, 18), "completed and perfected Revelation by the way of his presence and self-manifestation – by words and works, signs and miracles, but above all by his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending this Spirit of truth" (*CCC*, 65). Jesus Christ therefore is "the final event towards which all the events of salvation history

¹ P. ADNÉS, *Theological Reflection in Imitating Christ*, 171.

converge” (*GDC*, 40; cf. Lk 24:27). He is indeed “the Son of God made man, the Father’s one, perfect and unsurpassable Word. In him he said everything; there will be no other word than this one” (*CCC*, 65).

This, therefore, makes Christ the dynamic factor in Christian confession in the world, according to James Scherer.² In fact, he is the “centre of all Christian life,” (*CCC*, 1618). The Christian life is therefore the following of this person, Jesus, the Sacrament of God made visible to humanity, so that “he could save all men and sum all things in himself” (*GS*, 45). Christ is “the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all aspirations” (*GS*, 45).

The point of departure for all theology and, consequently, for inculturation, is Christ, whom we may speak of as the inculturation of God *par excellence*. He should be the centre, subject and source of our theologizing and inculturation efforts, for the faith that seeks understanding is precisely the faith in Christ in communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Any meaningful and fruitful process of inculturation must necessarily allow the great mysteries of his life to inspire us in a truly genuine process of incarnating the Good News of God, who is Christ himself.

0.3 Jesus, Our Way to True Inculturation

As the Church becomes increasingly aware of the urgent need of inculturation in her mission of evangelization, we must return to Christ, the central figure of the Christian faith to have a face-to-face encounter with him. For, “in all his life Jesus presents himself

² Cf. J. A. SCHERER, – S. B. BEVANS, ed., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization I*, 204.

as our model” (CCC, 520). He is indeed the “perfect man” (Heb 9: 24), the original inculturation of the Word of God (GDC, 109).

Jesus did not live in a cultural vacuum but “became man, a concrete man, in space and time and rooted in a specific culture (GDC, 109), “so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaimed to the nations, *must take root* in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word” (EA, 60). In this way, through the mysteries of his life he becomes our perfect paradigm of inculturation. We must allow Jesus to teach us by his life. Our inculturation effort must be, above all, truly Christ-like, one that heals, affirms, restores, challenges and empowers people in the concrete expressions of daily life.

At the end of the day, our task is one – to inculturate nothing but the Good News of Christ, for, indeed, what is truly inculturated is Christ himself and his personal communication. The Christian faith will be truly inculturated when each Christian reaches a mature appreciation of who Christ is for him or her and thus becomes truly transformed interiorly into a new creation (cf. EN, 18) by responding to God who personally and lovingly manifests himself to man. Pope John Paul II warned that “a faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived” (FR, 70). Similarly, “the failure to incarnate Christianity becomes the failure to make Christ appear in all his splendour to the people of each culture.”³

0.4 Work Outline

This essay will take us through a journey of discovery. Firstly, we shall attempt to better understand and appreciate this much talked about concept, inculturation, delving into its origin and meaning. Then we shall look into the world of Jesus Christ, the Son of God

³ J. WALIGGO, *Inculturation: Its meaning and Urgency*, 21.

and Son of Mary, who stands at the centre of Christian life. Here we shall endeavour to catch a glimpse of the profound mysteries of his life from his incarnation to his glorious resurrection and ascension and the event of Pentecost. With some understanding of whom Jesus is and the recognition of the central place he holds in Christian life, we shall see how every detail of his life serves as the foundation of Christian life. What becomes of Christianity without Christ? In the same way inculturation, will be meaningless and fruitless if it leaves out Christ, for what is inculturated is nothing but the Good News, which is Christ himself. We shall present the Church's understanding, teaching and practice of inculturation in the history of its missionary activity. Then we shall take a close look at the experience of inculturation in the Church in Africa.

Chapter One

Towards an Understanding of Inculturation

1.1 Introduction

The phenomenon of inculturation has always been present throughout the history of salvation and the history of the Church's missionary activity since the Church has always sought ways of expressing its message in a local culture. It gained formal entry into the theological discussion of the Church in a renewed way since the 1970s. Since then inculturation continues to receive elaborate discussion and missiological appreciation from renowned theologians across the world. The Church has continued to develop its reflection and teaching about it.

Our concern in this chapter will be mainly to seek an understanding of the nature of this profound theological concept. What does this term refer to and why has it emerged? Why is it so important to the Church? What challenges does it present to the Church? We shall pay attention to the elements, which enter into the notion of inculturation and its application.

1.2 Religion as a Cultural System

In our effort to understand inculturation, its meaning and nature, it may be useful, firstly, to appreciate some key elements embedded in the term “inculturation.” The word “inculturation” contains the word “culture,” which, when it interacts with faith/religion gives rise to the theological concept of inculturation. By “culture” we shall adopt the definition of Edward Tylor who described it as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁴ In other words, culture:

comprises everything that you have as a social being – the way a particular people farm, the way they marry; the way they settle cases, relationships between men and their wives, the way of hunting, the type of food that is eaten and how to prepare it, one’s language, ideas about life and death, the role of leaders in the society, the way buildings are put up – in short, everything that one acquires as a member of society.⁵

Culture touches on the totality of a person’s life in all that he/she thinks and does. Inculturation takes into account the fact of culture in all its ramifications. Can we speak of religion as cultural phenomenon or system? Almost all social and cultural anthropologists agree on the fact that culture is an essential characteristic of human existence, “for where there are humans, there is culture, because the human being is naturally a cultural being.”⁶ In fact, what distinguishes human nature from all other living creatures is culture, which, fundamentally, is a transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a pattern capable of development and change.

It is against this background that we may speak of religion as a human phenomenon or activity, for, it touches the core of a person’s life and influences his worldview. Religion

⁴ E. TYLOR, *Primitive Culture*, 1.

⁵ P. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 40.

⁶ E. NUNNENMACHER, “Culture”, in *Dictionary of Mission*, 94.

in this sense must affect and be affected by culture; it operates in and through a culture.⁷ “In other words the beliefs and practices of religion must themselves form a cultural system,”⁸ which provide a fundamental mode of cultural behaviour, giving grounds for the interpretation of life.

The Second Vatican Council stresses the intimate connection between faith and culture, calling for a deeper appreciation and respect for cultures.

There are many links between the message of salvation and human culture. In his self-revelation to his people, culminating in the fullness of manifestation in his incarnate Son, God spoke according to the culture proper to each age. Similarly the Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances and has utilized the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful (*GS*, 58).

Therefore, although the Gospel is not identical to culture, the Gospel message does not exist independently of culture. “The kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the Kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures” (*EN*, 20). Pope Paul VI bemoans the tragic split between the Gospel and culture: “the split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times” (*EN*, 20). He does not use the term “inculturation” but encourages strongly that “every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures” (*EN*, 20). He says:

What matters is to evangelize man’s culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et Spes*, always taking the

⁷ Cf A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 5.

⁸ A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 40.

person as one's starting-point and always coming back the relationships of people among themselves and with God (*EN*, 20).

Christianity should not be the enemy of any culture; it should not do away with values and rituals of any culture. The task of inculturation theology, which is contextual by nature, should be to recognize the validity of the host culture's way of understanding of God, its religious world and its moral codes and principles. It should be a continuous and genuine dialogue between culture and faith that aims at transformation and renewal of the human person and society at large.

1.3 The Origin of the Term Inculturation

As mentioned already, though the term "inculturation" emerged in the 1970s, its theological content is not something altogether new. We can trace it back to the foundational experience of the journey of faith of the people of Israel. Ultimately, it is in the person of Jesus Christ that we have the perfect example of inculturation. Jesus came to live among men and women and used the elements proper to his culture to proclaim and explain his message. The reality of inculturation has marked the Church's pilgrimage throughout the history of her missionary activity (*RM*, 52).

Shorter⁹ reports that the very first recorded use of the term in a theological sense was by Fr. Joseph Masson SJ, professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, shortly before the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. Mason wrote: "today there is a more urgent need for a Catholicism that is inculturated in a variety of forms." The Second Vatican Council (1962/65) gave elements necessary for the growth and development of "inculturation." The Council demonstrated a deepening sensitivity to the relation between

⁹ We shall rely mainly on A. SHORTER'S *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, pp 10-16, for our presentation on the origin of the term "inculturation."

faith and culture, which paved the way, in many respects, for the development of the theology of inculturation (cf. *GS*, 53-62).

In 1974, although the Bishops of Africa and Madagascar made a very strong statement to the Synod on Evangelization about the reality of inculturation, they did not use the term. It was the first assembly of the Federation of Asian Episcopal Conference in April the same year that spoke of “an indigenous and inculturated Church”. The term inculturation gained wider acceptance in the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus of December 1974-1975, which used the actual word “inculturation” fairly frequently in its texts “On Promoting the work of inculturation of faith and Christian life.” Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, in respect to this decree, issued a letter to the whole society on the subject of inculturation on 15th April 1978. In 1979, Pope John Paul II used the term in an official way for the first time in *Catechesi Tradendae* (*CT*, 53).¹⁰

1.4 Definition of Inculturation

One of the most widely accepted definitions of inculturation is that of Pedro Arrupe, the Superior General of the Society of Jesus. In his *Letter to the Whole Society on the Subject of Inculturation* in 1978, he describes inculturation as:

The incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular 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 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’¹¹

¹⁰ In *Catechesi Tradendae*, Pope John Paul II speaks about inculturation as “to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures.” This document is a post-synodal apostolic exhortation of 1979 on the topic of catechesis in the contemporary period.

¹¹ P. ARRUPÉ, *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses*, 173.

Aylward Shorter adds his contribution to the discussion on inculturation when he defines it as “the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures.”¹² Shorter’s definition give rise to three important observations:

First, inculturation goes beyond merely inserting Christianity into previously non-Christian cultures. Since inculturation is an ongoing process, it demands a continuous dialogue everywhere, not only in the so-called mission countries. Second, this notion implies that the Christian faith cannot exist except in a cultural form. This means that when Christianity comes to a culture it comes already wrapped in the cultural forms of the evangelizer. Moreover, Christianity can only take root in the new cultures if it assumes those cultural forms. Third, inculturation is more than acculturation. There is a need for a critical symbiosis. The faith criticizes the culture, and the culture enriches the Christian faith.¹³

Pope John Paul II in *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979) describes inculturation as the attempt “to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of a culture or culture” (CT, 53). One feature that comes out clearly in these definitions is that inculturation is not a static but an ongoing reality, a process that needs continuous and concerted renewal so that it may be relevant to each epoch of history.

1.5 The Scope of Inculturation

It is a common mistake to limit inculturation to simple liturgical rites and ceremonies which have been adapted to local cultures: Church music or local melodies, Christian art inspired by local conceptions, the use of local vestments and instruments for the celebration of Mass, the sacraments and sacramentals, and similar tangible elements. Undeniably, all the above-mentioned elements form part of the meaning of inculturation, but the scope of inculturation cannot, and should never, be limited to them. If we do so, we miss the essential point of the big picture.

¹² A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 11.

¹³ J. AUTUNES DE SILVA, “Inculturation as Dialogue,” in *AFER*, Vol 37, No. 4, August 1995, 203.

The scope of inculturation is comprehensive and all embracing. It touches the very heart of the Christian message and dogma. The heart of inculturation is life itself in its entirety: spiritual, economic, political and social in order to make sense of it. It is only when inculturation addresses itself to all peoples of all cultures and all the dimensions of life that it would truly achieve an authentic transformation of both individuals and society. We must always ask whether our preaching and celebration of the mysteries of Christ take into consideration the reality of people's life. Do they have any true relevance for the people?

Inculturation should penetrate all spheres of Christian life not "not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots (*EN*, 20). It is important that inculturation involve the whole people of God and not just a few experts. It should be an expression of the Christian community's experience (cf. *RM* 54).

