

# 7.6 Inculturation

## Aim

- To help participants evaluate the evangelization mission of the Church in Africa
- To help the participants in reflecting on the challenge(s) of inculturation
- To acquire skills, both conceptual and practical necessary for promotion of inculturation.

## Materials Required

- Handouts for each group of exercises in Procedure section

### Procedure

• Divide participants into three groups and give the following activities:

• **Group A:** They are given this verse from a Zairian song, for analysis based on the given questions.

• Song: Miserable Christian/At Mass in the morning/To the fortune teller in the evening/  
• The amulet in the pocket/The scapular round the neck.

### Questions:

- 1 What is going on in your heart after hearing this verse? Please share your feelings.
- 2 What does the verse say to you about Christianity in Africa, both historically and the present pastoral situation?
- 3 What are some of the reasons for this situation?
- 4 What would you want to do or see happening in the church in response to the problem?
- 5 What lessons can we learn for the present and the future?

### Group B

• Read the following story and discuss it, guided by the given questions.  
• *Martha, a middle aged woman in central Ghana, had been living with her husband of twenty-five years. They had been married in the traditional setup, where the catholic priest was invited, as well as members of her small Christian community. Martha and her husband were fervent and devout Catholics, participating actively in all church activities. Martha's husband, Stephen died after a long protracted cancer of the lungs. Even though Stephen had been active in the church, baptised and confirmed, because his marriage was only traditional (cultural), he was not given a church burial. This pained Martha to the extent that after the customary rites of burial and mourning she left the Catholic Church and stayed at home, not joining any other church.*

- 1. Did the Church fail Martha, if so, where and how? If not, what are the reasons?
- 2. Should Christian and traditional (cultural) marriages continue to exist independently of each other? If not, what are the possibilities of creating a meeting point?

### Group C

• Let them analyse and share their opinions on this story.  
• Fr. Nicholas Gaba, a Dominican priest from Togo working among the people of his tribe, with a group of elders (both males and females) established a 'homestead evangelization' where the Word of God is read and shared in the homes of the people. The traditional occasions of child birth, naming ceremonies, adult initiation, marriage, planting, harvesting and death are given Christian catechetical preparation and celebrated with Christian prayers and ceremonies. The provincial superior of Fr. Nicholas a priest from Europe, after visiting him, ordered him to leave the people in their 'fetish' practices and transferred him to the capital, Lome.

### Questions

- 1. What will be the feelings of Fr. Nicholas as an African, trying to bring Christianity (Gospel) into his culture?
- 2. What will happen to the faith of the people, after 'losing' their priest and being told that their customs and lifestyle are 'fetish'?
- 3. What do you say about the attitude and decision of the provincial superior?
- 4. Is there any room for African rituals and customs in the Catholic Church? If yes, where and how? If not, why?

## Input

General concerns from these cases, in addition to what participants might come up with, are in these highlights:

1. The type of African Christianity that is lived in some African countries: Mostly it is a split-level Christianity: the continuous side by side, of two different value systems in one and the same culture or person. 'The African operates with two thought-systems at once, and both of them are close to each other' (A. Shorter).

'When Africans want to get in touch with ancestors, or when they seek promotion in government, children in marriage or success in business, traditional oracles are flooded'

What then are the causes of the above situation among African Christians? What has contributed to this state of affairs?

It is an accepted fact that the early missionaries who brought the Gospel to Africa did not see the need for an encounter between the Gospel and African cultures. Most of their success was in these areas:

**A Christianity that departed from the people's situation.** 'The questions, needs, desires and hopes of the people were ignored in favour of a Christianity that stipulated obedience and implementation of decisions from above. Their call for 'conversion' meant abandonment of values and meanings of the African lifestyle. 'To be a Christian meant embracing a new name and living the new life marked by separation from that of the ancestors. There should be no association whatsoever with those who still clung to the customs, who were termed as pagans.

They Branded traditional medical and intermediary practices as witchcraft, and establishing a church that did not heal diseases- a psychological need that is prevalent in Africa. There was wholesale rejection of the African traditional religion and beliefs which were termed as idolatry and superstition.

**Accommodation** is the term that can best describe the