1.6 Inculturation as a Process

The basic character of inculturation is that it is a process. This process takes us into the realm of the complex and dynamic realities of culture and faith. We can approach these realities meaningfully only in a gradual process with lots of reverence and care, for the domains we touch are "holy grounds" (cf. Ex 3: 1-12).

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, highlights various ramifications of inculturation as a process. He stresses that the process of the Church's insertion into peoples' cultures is a lengthy one, mainly because it is not just a matter of purely external adaptation, but rather an intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the

various human cultures (cf. *RM* 52). It is “a slow journey, which accompanies the whole of missionary life,” the Pope adds (*RM*, 52). This process, as much as it is all-embracing, is at the same time a difficult one, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith (cf. *RM* 52).

This process of living exchange between faith and culture must involve an ongoing and life-long reflection, meditation and theologizing if a truly authentic “new creation” would be achieved. It also requires careful listening, paying attention to the signs of the time (cf. *GS*, 4). We must be ready to change mentalities and convictions, die to the old self and be renewed in mind and spirit.

We may therefore speak of this life-long process as a rite of passage, whereby one makes conscious progress through the various levels of life. This rite of passage may be a painful one, a process that may be frustrating, full of temptations to give up, but a process that will lead humanity into greater reality of existence. We have to die to the old self and put on the new nature (cf. Eph 4:22-24). We must set our eyes on Christ and listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

1.7 The Purpose of Inculturation

Inculturation has no other goal than helping every human person of whatever culture to mature in his or her faith, to respond fully to God’s own self-revelation in a more personal way. According to Bishop Peter Sarpong, “the aim of inculturation is to purify the society, to animate the society, to get rid of obnoxious things in the society so that there is a new creation.”¹⁴ Contextualizing it in Africa, Bishop Sarpong believes that inculturation “is

¹⁴ P. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 21.

about making the African understand his Christian religion so that it may become part of himself in much the same way as his traditional religion was part of himself.”¹⁵

In a sense, it is all about relevance, and that is the supreme purpose of theology. We can say that our faith is mature if it has taken root in the matrix of our being so that we may truly believe and love as Christians rooted in the authentic values of our cultural traditions. However, for this to happen, the Gospel must be presented with tools, methods and expressions coming from cultures themselves. Faith must always seek to be understood; it must, in other words, be inculturated, that is, transmitted and expressed through culture or cultures. Ultimately, inculturation of the Gospel message should bring about a more valid consciousness of God’s presence in every culture and religious context.

1.8 Conclusion

Although present throughout the history of salvation and typified in the sublime mystery of the Incarnation of the Word of God, inculturation has received formal expression and official Church endorsement only in the last forty years or so. Considering the rapid changes in the cultural, social, economic and political domains today, inculturation is not just an option but a necessity for the whole Church in its efforts proclaim the Good News of salvation to all nations. Christ must continually be incarnated in our world today.

The first African synod considers inculturation an urgent priority, a requirement, and a path towards full evangelization (cf. *EA*, 59). It is therefore imperative for local Churches to actively and consciously get involved in this profound, yet delicate and

¹⁵ P. SARPONG, *African Theology*, 7.

difficult. We must commit ourselves to the lifelong journey of making Christianity authentically relevant to all people, that Christ may truly “feel at home” in all cultures.

Chapter Two

Jesus as Our True Model of Inculturation

2.1 Introduction

The key to a proper understanding of the Christian faith and the Christian mission is Jesus Christ. In Jesus, the Word of God and human history are now inseparable: “the manner in which he lived, what he said and did, what happened to him in Jerusalem, – is a fundamental importance for understanding the Gospel message.”¹⁶ In fact the whole of Christ’s life is a mystery of redemption (cf. CCC, 517), for his “whole earthly life – his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, indeed his manner of being and speaking – is Revelation of the Father” (CCC, 516). Jesus Christ “came to live among us and used the elements proper to his culture to proclaim and explain his message. His examples, parables, way of life, language, food, experiences, were all based on the society in which he found himself, although he had come to save the whole world. His message was meant for all cultures but every culture had to make it its own.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Commentary on John 1:14 in *African Bible*.

¹⁷ P. K. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 23.

If we are to make sense of the Christian faith and our theologizing, we must try to understand this great mystery, Jesus Christ, the foundation of Christian life. In the same vein, inculturation will lose its vitality if we neglect to root it in Christ, the “inculturation of God.” Therefore, our task in this chapter will be an attempt to understand Jesus Christ and the mysteries of his life. “By his life, his preaching of the Good News to the poor, his passion, death, and glorious resurrection, he brought about the remission of our sins and our reconciliation with God, his Father” (*EA*, 60). We shall, however, limit ourselves only to those events of Jesus’ life relevant to our discussion.

2.2 Incarnation

The great mystery of the Christian religion is the fact that Christ “was manifested in the flesh” (1 Tim 3: 16); the eternal Son of God became man, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived the concrete realities of human existence, at once as a man and as the Son of God. The loving God whose wonder and love are beyond imagination (cf. 1 Tim 6: 16) wished to become visible and close to humanity, so in due time spoke through his only Son (cf. Heb 1: 1-3). He is “Emmanuel,” God-with-us (Mt 1:23. In the words of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council:

By his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin (*GS*, 22; cf. Heb 4: 15).

For St. Paul and the early Church, the incarnation is the mystery *par excellence*. It is “the mystery hidden for ages and generations, but now made manifest to his saints” (Col 1: 26; cf. Eph 1: 9; 3:3-5; 6: 19). Vatican II teaches that, “the Word of God, through whom all things were made, was made flesh so that as a perfect man he could save all men and

sum all things in himself” (*GS*, 45). The “soteriological motive” of the incarnation was clearly stated already in the Nicene Creed: “for us men and for our salvation, he came down from heaven and became man. He suffered, rose on the third day, and ascended into heaven. He will come to judge the living and the dead.” Ultimately, the doctrine of the incarnation is an extraordinary mystery that surpasses all human thinking and imagination, calling us to an ever-renewed contemplation in the spirit of admiration and gratitude for God’s saving act.

2.2.1 *Jesus, Word of God*

The Word of God is the name, identity, title, and honour given to Jesus in the NT (cf. Heb 4:12; Rev 19:13). The “Word” however has OT roots and we see the role that the word plays right from the first page of the Bible. “Creation itself is already intimately linked to the effectiveness of the Word. God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3).¹⁸ The notion of the word features prominently in the legacy of the Psalms. The psalmist puts it clearly: “by the Lord’s word the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth all their hosts...for he spoke and it came to be, he commanded and it stood in place” (Ps 33: 6-9). Then the “word” finds expressions in the prophetic literature and indeed in the whole OT history (cf. Is 55:10-11; Is 9; 7; Ps 147:15; Ex 20:1-17; Ex 34:25; Dt 4:13; 10:4).

The characteristics of the Word in the OT, now finds expression in the person of Jesus “the Father’s one, perfect and unsurpassable Word” (*GDC*, 40). The prologue of St. John explicitly refers to Jesus as the Word of God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1: 1). The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that, “through all the words of Sacred Scripture, God speaks only one

¹⁸ B. BUJO, *The power of the Word of God*, 23.

single Word, his one Utterance in whom he expresses himself completely” (CCC, 102; cf. Heb 1:1-3). Through him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible (cf. Col 1:12-20). Bernard Cooke believes that, “Jesus exists and acts as God’s embodied Word,”¹⁹ for “the Word that the Church proclaims is precisely the Word of God made man, who is himself the subject and object of this Word. The Good News is Jesus Christ” (EA, 60).

2.2.2 *Jesus: Truly God, Truly Human*

One of the greatest controversies that have marked the Christian faith is its belief in the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, about the exact meaning and implication of him being truly God (divine nature) and human (human nature) at the same time. Various heresies falsified this doctrine. Gnostic *Docetism* denied not so much Christ’s divinity as his true humanity; *Nestorianism* regarded Christ as a human person joined to the divine person of God’s Son; *Monophysites* affirmed that the human nature had ceased to exist as such in Christ when the divine person of God’s Son assumed it (cf. CCC, 465-467).

Against this background of heresies, the Church had to, especially during the first centuries of Christianity, defend and clarify this truth of faith. Various Ecumenical Councils made efforts to correct these heresies: the first Council of Nicea in 325 dealt with Gnostic-*docetist* heresy; the third council of Ephesus in 431 dealt with *Nestorianism*; and the fourth Council of Chacedon in 451 dealt with the *monophysite* heresy (cf. CCC, 465-469). Today the Church teaches that:

The unique and altogether singular event of the incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God, part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a

¹⁹ B. COOKE, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 179.

confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man (*CCC*, 464).

The Roman liturgy proclaims this faith in a song, “what he was, he remained and what he was not, he assumed” (*CCC*, 469).

2.3 Jesus’ Public Ministry

After 30 years of seclusion in his little village of Nazareth, Jesus comes to the glare of the public and engages himself in active ministerial activity for about three years. Jesus realized that he had a mission to accomplish. It was “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14) that Jesus returns to Galilee and brings his preaching at Nazareth, applying to himself the passage of Isaiah: “the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor...to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4:18-19; cf. Is 61:1).

St. Peter, in his address in the house of Cornelius in Acts 10: 34-38, summarizes Jesus’ ministry as follows, “God had anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and because God was with him, Jesus went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil” (Acts 10: 34-38). We may broadly categorize Jesus public ministry in two dimensions: his teaching/preaching and his healing ministries. In all these Jesus served as the sacrament of God in person, who, in the words of Cooke, “acted for God in meeting people’s needs. Simultaneously he served both his Father and his human brothers and sisters because his service of his fellow humans was precisely what the God who sent him wished him to do.”²⁰

²⁰ B. COOKE, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 168.

2.3.1 *Jesus' Teaching/Preaching*

Jesus was one of the greatest teachers of his time who taught profound truths with great authority. Yet, his teaching was that of a Jewish layperson, it was unofficial, having neither mandate nor validation nor approval from any official religious group of his day.²¹ Jesus belonged to none of the rabbinic schools of his day, followed none of the rabbinic masters (as, for example, did Paul). Rather, according to Cooke, "his teaching was prophetic, breaking suddenly on the scene and speaking immediately for and about God."²² For this reason, the Jewish religious leaders viewed Jesus' teaching activity with a lot of suspicion. He faced stiff opposition from the leaders, leading to his eventual crucifixion.

The core of Jesus' teaching/preaching was the Kingdom of God (Mk 1: 14-15, 4: 11, 4: 26; Mt 12: 28; Lk 6: 20). Jesus proclaimed the Good News of this Kingdom as the urgent and definitive intervention of God in history. "To this Kingdom, he devoted his entire earthly life, he made known the joys of belonging to the kingdom, its demands, its *magna carta*, the mysteries which it embraces, the life of fraternal charity of those who enter it and its future fulfilment" (*GDC*, 34). Therefore, what we have in his preaching/teaching ministry are elements that go into constituting the reality of the kingdom of God Jesus sought to bring about (love, forgiveness, patience, reconciliation, peace, compassion, discipleship, and so on).

The content of Jesus' preaching and teaching was suggested to him by the circumstances of daily life, by the questions of his followers, by the objections of his enemies. His teaching was existential. He used every possible method to convey his

²¹ Cf. B. COOKE , *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 171.

²² B. COOKE, *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, 172.

message: parables, allegories, short sayings, stories, antithesis, and so on. His “teaching brought men face to face with the vital issues of life, revealed God’s truth, and then compelled them to decide for it or against it, once and for all.”²³ Jesus’ words were so intimately related to his deeds that no one could possibly understand one without the other; his teaching and his life can never be separated. In other words, we may say that the teaching literally grew out of his life and the life fulfilled the teaching. In Bauman’s view, “his simple, direct, authoritative approach places him in the company of history’s greatest teachers.”²⁴

2.3.2 *Jesus’ Healing Ministry*

We have already pointed out that Jesus’ ministry was a ministry of an immense interest in people and a living concern for their needs. He did everything to bring joy to their lives. He could not stand by inactive while people suffered. This compassion took on a practical form – hence the many healing episodes in the Gospels. Jesus was deeply aware of the disastrous impact on humans of the various forms of evil – sickness, ignorance, fear, abject poverty, social oppression, religious exploitation and particularly sin.²⁵ His healing ministry touched the reality and understanding of sin of his time: “sickness and other physical disabilities, suffering, physical disorders, social inequalities, death and sin were somehow all linked together but sin was the root of all the other evils.”²⁶ His healing was thus at different levels. His healing of physical blindness, for example, was joined to the cure of spiritual blindness. Another intriguing aspect of Jesus’ healing is its link with

²³ Cf. E. BAUMAN, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus*, 127.

²⁴ E. BAUMAN, *The Life and Teaching of Jesus*, 132.

²⁵ Cf. B. COOKE, *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 174.

²⁶ B. COOKE, *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 175.

people's faith, "as if faith was the prerequisite for healing and without such faith Jesus apparently was unable to heal"²⁷ (Mt 9:2, 22, 29; 15:28; Mk 2:5, 5:34; Lk 5:20, 7:50; 18:42). It seems quite clear that Jesus took it for granted that there was such interaction.

2.4 Jesus' Relation with His *Abba*

All that Jesus did and said flows from the very deep conviction of his union with his Father, whom he passionately called, *Abba* (Mk 14: 36). According to Bernard Cooke, "Jesus had a profound sense that his own loving concern for people was completely in line with his Father's creative compassion for humans."²⁸ In fact, "what is revealed in the sacrament of Jesus' ministry is God's service to the needs of humans."²⁹

In the Gospel accounts, we see Jesus always in communion with his Father (Mt 15: 13, 18: 35, 7: 21; Mk 8: 38; Lk 10: 22, 23: 46; Jn 5: 17, 36, 8: 28; 10: 15; 11: 41). In going out to help those in need and to preach the Kingdom of God, Jesus was aware that this was what his *Abba* wished and sent him to do (Lk 4:18-20). "This," according to Cooke, "was his mission, to be the expression in people's lives of his Fathers' love. This was what it meant for him to be about the business of establishing the Kingdom of God."³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, in his renowned book, "Jesus of Nazareth" talks about Jesus' communion with the Father as the true centre of Christ's personality. "Without it" Ratzinger says, "we cannot understand him at all, and it is from this centre that he makes himself present to us still today."³¹

²⁷ B. COOKE, *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 175.

²⁸ B. COOKE, *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 174.

²⁹ B. COOKE, *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 174.

³⁰ Cf. B. COOKE, *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 174.

³¹ J. RATZINGER, *Jesus of Nazareth*, XIV.

2.5 Jesus, the Sacrament of God

The theological conviction that Jesus is the sacrament of God is deeply rooted in the NT. The earliest Latin version of the NT transliterated the Greek word, *mystery* as *mysterium*, and *sacramentum*. “In later usage the term *sacramentum* emphasizes the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation which was indicated by the term *mysterium*” (CCC, 774). Looking into scripture, Herbert Vorgrimler realizes that in the Letter to the Ephesians and the Colossians, *mysterium* does not refer to something secret, but to God’s saving intent as revealed and realized in the course of the divine salvation³² (Eph 1: 9-1-; 2:11-3:13; Col 1:20, 26-27; 2:2; cf. Rm 16: 25-26). In this sense, “Christ himself is the mystery of salvation” (CCC, 774), the outward and visible sign of God’s grace. St. Augustine expressed this truth profoundly when he said, “there is no other mystery of God, except Christ” (CCC, 774).

According to Vorgrimler, “the witness to the events of Christ’s life, his dealing with human beings, show how much he was in his very person, a ‘sign,’ a making-visible of the presence of God.”³³ Therefore, we must see Christ’s whole life, all the events that marked it, as real symbols of the concrete presence and reality of God. In essence Jesus Christ, in other words “could be called the icon, the image of God pure and simple (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; cf. Col 1:15), the visible epiphany of the invisible essence of God (cf. Heb 1: 1-2; cf. 1 Jn 1:1, Jn 14: 9.)”³⁴

At the heart of Jesus’ sacramentality is his *Abba* experience, which we have talked about already. His profound recognition of the presence of God in his life was a

³² Cf. H. VORGRIMLER, *Sacramental Theology*, 31.

³³ H. VORGRIMLER, *Sacramental Theology*, 30.

³⁴ H. VORGRIMLER, *Sacramental Theology*, 31.

fundamental symbol in his total openness to doing the Father's will. Through his teaching and healing actions, and above all, through his self-giving in death, Christ sacramentalized the transforming presence of his *Abba*. Jesus "experienced his Father as the source, final meaning, and ultimate purpose of all the events that made up his human career."³⁵

2.6 The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ

The passion, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ is what is generally referred to as the Paschal mystery.³⁶ This mystery, the *CCC* teaches, "stands at the centre of the Good News that the apostles, and the Church following them, are to proclaim to the world" (*CCC*, 571). Our concern in this section is to gain a general understanding of these mysteries of Christ and their relevance to our task of inculturation. In his passion, Jesus freely offers himself and goes the way of the cross. He suffers humiliation and pain for the sake of his brothers and sisters. "Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Lk 24: 44-45).

Christ's death is interpreted by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews as the unique and definitive sacrifice that achieved, for all, eternal salvation (cf. Heb 10; 12; 14). The Catholic Church teaches that, "Christ's death is both the *paschal sacrifice* that accomplishes the definitive redemption of men through 'the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world' (Jn 1:19; 1 Cor 5: 7; 1 Pet 1:19) and the *sacrifice of the New Covenant*, which restores man to communion with God by reconciling him to God through the 'blood of the covenant, which was poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (*CCC*, 613; Mt 26: 28; cf Ex 24; 8; Lev 16: 15:15-16; 1Cor 11:25).

³⁵ B. COOKE , *Sacrament and Sacramentality*, 64.

³⁶Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paschal_mystery

The resurrection celebrates Jesus glorious triumph over death through the action of the three divine persons. “Christ has risen again, destroying death by his death, and has given life abundantly to us so that, becoming sons in the Son, we may cry out in the Spirit: Abba, Father” (*GS*, 22). The resurrection is the object of faith, for according to Paul, “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is vain” (1 Cor 15: 14). Therefore “the resurrection, above all constitutes the confirmation of all Christ’s works and teaching” (*CCC*, 651).

The *CCC* teaches that the Paschal mystery has two aspects: “by his death, Christ liberates us from sin, by his Resurrection, he opens for us the way to a new life” (*CCC*, 654). We celebrate this mystery in the *Tridium* (Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday) and Easter and, indeed, each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we proclaim Christ’s death and resurrection until he comes again in glory. Isn’t this the process through which a genuine inculturation must go through in its efforts of rooting the Good News Christ in the hearts of men and women of all cultures exhorting them to new ways of being and living? Won’t the process of inculturation involve some “dying” and “rising” to new life?

2.7 The Great Commission

Christ’s final command to his apostles before he ascended to his Father was clear: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28: 19-20). By this command, Christ entrusted his apostles with the mission and the power to proclaim to humanity what they had heard, what they had seen with their eyes, what they had looked upon and touched with the hands, concerning the Word of Life (1 Jn 1:1). And indeed “they went forth and

preached everywhere” (Mk 16: 20). This is the mission of the Church, to make the Gospel of salvation known to all people.

It is of interest to our discussion on inculturation to note that, unlike in the OT, Yahweh never directed the Jews to go out to the whole world and make disciples; rather by their life, they were to be witnesses to Yahweh and thus attract the nations to the knowledge and love of Yahweh. The apostles, however, were explicitly directed to evangelize the world, as is made crystal clear especially in Mt 28:16-20; Mk 16: 15-20; Lk 24: 45-48.”³⁷ In this respect, Peter Sarpong makes an interesting observation in this regard “when the Lord asked his disciples to go and preach to all nations, (Mt 28:19), he meant just that, they were to preach to all peoples in the concrete situations of life they found themselves in.”³⁸ This is inculturation. By Jesus’ command to preach the Gospel to the whole of creation (Mk 16:15), didn’t he have in mind the ability of every culture to welcome and make sense of the Good News of salvation?

Therefore, the great commission of universal love to make disciples of all nations provides an even clearer theological basis for inculturation, the basic theological truth being that the “kingdom of God is meant for all peoples” (*RM*, 14). All peoples are called to become members of the Kingdom.

2.8 The Sending of the Holy Spirit

Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, to the apostles to lead and accompany them in all things, and bring them to remember all that Christ said to them and to complete his work on earth (cf. Jn 14: 20). So, after his

³⁷ Commentary on Acts 1:8 in *African Bible*.

³⁸ P. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 23.

resurrection and before his ascension, Jesus “enjoined them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for ‘the promise of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 1:4) who will empower them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The fulfilment of this promise was celebrated in the Pentecost event: the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2: 1-13), generally understood as the birth of the Church. It was the Spirit who formed the new family, the Church, “the universal sacrament of salvation” The Spirit in this way becomes the principle inspiring all mission, “through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church” (*DV*, 8). He is the principal agent in the Church’s mission of evangelization, causing “her to grow constantly in her understanding of the Gospel, prompts her and sustains the task of proclaiming the Gospel in every corner of the world” (*GDC*, 43). “Evangelization will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit” (*EN*, 75), for “it is not by chance that the great inauguration of evangelization took place on the morning of Pentecost, under the inspiration of the Spirit” (*EN*, 75).

In the same way, inculturation will never be possible without the action of the Holy Spirit. It must be docile to the prompting and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for “it is he who causes people to discern the signs of the times – signs willed by God – which evangelization reveals and puts to use within history” (*EN*, 75).

2.9 Conclusion

The mystery of Christ’s life, in fact, Christ himself, is what gives meaning and shape to everything Christian, including our theologizing. For Christ is all we know of God, the perfect image of the invisible God. Indeed he is the true “primordial sacrament” of God’s saving presence among humanity. His incarnation, life and ministry and his death

and resurrection, according to the *CCC* “enables us live in him all that he himself lived, and he lives in us” (*CCC*, 521). Christ has become the perfect example for all Christian life.

Our daunting task, therefore, is to approach the throne of glory, as the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews says, (Heb 4; 16) with awe and reverence, and make attempts to understand this great mystery. Then the whole of creation may totally submit to Christ and allow him to be all in all to all peoples and all cultures. This is the task of the Church of Christ, the universal sacrament of salvation, to truly make Christ present in all his glamour. This will be achieved through an inculturation process that is truly Christ-like, spearheading a genuine and transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity, and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures (*RM*, 52-54). This is the urgent challenge of the proclamation of the Good News today.

Chapter Three

The Development of the Church's Understanding and Practice of Inculturation

3.1 Introduction

We have already pointed out that the reality that inculturation expresses is as old as Christianity itself, since the Church has always sought ways of expressing its message of salvation in local cultures throughout her pilgrimage of missionary activity (cf. *RM*, 52). Our task in this chapter will be to explore and present in a concise manner the development of what we, with hindsight, may consider efforts towards inculturation in various epochs of the Church's missionary activity. The Church has always seen the scope of its mission as universal and all-embracing, always making attempts to cross all human boundaries and meeting people of all cultures and religious traditions.³⁹ With a heritage of over 2000 years of missionary activity, we shall select only a few significant events and personalities and highlight their contributions to the development of the legacy of inculturation.

³⁹ Cf. F. A. OBORJI, *Concepts of Mission*, 17.

3.2 St. Paul and the Apostolic Church

The coexistence of Christianity with other cultures dates back to the apostolic Church which was mandated to go into the whole world to proclaim the Gospel to every creature (cf. Mk 16: 15). The champion of the struggle of the early Church's faith to en flesh itself in different ethnic groups with distinct cultural practices and laws was St. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:15), the great missionary and theologian.

Faced with a divided world, culturally (Greeks and Barbarians), religiously (Jews and Gentiles), economically (rich and poor) and socially (free and slave), Paul fought strenuously to eliminate any sort of segregation in the Church and make the Gospel accessible to all people. The uniting factor for him is Christ; any segregation is a denial of the Gospel (Gal 3: 27–29; Col 3:11). He reached out to the Gentiles and freely proclaimed the Gospel to all. Paul describes his own vision as “all things to all people.” He writes: “to the Jew I became like a Jew to win over the Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law...to those outside the law I became like one outside the law; to the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some” (1Cor 9:19- 23).

The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 15) is central to Luke's story in the Acts of the Apostles because it addresses the crucial questions at the heart of the expansion of the Church from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth: will the Jerusalem Church sanction unhindered outreach to the Gentiles?⁴⁰ At the council, it was confirmed that Gentiles and Jews could be accepted as Christians. This gave new identity and missionary orientation to

⁴⁰ Cf. D. K. STRONG, “The Jerusalem Council: Some Implication for Contextualization”, in *Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 197.

the Church, a decision that enabled the Church to continue spreading to the ends of the earth. The resolution of the conflict also transformed the Church; the Gentile mission is not only affirmed but also equipped with a Gospel free from the ritual law.⁴¹ We learn from the conclusion of the council that “what must change first is not one’s culture but one’s faith in Christ.

3.3 The Second Century and Beyond⁴²

As the Church moved into wider and more varied cultural regions of the world in the post-apostolic period, things became even more complicated. As Gentile converts increased and began to outnumber those of *Helensitic* Jewish origin, it became necessary to evangelize the Gentile cultures, and in particular the dominant Graeco-Roman culture of the Mediterranean world. The dialogue with these cultures begun explicitly in the second half of the century with the Apologists. The Christian apologists came to believe that every cultural tradition expected the Messiah, and they sought to identify the questions in those traditions to which Jesus Christ provided answers. Steps were thus made towards the Jewish or ‘pagan’ cultures of Greece, Rome and the Near East.

Worthy of mention in the efforts towards inculturation is the contribution of Gregory the Great (540–604). He had a great vision for the Anglo-Saxon mission. When he sent St. Augustine of Canterbury and his companions in AD 597 to pagan Anglo-Saxon England, Gregory urged them in his letter, which Shorter considers as an interesting

⁴¹ Cf. D. K. STRONG, “The Jerusalem Council: Some Implication for Contextualization”, in *Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 198.

⁴² We shall rely mainly on AYLWARD SHORTER’S, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation* for our presentation of this section, 137-161.

cultural policy, to appropriate Anglo-Saxon religious institution, with a substitution of religious meanings.

Cyril and Methodius (two brothers born in Thessalonica in 825 and 826 respectively) are appreciated for their contribution to the Church's cultural heritage. They were sent by the Emperor Michael to evangelize the Khazars in Russia in 861. Two years later, they were sent to Moravia (now part of modern Czechoslovakia). Their particular genius, according to Shorter, was to have created the Glagolitic (predecessor of the Cyrillic) alphabet, on the basis of the Greek alphabet, and to have used this to commit a particular dialect of Slavonic to writing. What they did was to create a unified literate Slavonic culture. They translated the Greek and Roman liturgies into Slavonic. They created codes of civil and Church law in that language, and, after Cyril's death in AD 869, Methodius went on to translate the whole Bible into Slavonic. The language of Saints Cyril and Methodius is still the liturgical tongue of Russians, Serbs, Ukrainians and Bulgars. Today we may consider some of their attitudes as "unmissionary," like destroying pagan shrines and sacred trees among the Khazars and requiring a total abjuration of all non-Christian practice from their converts. However, the value of the example of Saints Cyril and Methodius consists in demonstrating that even in the heyday of the Church's *monoculturalism*, concerns were made – with papal backing – to non-Latin cultures.

In 1980, Pope John Paul II declared the ancient Saints Cyril and Methodius co-patrons of Europe. Five years later, in the encyclical, *Slavorum Apostoli*, he commemorated the eleventh centenary of these Saints' evangelizing work in the Slavic nations. This encyclical is most notable, perhaps, for its outline of the Pope's understanding of inculturation. The spreading of the Gospel does not mean the impoverishment or extinction

of the real human values of any culture. These values, the Pope says, are like the tiles that make up a great mosaic, the work of art of the *Pantocrator*, the creator of all things.

The post-Reformation mission provides some evidence of inculturation too. The foundation of the Sacred Congregation *de Propaganda Fide* in 1622 by Pope Gregory XV was an important step for the Church as it enabled Rome to take over the direction of the whole Catholic missionary effort. Shorter observes that since the new congregation for the propagation of the faith insisted on evangelization by peaceful, rather than violent means, it tended to have some respect for the people's way of life or cultures.

Worthy of mention too for their contribution to inculturation are the seventeenth century Jesuits, Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India and Pedro Paez in Ethiopia. Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) was an Italian Jesuit missionary who led his fellow Jesuit missionaries to embark on a profound dialogue with the religious culture of the Chinese, aiming at nothing more or less than inculturation in the real sense of the word. The goal, Shorter says, was to achieve a Christian reinterpretation of Chinese culture, which would, in turn, provoke a Chinese interpretation of Christianity presented in this systematic Chinese form.

Roberto de Nobili (1577–1656), another Italian Jesuit missionary, evangelized India adopting the customs and mode of life of the Hindu holy men, winning himself the name *Rajah Sannyasi* or “noble holy man.” His plan was to penetrate the caste system itself and to approach the very highest caste of the Brahmins. Pedro Paez (1564 – May 25, 1622), a Spanish Jesuit, was very tolerant of Ethiopian Christian culture. He accepted the Ethiopian liturgy, and succeeded in persuading the Negus (an Ethiopian king and ruler) to profess the two natures of Christ and to legislate for the reunion of the Ethiopian Church with Rome.

3.4 Lavigerie and the Missionaries of Africa

During the great renewal of the missionary spirit that characterized the nineteenth century, the founders of Catholic missionary institutes all realized somehow, “in their various ways, the importance of indigenous cultures and exhorted their followers to study them and conform to them as far as possible.”⁴³ This was true of founders such as Francis Liberman and Claud Francis Poullard des Places (founders of the Holy Ghost or Spiritan Congregation in 1848), Melchior de Marion Brésillac (founder of the Society of African Mission at Lyons in 1856), Daniel Comboni (founder of the Combonian Missionaries of the Sacred Heart [Verona Fathers] in 1867 and its sister-congregation, the Pious Mothers of the Negroes [Verona Sisters] seven years later) and Cardinal Charles Lavigerie (founder of the Society of the Missionaries of Africa in 1868 and the Missionary Sisters of our Lady of Africa [White Sisters] in 1869). “Most of these founders turned their attention wholly or initially towards Africa, which was the principle field open to evangelization at the time.”⁴⁴ They advanced ideas and attitudes which their missionaries should adopt towards indigenous cultures. They recommended a movement of evangelization from within those cultures in the practice of what we may call inculturation today. We shall elaborate a bit more on Cardinal Charles Lavigerie and his peculiar vision for his missionaries.

Generally, Lavigerie’s vision was the regeneration of Africa, an idea largely taken up from Daniel Comboni.⁴⁵ Consequently, he had a well thought out missionary method of evangelization which consisted in drawing near to the native people of Africa by adopting their manner of life: their language in the first place, but also their dress and their food.

⁴³ A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 168.

⁴⁴ A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 168.

⁴⁵ Cf. A. SHORTER, *Christianity and the African Imagination*, 40.

“One of Lavigerie’s most enduring legacies was the encouragement he gave to the missionary to study the African vernacular languages and to the recording of oral tradition. Also important was the respect which he inculcated in his missionaries for the cultures of the African indigenous people and of Islam.”⁴⁶

Lavigerie was a man of his time but was surely a far sighted man in many ways. He tried to work out a workable missionary method for his missionaries that would achieve a true appreciation of the African people and their culture. He has left his missionaries who continue to proclaim the Good News today with a rich heritage of missionary approach. Though the modern study of culture may reveal several fallacies in Lavigerie’s approach, such as giving little credence to the deeper levels of African culture, their value systems or their religious core, Lavigerie nonetheless understood the necessity of evangelizing Africans in their own social and cultural milieu.⁴⁷ The seeds that Lavigerie and many other founders who fell in love with Africa, its people and culture planted would bear fruit in the following century that grew in a deepened awareness and appreciation of the dialogue between faith and cultures.

3.5 The Second Vatican Council

Although Vatican II never used the word “inculturation”, it offers all the elements necessary to define it. The Council “opened up new perspectives on the value of culture and its impact on the development of the human person.”⁴⁸ It showed great interest and openness towards culture and proposed the proclamation of the Good News to be adapted to the needs of different times and places (cf *OE*, 2). Francis Oborji expresses the spirit of

⁴⁶ A. SHORTER, *Christianity and the African Imagination*, 51.

⁴⁷ Cf. A. SHORTER, *Christianity and the African Imagination*, 42.

⁴⁸ F. A. OBORJI, *Concepts of Mission*, 110.

Vatican II as being “‘fully present to all persons and peoples’, and one could add, to all cultures.”⁴⁹ The Church in her missionary activity stands out as the visible sign of Christ’s presence to all peoples and nations (*LG*, 1).

Vatican II affirmed the validity and urgency of the Church’s incarnational approach to all people. The decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*) gives us some of the greatest insights to this approach when it states:

Just as happened in the economy of the incarnation, the foundations of the apostles, take over all the riches of the nations which have been give to Christ as in inheritance (cf. Ps 2: 8). They borrow from the customs, traditions and wisdom, teaching, arts and science of their people everything, which could be used to praise the glory of the Creator, manifest the grace of the Saviour, or contribute to the right ordering of Christian life (*AG*, 22).

Gaudium et Spes devotes the entire second chapter of Part Two to the subject of culture, which it defines in general terms as “all those things which go to the refining and developing of man’s diverse mental and physical endowments” (*GS*, 53). The Constitution goes on to affirm that the Church is not tied exclusively to any one culture but rather that the history of evangelization has been and continuous to be a process of cultural adaptation, of “communion with different forms of culture, a living exchange between the Church and diverse cultures of peoples” (*GS*, 58). This living exchange yields a mutual enrichment of the Gospel as well as the culture (*GS*, 58).

Gaudium et Spes recognizes that the Church “has profited from the history and development of mankind, the progress of the sciences, and from the riches hidden in various cultures, through which a great light is thrown on the nature of man and new avenues to truth are opened up” (*GS*, 44). Indeed, it is this kind of adaptation and preaching

⁴⁹ F. A. OBORJI, *Concepts of Mission*, 6.

of the revealed Word that must be, in words of the Constitution, “the law of all evangelization” (GS, 44).

3.6 *Evangelii Nuntiandi*

This apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI on “Evangelization in the Modern World” issued in December 1975, following the Synod of Bishops on evangelization is very significant for inculturation. The Pope answers the question, “what is evangelization” by saying that it is about “bringing the Good News of Christ into all the strata of humanity, so that humanity itself becomes a new creation” (EN, 18). This total interior transformation of humanity will be achieved by way of evangelization of cultures “not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots” (EN, 20).

There should be no split between the Gospel and culture (EN, 20). “Evangelization will lose 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” (EN, 63). *Evangelii Nuntiandi* does not use the term “inculturation” but strongly highlights the dimension of the evangelization of culture.

3.7 *Catechesi Tradendae*

Pope John Paul II summed up the thinking of the Synod of Bishops on Catechesis in 1977 in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae*, “Catechesis in Our Time,” issued in October 1979. This document is particularly important because in it we find for the first time in a papal document the word “inculturation.” The Pope writes:

The term ‘acculturation’ or ‘inculturation’ may be a neologism, but it expresses very well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation. We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. For this purpose, catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expression; it will respect their particular values and riches. In this manner, it will be able to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought (CT, 53).

In the passage, Pope John Paul II uses “inculturation” in conjunction with “acculturation.”

Whether he was alluding to the essential connection between the two or not is not very clear.⁵⁰ Shedding further light, the Pope adds:

Genuine catechists know that catechesis ‘take flesh’ in the various cultures and milieux: one has only to think of the peoples with their great differences, of modern youth, of the great variety of circumstances in which people find themselves today... true catechesis eventually enriches these cultures by helping them to go beyond the defective or even inhuman features in them, and by communicating to their legitimate values the fullness of Christ (CT, 53).

The Pope will take up the discussion on inculturation in his addresses in various public appearances in Africa and in other parts of the world and in his other documents such as *Redemptoris Missio* and *Ecclesia in Africa*.

3.8 *Redemptoris Missio*

Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, “The Mission of the Redeemer,” issued on December 7th 1990 is devoted to the “urgency of missionary activity of the Church.” In it, he devotes numbers 52-54 to what he terms, “Incarnating the Gospel in people cultures.” He defines inculturation as

[an] intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and insertion of Christianity in various cultures...through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and

⁵⁰Cf. A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 223.

renewing them from within. Through inculturation the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is, and a more effective instrument of mission (*RM*, 52).

This definition underlines the fact that inculturation is characterized by a dual movement, that is, a dialogue movement towards cultures through the incarnation of the Gospel and the transmission of its values, and a movement towards the Church that involves the incorporation of values that comes from the culture the latter encounters, effecting mutual enrichment.

3.9 *Ecclesia in Africa*

Pope John Paul II gives an elaborate reflection to the subject of inculturation in his post synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, issued on 4th September 1995. “The Synod”, he says, “considers inculturation an urgent priority in the life of the particular Churches, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa ... and one of the greatest challenges for the Church in the Continent on the eve of the Third Millennium” (*EA*, 59). The Bishops at the Synod felt that it would be a kind of self-denial to speak about all the important things without realizing that unless the Gospel message is presented in the language with the gestures and the symbols that people understand, this message will remain foreign to the people.⁵¹

Theologically, *Ecclesia in Africa* sees inculturation from the perspective of the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and the Pentecost experience and not from the perspective of adaptation (*EA*, 60). The image of the Church as “God’s family,” which appears in a slightly different way in *Lumen Gentium* 6, was taken as the “guiding idea for evangelization in Africa” (*EA*, 63). Pope John Paul II calls on theologians in Africa to “work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this

⁵¹ Cf. P. LWAMINDA, “The African Synod’s Call to Proclamation and Inculturation of the Gospel,” in *Exploring our Christian Life*, 20.

concept” (EA, 63). *Ecclesia in Africa* singles out two areas for immediate action in inculturation. These are inculturation of the liturgy and the setting up of Episcopal study commission to deal with “matters concerning marriage, the veneration of ancestors and the spirit world, in order to examine in depth all the cultural aspects of problems from the theological, sacramental, liturgical and canonical points of view” (EA, 64). The document also highlights other areas for inculturation (cf EA, 65-71).

3.10 Progression in the Concept of Inculturation ⁵²

The reality of inculturation has been present in various degrees in the Church since its foundation. Theologians have tried to conceptualize this reality by using one terminology after another. Peter Sarpong sees the first stage as *pedagogical*, whereby the Fathers of the Church *taught* the Christian religion in accordance with the religious and philosophical thinking of their age. Later on, when missionaries began to go all over the world, the concept of *pedagogy* gave way to that of *imposition*, the missionary methodology whereby people were told *how to do things* – how to pray, how to say *I am sorry*. Here, you are basically instructed.

Sarpong cautions that *imposition* is not used in a pejorative sense or as a synonym of compulsion or coercion. He gives this example to illustrate the point: “Among the Asante of Ghana, the bodily symbol for *I am sorry* is to place the back of your right hand in the palm of your left hand. To strike your chest is a symbol for defiance, admitting having committed an action without being sorry for it. It is something like saying; *I did it and so*

⁵² PETER SARPONG, in his book, *Peoples Differ*, (27-32) gives a brief summary of the progression of the concept of inculturation. We shall follow the model and the progression as presents in that book.

what?”⁵³ *Imposition* gave way to *translation*, which means rendering a concept from one language into another, putting into one’s language what somebody else has expressed in his language.

From *translation*, we came to *adaptation* which was used in many ecclesiastical documents (for example Vatican II). *Adaptation* implies conforming yourself to somebody else’s idea and making it your own. Sarpong bemoans adaptation as being worse than *imposition*. It was soon replaced by indigenization. *Indigenization* attempts to go back to where things originate, for example, indigenous ways of prayer, indigenous ways of preaching and indigenous way of explaining the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. Sarpong notes that substituting *indigenization* with *Africanization* did not help much, hence, the new concept *contextualization*, which means looking at things from their context, the situation. It means bringing the message of Christ to bear in a situation. It is at this point that Sarpong introduces the term *inculturation* saying, “there is no doubt that the best word to describe the process of making the faith our own is inculturation.”

3.11 Conclusion

Our overview of the Church’s pilgrimage of missionary activity affirms that Christianity is a historical religion and that inculturation belongs to this historical heritage. This is demonstrated in the existence of the reality of inculturation in the sublime expression of the thinking and practice of the Church until its explicit expression. History as a whole, in this sense, becomes a history of God’s saving act, a history of salvation. It is a powerful testimony of how the Good News of Christ, which is unchanging, breaks beyond every culture, always needing to find concrete expression in the culture of various

⁵³ PETER SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 27.

people. In fact, inculturation belongs to the very nature of the Church.⁵⁴ This teaches us that the Christian faith cannot be lived or expressed in abstract terms. It needs a culture at all times and in all places. The Good News, and indeed Christ himself, must be enfleshed in every culture. We also learn from the evidence of the reality of inculturation down through history to be attentive to the signs of the times and make Christ ever more present and relevant to every person. It is only then the Gospel may truly advance meaningfully to the ends of the earth.

⁵⁴Cf. <http://www.unum-mnes.com/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?p=60&sid=ab6e1f78e5fdd7dd4c1ae1ee41ca427b>

Chapter IV

Way Forward: Efforts and Challenges of Inculturation

4.1 Introduction

The foundations of the Christian faith have already been laid in Africa. Most Churches in Africa have celebrated 100 years since their foundations. Today, the Continent is blessed with well-established ecclesiastical structures with native ministers in positions of responsibility. These years have been a time of many experiments, reflections, implementation and a general move towards what Pope John Paul II calls, “an African Christianity.” One of the most significant things that has happened in the Church in Africa is the holding of the first African synod of 1994, followed by the second African synod of 2009.

What the African Church needs to do is to grow into a deeper maturity of the Christian faith, especially through the path of inculturation. Since its formal formulation in the 1970s with ensuing reflections and recommendations, the Church in Africa has embarked on efforts at promoting inculturation in all dimensions, theological, liturgical, moral, social, pastoral, economic, catechetical and, indeed, the whole of Christian

existence. In this chapter, we shall explore the experience of the process of inculturation in Africa.

4.2 Efforts

4.2.1 *African Theology*

One of the greatest innovations in the Church in the last century is the development of African Theology, which saw the light of day in the 1950s on the eve of the independence of the African states. Efoé-Julien Penoukou, a renowned theologian from Benin describes this theological discipline as “characterized by a demand for the overt recognition of African values. It is the theology of adaptation, of finding stepping stones in cultural traditions in order to pass over them to a Christianity seen as a finished product.” Penoukou adds, “this ongoing theology will become increasingly critical of the ecclesial practices of the magisterium and will promote a growing awareness of the need to incarnate the Gospel in African reality.”⁵⁵ African Theology “aims at contextualizing Christian scripture into the African’s way of life, concentrating on the language, culture, traditions and customs of the locality.”⁵⁶

It was necessary for this development to take place because, for many people, the many centuries of evangelization looked down upon African Religion and all its values, dismissing it as evil and its worship as pagan. Others feel that there has been an excessive imposition on Africa of Western Christian values at the expense of good African values.⁵⁷ Yet today, there is a generally positive appreciation and deeper realization that not all

⁵⁵ E. PENOUKOU, “The Churches in African: their identity? Their Mission?” 41.

⁵⁶ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 34.

⁵⁷ Cf. L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 34.

African religiosity is pagan, evil and sinful and therefore unacceptable. In fact, these elements form the foundation for theological reflection that has enriched the inculturation effort in Africa. In a sense, African Theology takes on board the whole reality that constitutes an integral part of life of the African, which he cannot do away with: economics, politics, socio-cultural, gender, religious, worship, family, and so on. This has given rise to various tendencies in African Theology such as inculturation, liberation, reconstruction and feminist theology.

These theologies have continued to provide bases for pastoral orientations and strategies. African theologians⁵⁸ are indispensable in the quest of a self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting Church that is led by indigenous people and meets local needs and problems.⁵⁹ When the first synod on Africa proposed the model of Church as God's family as the guiding idea for the evangelization in Africa, it added that theologians in Africa work out the theology of this model with all the richness contained in this concept (cf *EA*, 63). Enormous work has been accomplished by dedicated African theologians and scholars since the synod in the main areas of the themes which the synod examined: proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace and the means of social communication.

African Theology is not without challenges. Despite the fact that Africa is endowed with cultural, natural and human resources, the Continent suffers the scourge of civil wars, tribalism, ethnic discrimination, political instability, famine and poverty. The scope of African Theology must embrace all these broad and complex realities if it has to respond to

⁵⁸ The list of African theologians includes John Mbiti, Laurenti Magesa, Charles Nyamiti, Aylward Shorter, Mercy Oduyoye, John Mary Waliggo and Efoé-Julien Penoukou.

⁵⁹ Cf. L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 175.

the signs of the times. In addition, African Theology has not been totally appreciated by some bishops and Church officials who frown on some aspects like inculturation.

4.2.2 *The Church as the Family of God*

The image of the Church that came out of the 1994 African synod was the image or model of the Church as family: “Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the *Church as God's family* as its guiding idea for the evangelization in Africa” (EA, 63). The synod stresses that “family should provide the framework of understanding and consequently, the practice of daily Christian living where we think of the Church and express its meaning in our lives as family.”⁶⁰ This concept developed from and built on the image of *the people of God* and *communion*, which Vatican II spoke about (cf LG, 6). The vision of the Church as God’s family is deeply rooted in the African’s sense of family and seems to have a natural appeal to African people. This image takes into itself all inherent richness of the deeply cherished extended relationships in Africa: “care for others, solidarity, warmth, human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (EA, 63).

Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator calls upon us to bear in mind that “when we say the Church is like a family, we have in mind a different and special kind of family – the family of God, which strives to internalize the positive values and overcome the negative attributes associated with ordinary experience of family.”⁶¹ A close look at the events in Africa reveals the enormous challenges that beset this model of Church where, for most people and cultures, blood is thicker than water (even including the waters of Baptism).⁶² Where was the sense of the family, for instance, when Christians brutalized and massacred

⁶⁰ A. E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 84.

⁶¹ A. E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 86.

⁶² Cf. A. E. OROBATOR, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 86.

each other in the tragic genocide in Rwanda and Burundi? What went wrong? Where were the Christian families? Can the rich imagery of the Church as family genuinely transform the African society and so serve as key to reconciliation, peace and unity in the continent? Can the Church be the family where everybody is included and feels at home?

4.2.3 *Small Christian Communities: A New Way of Being Church*

Small Christian Communities⁶³ (SCCs) have emerged as a force of evangelization in Africa (cf *RM*, 57). The concept developed as a result of putting the ecclesiology of Vatican II into practice, mainly based on the Church as communion and the model of the Church as people of God. Africa, Latin America and Asia pioneered its development. Small Christian communities have become instruments for inculturation, what Hans Kung describes as “‘new way of being Church,’ ‘a new model of Church’ and ‘a new paradigm in the history of the Church.’”⁶⁴ The SCC model of Church is mainly based on a bottom-up approach, starting from the grassroots. Their vocation, it is said, is to be the keeper of the Church’s conscience for inculturation.

“Conceived in the late 1970s by the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA), SSCs were meant to be cells where the Christian faith would be intensely lived and shared.”⁶⁵ AMECEA opted for SCCs as the best way to build up the local Churches to be truly self-ministering, self-propagating and self-supporting. The first African Synod describes the characteristics of these communities in these words:

⁶³ In Africa, Asia and North America the term Small Christian Community is generally used. Latin America uses the name *Comunidades Eclesiales de Base* [CEBs] or the English translation “Basic Ecclesial Communities.” Cf Joseph Healey & Donald Sybertz, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 7-8.

⁶⁴ J. HEALEY & D. SYBERTZ, *Towards an African Narrative Theology*, 137.

⁶⁵ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 43.

Primarily they should be places engaged in evangelizing themselves, so that subsequently they can bring the Good News to others; they should moreover be communities which pray and listen to God's Word, encourage the members themselves to take on responsibility, learn to live an ecclesial life, and reflect on different human problems in the light of the Gospel. Above all, these communities are to be committed to living Christ's love for everybody, a love which transcends the limits of the natural solidarity of clans, tribes or other interests (*EA*, 89).

The SCC is the concrete place where God manifests himself, the "Domestic Church" the source and expression of inculturation.⁶⁶ It is the cell and model of the Church as family. The neighbourhood Church promotes communion and co-responsibility, and gives members a sense of belonging as modelled on the concept of the African family.

A SCC is normally made up of about 10-20 members in a neighbourhood, meeting regularly (usually once a week). The Word of God (Bible sharing/reflection) is at the heart of SCC meetings. The Word of God "provides insight into the impact of building and maintaining SCCs, in the daily life of the people and at a weekly meeting."⁶⁷ Each SCC is unique and organizes its own programme. However, the common elements would be praying together, reading and sharing the Word of God, animating at Mass on Sundays. They are vibrant groups that help to resolve some of the practical problems of members of the community or of their neighbourhood. For example, some SCCs raise funds to help the poor, visit the sick, and do some other charitable works. They concern themselves with real issues of life such as social justice. Members strive to live as a family who are truly concerned about each other's life at all stages and events of life such as baptism of a member's child, weddings and graduation.

SCCs are not without challenges. In his visit to some SCCs in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Magesa's researcher noticed that most of the participants were mainly children

⁶⁶ Cf. L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 51.

⁶⁷ R. ISHENGOMA, *Akamwani*, 21.

and elderly women who could neither read nor write. The leaders of all these communities, though, were invariably from among the few men attending who also assumed the responsibility of interpreting the Scripture readings. The constant complaint concerned the absence of men and young people from these meetings.⁶⁸ Another problem is that not all members of the Church join the SCCs. Irrespective of the challenges, SCCs remain one of the key means of achieving and implementing the model of the Church as family, the place where true and genuine inculturation takes place.

4.3 Challenges

4.3.1 Cultural Complexity and Socio-Cultural Change

The context of contemporary world is a complex reality in the face of factors such as globalization, secularization and urbanization. The world has become much smaller (referred to as a “global village”) due factors such as technology, information, cross border migration and multi-national corporations. This “global consciousness is replacing the more limited consciousness of one’s own ethnicity, gender, language, and national borders.”⁶⁹ These and many present day situations exert immense influence on all dimensions of life, including religion. Pope John Paul II captures this scenario in his encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio*:

Today we face a religious situation which is extremely varied and changing. People are on the move; social and religious realities which were once clear and well defined are today increasingly complex. We need only think of certain phenomena such as urbanization, mass migration, the flood of refugees, the de-Christianization of countries with ancient Christian traditions, the increasing influence of the Gospel and its values in overwhelming non-Christian countries, and the proliferation of messianic cults and religious sects. Religious and social upheaval makes it difficult to apply in practice certain ecclesial distinctions and categories to which we have become accustomed (*RM*, 32).

⁶⁸ Cf. L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 51.

⁶⁹ P. RYAN, “Developing a Theology of Inculturation,” 5.

We cannot indiscriminately criticize or exonerate these contemporary phenomena because they have their positive as well as negative impacts. What comes across clearly through is that the socio-political structures and cultural changes make the process of inculturation very delicate and complex. The Christian message has to be made to “feel at home” in all these new and evolving cultural phenomena. This is the task of inculturation.

Inculturation is exactly the process of a continuous dialogue with culture in a particular place and time. Theology studies the questions we ask about faith, but in the face of such huge cultural change, cultural pluralism and the enormous socio-economic developments, many different questions will surface. Theology has no option than to confront all these modern situations that influence the human person. The response to these questions demands of us thorough understanding, analysis and interpretation of the modern culture in the light of the Gospel. Here we need to acquire proficiency in all branches of learning, or at least employ different fields of knowledge such as anthropology, sociology, ethnography, history, geography, in fact, anything that would prove helpful in approaching the changing and growing situation of our time (cf. *MI*, 23; *RE*, 25; *EP*, 56, 60).

Theologians must be “on their feet” and be attentive to the signs of the times. And if care is not taken, this difficult, complex and delicate process will result in mere syncretic tendencies. All people must commit themselves to this life-long process for there will never be one moment when we will say we have attained definitive inculturation. The greatest challenge to inculturation is to respond to the invitation of Vatican II, to make the joy and hope, grief and anguish of the people of every age and culture, the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well (*GS*, 1). This calls us to embrace, with

urgency, the task and challenge of inculturation that men and women of this present time may not be submerged in these huge social phenomena but to make sense of them. To achieve this we need deep knowledge of the Christian faith and of African traditions and cultures. “This is a difficult point of arrival. Miss one and you miss both, and inculturation cannot then be attained.”⁷⁰ This ongoing dialogue between faith and culture or cultures must be promoted and supported.

4.3.2 The Gap between Theory and Praxis of Inculturation

One of the greatest problems that hinder its growth is the gap between theory and practice, between what is and what needs to be, the gap between doing and acting. This gap, it seems to me, is the crisis of the entire Church where there seems to be continuous conflict between the deductive and inductive approaches to Church life.

In his research, Magesa realized the tension that exists between what Church officials hold and teach and what is real in people’s life in Tanzania. This differentiation has affected the process of inculturation. “While a good number of theologians now accept that inculturation is a task for all the faithful, official Church leaders see the process as a scientific task which they have to teach, guide and protect.”⁷¹ And because of the tight grip the leaders of the Church have over the process, Magesa observes that the “ordinary Christians have learned to distrust their own views on the matter, and rely on what the leaders of the Church say.”⁷² Ordinary Christians want to be told what inculturation means, what the Church is doing about it, and those elements in their culture that are relevant for inculturation. This results in having merely passive recipients of the Church’s teaching.

⁷⁰ S. NGANDA, “The Sacrament of Baptism,” 95.

⁷¹ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 36.

⁷² L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 36.

Yet, Magesa maintains that “Lay people in the Church have their own ways of responding to the Gospel and the challenge of everyday life that is different from what the Church leaders teach.”⁷³ The official control, according to him, seems superficial while the reality on the ground is different. We are faced with a situation of clear dichotomy between what the Church teaches and what people in ordinary life situation actually live on day-to-day basis. If people will come to own their faith and be confident in what they do and so attain a sustainable inculturation, then this tension needs to be resolved.

Magesa describes these two major orientations in Eastern Africa as the *official* and *popular* inculturation, the official level being the noetic or cognitive dimension that relies on an intellectual analysis of principles and directives of Church teaching (deductive in nature). The popular process of inculturation, rather than concerning itself directly and immediately with cognitive notions in Christianity and culture, their analysis, differentiation, explication and synthesis, has been basically intuitive and spontaneous, arising from within the African heart and soul.⁷⁴ We see in Magesa’s distinction of the two levels a clear conflict between theory and praxis. In this view, too much has been placed on the official to the detriment of the popular process of inculturation. This gap must be bridged if not we run the risk of expounding beautiful theological hypothesis that have no real practical bearing in people’s lives.

Magesa takes the example of the life of SCCs in the AMECEA region as an illustration. AMECEA made “SCCs a ‘pastoral priority’, a move they described as the best way ‘to defend those authentic human values which have been the basis of the life of the

⁷³ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 36.

⁷⁴Cf. L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 58.

peoples.”⁷⁵ SSCs are supposed to be the foundation of the ecclesial community intended to start at the grassroots and grow up as if born from there. In this light, Magesa agrees that a lot of work has been done on the theology and ecclesiology of SCCs in Eastern Africa, but contends that much of this work has been conceptual and not practical theology and so has lacked the desired impact on these groupings known as SCCs.⁷⁶ According to him,

Much of this theological work has also been extrinsic to the experience of community living of the region’s societies themselves. Structures of family, kinship and clan received little considerations in the formation of SCCs. They would have been if SCCs had arisen as a need felt by the general Christian faithful. As they are now, they exist as parallel structures to the family and kinship systems, and the symbolic link between the two in Christian terms is obscure or non-existent.⁷⁷

This makes Magesa ask whether the SCCs are a superimposition over the existing kinship structure. Are they meant to replace it or to merge with it?⁷⁸ The consequence, he observes “is that SCCs have largely continued to be perceived here as a ‘project’, the particular concern of academicians and bishops. The contribution of the people – intuitively and spontaneously – in the development and direction of SCCs has not been too pronounced.”⁷⁹ If SCCs are situated in the whole context of inculturation, as a basic element thereof, they have in most cases failed.⁸⁰

Unfortunately “instead of portraying the *fact* of inculturation as it is, academicians and the hierarchy paint a picture of inculturation as they envision it, as they want it to be.”⁸¹ So in the end, “despite the intended goal of inculturation, what has been achieved on this level has been some intellectual synthesis of Western missionary Christian and African

⁷⁵ Cf. L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 60.

⁷⁶ Cf. L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 60.

⁷⁷ L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 60.

⁷⁸ Cf. L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 60.

⁷⁹ L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 60.

⁸⁰ Cf. L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 60.

⁸¹ L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 59.

cultural themes or elements.”⁸² What is needed as a way forward is an honest, balanced and comprehensive understanding where *formal* and *popular*, or theory and practice, would meet and interact positively for a productive inculturation in Africa. We must, above all, be a Church that “walks the talk”, one committed to action. This calls on us to rethink our theology and make it down to earth as much as possible always aiming at making it relevant to people.

4.3.3 *The Role of the Missionary*

The missionary⁸³ or agent of evangelization has an indispensable role in the process of inculturation. St Paul asks, “And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent?” (Rm 10: 14). Therefore, although inculturation is essentially a community project, without specific agents to lead and coordinate the Christian community in the process, it may run down to mere theories and abstractions. The role of the missionary is not an easy one. He is to lead, coordinate and enhance the energies, gifts and talents as well as the difficulties of the community towards a genuine inculturation. But first of all, he himself must be “inculturated” in heart and mind.

Ecclesia in Africa pays homage to missionaries, men and women of faith and heralds of the Gospel for their heroism and sacrifice in the work of evangelization in Africa (*EA*, 35). It recognizes the contribution of the sons and daughters of Africa who served as co-workers of the missionaries, especially catechists and translators (*EA*, 36). The seed

⁸² L. MAGESA, “The Present and Future of Inculturation in Eastern Africa,” 59.

⁸³ We use missionary in a simple sense to mean an African or non-African who finds himself or herself in a position of pastoral care in the Church’s mission of evangelization. This could be a priest, a deacon, a sister, catechist or lay leader and, indeed, all agents of evangelization.

sown at that time has borne much fruit today. Africans have become missionaries to themselves. The Church has native Church leaders and structures, many priests and sisters, catechists and vibrant participation by all.

However, these missionaries were men and women of their own time. They have been accused variously of proclaiming the truth of the Gospel in conjunction with the imposition of elements which were culturally alien to the people. For instance, in many places missionaries faced the temptation to manipulate an oral culture at the moment of giving it a written form.⁸⁴ Some also paid little attention to African culture and religious beliefs. For generations, the foremost task of missionaries was the implantation of the Church with all its structures. Now, in a period of intense discussion and promotion of inculturation, the missionary finds himself or herself with a huge task.

Clemens Sedmak's description (as quoted by Magesa in *Anatomy of Inculturation*) of the qualities of a good theologian of inculturation could describe equally well the qualities of a good agent of inculturation: "...a person who is close to the people, who has a creative imagination and the gift of listening, who shows a commitment to hard work, who accepts the risk of making a mistake, who is a person of self-renewal."⁸⁵ He is, in other words, a humble servant at the service of the Church. His life must be modelled on Christ, the Master. He does not go to conquer but to give himself that others may fully live. One must be ready for the process of learning, self-emptying and self-renewal. His task is as an ongoing and never finished process. According to Magesa, "for people who proclaim the

⁸⁴Cf. A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 144.

⁸⁵ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 191.

Gospel in an environment different from their own, inculturation requires nothing less in intellectual and attitudinal approach than conversion.”⁸⁶

Missionaries must be ultimately interested in people and strive towards complete immersion in the culture, traditions and world-view of the people. Retired Archbishop Sarpong of Kumasi, Ghana, adopted a concrete policy to help his missionaries. He explains it himself thus:

Not long after I had become a Bishop, I made a regulation that missionaries, both African and non-African, coming to the Diocese of Kumasi, devote at least three months to acquainting themselves with the life of the Asante in particular and Ghanaians in general. For this purpose, a programme of cultural orientation was drawn up which comprised an introduction, the grammar of the Asante language, colloquial Asante, liturgical Asante and Asante culture.⁸⁷

The missionary must be prepared to “turn around” to see things in different light, that is, in a manner they have not seen them before.

4.3.4 *Syncretism*

We have underlined the indispensability of inculturation in the work of evangelization. It is a movement towards full evangelization calling for particular attention in the circumstances of the contemporary world (*EA*, 62). And if not properly carried out, inculturation runs the risk of what Pope Paul VI calls, purely decorative, as it were, by applying a thin veneer that does not really touch the depth and the roots of people’s lives (*EN*, 20). So “in all cases care must be taken to avoid syncretism” (*EA*, 62). Syncretism may be generally understood as “the ‘existential mixture’ of cultures and religions, as spontaneous interpretation as opposed to an intellectually justified one.”⁸⁸

⁸⁶ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 149.

⁸⁷ P. K. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 13.

⁸⁸ F. WIJSEN and H. HOEBEN, “We are not a carbon Copy of Europe”, 76.

Frans Wijsen and Harrie Hoeben argue for a dialogic character to syncretism and see it as a path towards full inculturation. They put forward quite a convincing argument worth quoting:

It needs no extensive debate to recognize that syncretism has always been part of history of Christianity. From the moment Christianity moved out of the Jewish context into a Gentile one a process of syncretism was set in motion. And the Gospels themselves show abundantly traces of syncretism. And surely when Christianity was introduced into Africa, it was already a syncretic unit of 'lived faith', as it had absorbed components of different cultures and religions. At times the word syncretism is interpreted from a dogmatic perspective. Syncretism is then saddled with a negative connotation, for it is defined as an aberration of doctrine. But syncretism can also be viewed from a pastoral perspective, and then it refers to the very process of faith, the identification with Christ, which is taking place constantly. In this way, it surely presents a very positive aspect of a living faith and must be seen as a necessary step within the process to arrive at inculturation. Of course, syncretism results from a spontaneous process of lived Christian faith, whereas inculturation is an identical process, which is vindicated by official recognition as an expression of 'authentic' and 'mature' Christianity.⁸⁹

Wijsen and Hoeben conclude, saying, "the contestation by Church officials then determines the distinction. Accordingly, syncretism poses a problem for the professional theologian, but in no way for the ordinary faithful." We must therefore strive to avoid syncretism as much as possible but at the same time appreciate it as the initial stage that would lead, hopefully, to authentic inculturation.

4.4 Way Forward

4.4.1 *Promote Research cultural awareness*

What can help inculturation make the progress and achieve its intended objective? If it will thrive and have impact in people's life, we have to stimulate cultural interest and research. Africa seems to be losing its rich cultural heritage to modern day factors such as secularization and globalization. We may rightly speak of cultural erosion in Africa. For

⁸⁹ F. WIJSEN and H. HOEBEN, "We Are Not a Carbon Copy of Europe," 76-77.

example, very few people undergo the traditional African rites of initiation. Christianity for long frowned on powers of diviners, magic or sorcery and a practice such as pouring of libation. A simple survey of a group of youth will reveal how little they know about their cultures. To offset this situation, Fr Nundwe recommends that “the agents of inculturation should be trained in theology and be familiar with the particular cultures they work in.”⁹⁰ Areas such as customary marriages, practices of inheritance, blessings, curses and other aspects of religious and social life should be explored.

There are other people who have the mentality that anything from African tradition is pagan and primitive. Such people feel that by inculturating doctrine and liturgy, we are going back to dark and primitive ages. How will we achieve sustainable and comprehensive inculturation when the “raw material” (culture) is not fully known? For sustainable inculturation, we have no option than to approach culture positively.

The first synod on Africa takes a lead in highlighting what it calls the positive values of African cultures: “a profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the creator and of a spiritual world. The reality of sin in its individual and social forms is very much present in the consciousness of these peoples, as is also the need for rites of purification and expiation” (*EA*, 42). Africa can offer these priceless values the Churches and to humanity as a whole and truly contribute to an effective reversal of the Continent’s dramatic situation (cf. *EA*, 42-43).

“All this underlines the need,” according to Pope John Paul II, “for research in the field of African cultures in all their complexity” (*EA*, 62). Magesa maintains that “there is

⁹⁰ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 16.

need to promote respect for African cultural heritage and identity, to drop the Western mentality that leads to negative perceptions and mistreatment of African traditional religiosity and people.”⁹¹ This will lead to a deeper appreciation and rediscovery of precious African values that seem to be fading away. How can we construct any meaningful theology around the notions of family as a model for the Church in Africa, for instance, if we do not comprehensively understand the concept and practice of the African family and all that it entails? Failure to do this will leave inculturation to the mercy of abstractions and far from reality.

4.4.2 Integrated Approach to Mission

Vatican II made it clear that the nature and foundation of the Church are all geared towards its missionary activity, for she is indeed “missionary by nature” (*AG*, 2). “She exists in order to evangelize” (*EN*, 14). The basis of the Church’s missionary nature is the divine mandate that it has been “sent to the nations to be the universal sacrament of salvation” (*AG*, 1) and so be the visible sign of Christ’s presence to all peoples and nations (*LG*, 1). Therefore, evangelization, which is the grace and vocation proper to the Church, constitutes the essential mission of the Church (*EN*, 14). In fact “she exists in order to evangelize” (*EN*, 14), that is “to preach and teach, to be the channel of the gift of grace, to reconcile sinners with God” (*EN*, 14).

The Church follows some paths in order to achieve her goal of evangelization. These paths include witness, initial proclamation of the Gospel, conversion and baptism, forming local Churches, incarnating the Gospel in people’s cultures, dialogue with other religions (cf *RM*, 41-60). These paths and many others proposed by missiologists express

⁹¹ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 17.

the Church's single but complex reality of mission. Yet none of these paths should be seen in isolation. "The crucial problem in mission today is whether we can overcome our particularities, get a glimpse of its totality, and maintain its integrity; or in other words, whether we can repossess earnestly and urgently the biblical vision of a holistic mission carried out faithfully and consistently in the crossroads of life."⁹²

Orlando Costas observes that, "while some have been preoccupied with evangelism, others have focussed on questions of social justice. While some have stressed the contemplative inward journey, others have championed an activist outward journey. While some have seen Church growth largely in terms of numbers, others have disdained all dimensions of growth other than growth in costly discipleship."⁹³ With such an approach we run the risk of emphasizing one aspect to the detriment of the other. What is needed is an integral understanding and approach to mission. It seems to me that inculturation brings all these vast and complex realities and paths of mission together by giving meaning and vitality to the Church's evangelizing mission.

"As such, inculturation is not just one aspect of the missionary activity of the Church; it ought to be the chief concern of evangelization."⁹⁴ Inculturation is inseparable from evangelization, for it is vital for any effective evangelization. What will ecumenism, dialogue and liberation achieve if the faith is not truly inculturated, penetrating the very roots of people's lives? In a way, we have to move towards a more conscious integrated understanding and approach to mission where all the paths of evangelization meet. "The

⁹² O. COSTAS, *The Integrity of Mission*, XII.

⁹³ O. COSTAS, *The Integrity of Mission*, IX.

⁹⁴ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 174.

problem is that the Church is not 'Church' until and unless it is made flesh,"⁹⁵ and this should be the aim of all evangelization. Inculturation in this way becomes the force of every model or path of mission, always desiring the deep transformation of the person and making Christ and his message of salvation ever more understood by the people of every culture, locality and time.

4.4.3 *Inculturation as Community Project*

We can ask the same question again: What can help inculturation make progress and achieve its intended objective? For Magesa, "all Christians must be involved in the process of inculturation if it has to succeed,"⁹⁶ for it is the life of the community which is in question. It should essentially be a community project or process of all the people of God since it concerns cultures or the way of life of a people in their concrete social situation. This means among other things, stimulating liturgical and catechetical creativity in the community. The gifts of the members of a community must be enhanced and promoted. The community provides the criteria of authenticity and success and at the same time the means of implementation of inculturation.⁹⁷

The method of inculturation is inductive, "from below." It is not just the responsibility of a few experts who sell it to the people but a collective community process. In Shorter's contention, "Christians prefer forms which allow a full participation by laity of both sexes, and which capitalize the gifts that are found in the community." Clerical leadership and stimulation, should aim at this. We are not advocating here that inculturation take place in opposition to the experts and representatives of the official Church. What

⁹⁵ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 137.

⁹⁶ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 17.

⁹⁷ Cf. A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 263.

matters is an honest collaboration. There is need for experts, even sometimes missionaries from overseas, “to give the community encouragement and to help it make the necessary discernment and the necessary critique of its own culture, and promote the discovery of the Seeds of the Word.”⁹⁸ Experts are also needed to ensure the truly Christian character of the new creation which inculturation brings into existence. Approached this way, inculturation will achieve a balanced appreciation between the formal and popular levels in a more complementary way. Shorter takes the SCC as an example and shows how it is called to make a contribution from its own vitality and creativity to this comprehensive *ecclesial* commitment. It is in this way that the SCCs are a force for inculturation whereby the cumulative influence of basic communities transforms the local Church.

4.4.4 *Inculturation Spirituality*

If we understand spirituality to simply mean a journey of continuous conversion whereby we open up to new horizons and recognize the call of God in the events of life, to be involved in inculturation will entail a commitment to following this journey; it will be a series of conversions or expansions of horizons as one comes to realize the demands of the process of earthing the Gospel in new soil. We may refer to this as inculturation spirituality. This spirituality becomes not just an exercise to be achieved and done away with but rather a profound attitude of openness to the self-communication of God and consequent attempts to respond to God whole-heartedly. It calls us to a radical conversion in the way we understand God, his actions in the world, revelation and salvation.

Inculturation spirituality is primarily a call to holiness for both individuals and communities. Pope John Paul II expresses it in these words:

⁹⁸ A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 254.

Inculturation, through which the faith penetrates the life of individuals and their primary communities, is also a path to holiness. Just as in the Incarnation Christ assumed human nature in everything but sin, analogously through inculturation the Christian message assimilates the values of the society to which it is proclaimed, rejecting whatever is marked by sin. To the extent that an ecclesial community can integrate the positive values of a specific culture, inculturation becomes an instrument by which the community opens itself to the riches of Christian holiness. An inculturation wisely carried out purifies and elevates the cultures of the various peoples (*EA*, 87).

Rafael Esteban talks about inculturation as “another name for the process of communal and continual conversion undergone by a community that comes to believe in Jesus Christ. This process should respect what the Spirit of God has engendered in their human history.”⁹⁹

Esteban explains further, “When a people with a history and a culture accepts Christ as an answer to the challenges of human existence that community enters into a dynamic of death and resurrection.” This is the process inculturation must undergo, a process of dying and rising, as it were, to new life, or, in other words, to “new creation.” It is all about a change of heart and mind (Ez 11: 19). It should be a spirituality modelled on Christ himself, who was totally obedient to God even unto death (cf Phil 2:8), he is the way, the truth and the life (Jn 14: 6). Inculturation is about life, a full and abundant life in all its dimensions (cf Jn 10:10). And so just as spirituality is part and parcel of life, so should it be part and parcel of the process of inculturation.

4.4.5 *Beyond Inculturation*

The term “inculturation” has developed from one concept to the other. Today some scholars wonder if it is the right term to describe the reality of the Christian faith taking root in a culture or cultures. This has come about because of the growing “intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings

⁹⁹ R. ESTEBAN, “Mission and Inculturation,” 16.

are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.”¹⁰⁰ What we have today are societies where people factually experience themselves as belonging not to one particular identity, but to multiple identities.

Applying this new reality to the discussion of inculturation, given that modern and postmodern societies do not form a cultural “patchwork quilt or mosaic of separate pieces with hard well-defined edges but a cultural mix or cocktail,” Frans Wijzen wonders, “in what culture do we inculturate Christianity?”¹⁰¹ The cultural reality in today’s world seems to call for a new language that might better express the dynamic in it. In a similar vein, Shorter maintains that “it cannot be denied that the word ‘inculturation’ by itself suggests the transfer of faith from one culture to another, the insertion of the Christian message into a given culture, and so seems to suggest that the process of mission or evangelization is a one-way process.”¹⁰² To create such an impression is unfortunate, and so Wijzen and other missiologists, following the inspiration of Bishop Joseph Blomjous, suggest the term “interculturation” rather than “inculturation” as the term to generate reflection to fulfil that role.

“Interculturation expresses the idea that the process of inculturation is not simply the interaction between Gospel on the one hand and culture on the other, as if they represent two monolithic meaning systems, but between multiple cultural orientations.”¹⁰³ The understanding here is that an already culture-embedded-Gospel must confront not a single culture, but cultures no longer able to be clearly distinguished from one another.

¹⁰⁰ Anthony Giddnes’s definition of globalization as quoted by L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 150.

¹⁰¹ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 151.

¹⁰² A. SHORTER, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, 13.

¹⁰³ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 151.

Interculturation thus, “stresses the interdependence of cultures for mutual enrichment.”¹⁰⁴ It safeguards the reciprocal character of mission. Theology must be forward looking and open to these new horizons and meanings in the presence of the immense mystery of God’s work in the world and the promise of the Kingdom. In all these, however, we realize that we are dealing with a very complex concept whose meaning cannot be exhausted but continues to open us to amazing horizons as the Gospel continue to encounter complex social, political, economic and cultural situations. There is need for continuous reflection so as to meet the challenges of the rapid modern day changes.

4.4.6 Faithful to Guiding Principle and Recommendations

Inculturation travels slowly on a delicate and complex road “since it raises the question of the Church’s fidelity to the Gospel and the Apostolic Tradition amidst the constant evolution of cultures” (*EA*, 62). It is not a finished product but a complex reality that keeps on growing and opening up to new horizons. *Ecclesia in Africa* devotes a big section of its discussion on inculturation and made several recommendations for the Church in Africa, aimed at ensuring the viability and sustainability of the process and to rid it of all syncretism, abstractions, “over-inculturation” and “misdirected inculturation.”

Ecclesia in Africa invites all local Churches to be involved in the process of inculturation in an ongoing manner. “The synod recommended ‘to the Bishops and to the Episcopal Conferences to take note that inculturation includes the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelization. It includes theology, liturgy, the Church’s life and structures’” (*EA*, 62). The synod underlines the need for research in the field of African

¹⁰⁴ J. WALIGGO, “Making a Church that is truly African,” 12.

cultures in all their complexities; “to exploit to the maximum the numerous possibilities which the Church’s present discipline provides in this matter” (*EA*, 62).

Pope John Paul II earnestly hopes that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church (*EA*, 63). In the areas of application, the synod recommends that, “inculturation of the *liturgy*, provided it does not change the essential elements, should be carried out so that the faithful can better understand and live liturgical celebrations” (*EA*, 64). *Ecclesia in Africa* expressed the hope that, “Episcopal Conferences, in cooperation with Universities and Catholic Institutes, would set up study commissions, especially for matters concerning marriage, the veneration of ancestors, and the spirit world, in order to examine in depth all the cultural aspects of problems from the theological, sacramental, liturgical and canonical points of view” (*EA*, 64).

However, inculturation must be undertaken always respecting the two principal guidelines the Church set forth, first in *Redemptoris Missio* 54 and later in *Ecclesia in Africa* 62, namely “compatibility with the Christian message and communion with the universal Church.” Pope John Paul II adds, “in all cases, care must be taken to avoid syncretism” (*EA*, 62). This is meant to foster nothing but an authentic process in which the message of Christ in all its richness will truly be proclaimed and thus penetrate the hearts of men and women of all cultures and places. Then people would live holy lives in union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit.

4.5 Conclusion

Inculturation is present in the Church in Africa. It shares in the universal history of the Church’s encounter and engagement with cultures from the time the Gospel was first

preached. It is an urgent and necessary priority towards full evangelization in Africa. The Church will only attain maturity in faith by way of inculturation. A lot has been done and should be appreciated, yet we realize the journey towards full inculturation in Africa is far from completion. If anything, it is only beginning. The challenge remains enormous, to achieve a balanced and true inculturation that will avoid cultural confusion and alienation in a fast evolving society.

Africa has everything it takes to facilitate a comprehensive inculturation. It has to look into itself and discover the riches of its own traditions. It is time for everyone to become partners and active participants in the process. The Church in Africa must embrace this task with determination, enthusiasm and reverence. Pope John Paul II speaks about the task of inculturation in these words:

The Church in Africa, in order to evangelize, must begin by being evangelized herself ... She needs to listen unceasingly to what she must realize, to hear reasons for hoping, to the new commandment of love. She is the People of God immersed in the world, and often tempted by idols, and she always needs to hear the proclamation of the 'mighty works of God' (EA, 76).

In this way, the Church in Africa will truly be at home in the continent and therefore foster nothing but an African Christianity, whereby people live authentically as Christians and at the same time as Africans. Church leaders, all agents of evangelization, and indeed the whole of the people of God, must commit themselves to this task. Catechetical and religious education methods which respect the principles of culture and which can give the Christian message more vivid meaning as well as theological research can greatly be enriched by the African culture.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Inculturation is always with us. It is the way for the Church's mission of evangelization in the modern world, for what matters is to evangelize people's culture and cultures. The process of inculturation has been part and parcel of the history of the Christian Church. It can hardly be separated from evangelization because of the nature of divine communication. It enables Christianity to be contextualized so that each culture may authentically have a contextualized Christianity, "an African Christianity" for instance. To be relevant, the Christian message must necessarily be incarnated in local cultures so as to effect the interior transformation of humanity and all the strata of society. Every local community or culture would then be able to welcome Christ and the values he stood for by embodying them in the expressions and symbols taken from the life experience of the people.

Inculturation is not abstract. It takes place in people's life. To achieve its aim it must be intimately bound with life in all its facets. For the Good News of Christ addresses human persons in their complex wholeness: spiritual, moral, economic, political, cultural and social. The life experience of a people, their rootedness in their cultures, their philosophy, their belief systems, and their total way of life must be taken seriously. The goal of inculturation is to make the Gospel more engaging for a people of a particular

culture to live more meaningfully. Inculturation leads them to a better understanding of the mystery of Christ so that the Christian faith can be expressed in a concrete experience of daily life. As a way of life, “nothing of God’s creation, nothing that is real, nothing that concerns the life of humanity and the universe is alien.”¹⁰⁵ In fact, it should accompany life in its completeness, from birth to death.

Inculturation must be founded on Jesus Christ. This is the theological basis for any meaningful inculturation. In the words of Sarpong, “Jesus is the Father, the Source, the Cause and the Inspiration of inculturation which means nothing more or less than accepting Christ in your own way and passing him on to others.”¹⁰⁶ Christ’s whole life: incarnation, public ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost must be what inspire inculturation. “This is the way God chose to realize God’s own plan in the world. God becomes human. Through Jesus, the Godhead immersed itself in the history and life of the people of Israel, using their language, land and even religion ‘in order to show through what he did for them what he intended to do for the whole human race’”¹⁰⁷

In other words, we must evangelize as Jesus Christ did. The self-emptying of the servant who lived among the people, sharing their hopes and sufferings, giving his life on the cross for all humanity – this was Christ’s way of proclaiming the Good News, and as disciples we are summoned to follow the same way. Jesus was a man of his time. He accepted his peoples’ worldview, he knew things probably better than his contemporaries did but he did not question their way of thinking about ghosts, spirits, and demons, nor

¹⁰⁵ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 191.

¹⁰⁶ P. K. SARPONG, *Peoples Differ*, 27.

¹⁰⁷ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 137.

argued about their somewhat magico-religious interpretation of his actions. Rather he used it, whenever he could, by praising this human faith and purifying it. This is inculturation, a process that listens, affirms, appreciates, challenges, confirms, empowers and above all transforms.

For this to happen there is need for continuous conversion. In Acts chapter 10, Peter had to undergo this “painful” conversion from his arrogant attitude towards non-Jewish people to realizing their true worth in God’s sight. He learnt that “what God has made clean, you are not to call profane” (Acts 10:15). And later, enlightened, Peter explains to the Roman soldier Cornelius, “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” (Acts 10: 28).

The Church is not a “Church” until and unless it is “made flesh”. And so just like the Christ event, the Church cannot be realized as such until it becomes part and parcel of a particular people. It must be “at home” with cultures, “take them on board” and become part of them. This process is a mutual enrichment for both the Gospel and cultures. “Deny, bypass, or explain away this fact and all efforts to understand the process become compromised from the start.”¹⁰⁸

Inculturation should further lead to “healing” the disease of “dualism,” or what is commonly referred to as the dualistic lives most Christians find themselves entangled in. People easily accept Christianity and seem to be at home in it until problems or disaster strike: death, sickness, fear, job loss, natural disasters and marriage problems. These are the moments people reveal their “true colours”, as it were, and return to traditional practices

¹⁰⁸ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 137.

and rituals, and fail to trust in the saving power of Christ. Jesus warns us not to pour new wine into old wineskins. If we do, he tells us, “the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins are ruined” (Mk 2:22). The consequence of such double, unreconciled worlds or lives leaves untold problems on the people in question and on the Christian community as a whole.

Inculturation ultimately aims at a “new creation.” The need for a genuine commitment to this process cannot be over emphasized. It is an urgent necessity and not just an option for the Church. “This urgency arises on account of the rapid changes that are taking place all over the world among peoples and cultures, making new and intense demands on the Gospel and the Church as a set of cultural perspectives interacting with other sets of cultural perspectives.”¹⁰⁹ Inculturation is inevitable, for “a faith that does not become culture is a faith not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived.”¹¹⁰ That is why to ask the question whether inculturation is necessary is tantamount to asking whether it is necessary for a baby to grow.

When all is said and done, inculturation is the honest attempt to answer the all-time question, “Who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8:27-32) in the midst of the rapid cultural and socio-political change and their influence of contemporary society. There are no “ready made” or exhaustive answers to the question. It is, above all else, a slow and gradual journey, a spiritual journey towards knowing Christ more profoundly and loving him more dearly. It is a journey towards maturity, where Christ will truly “be at home” in all cultures in all aspects of life. This is the challenge: to strive daily towards a genuine synthesis

¹⁰⁹ L. MAGESA, *Anatomy of Inculturation*, 155.

¹¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Letter Instituting the Pontifical Council for Culture, 20 May 1982.

between culture and faith, to attain a “new creation”. Africa has all it takes to make the journey. What African Christians must do is to commit ourselves to this life-long journey that may only be carried out with the help of the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, who leads us to complete truth.

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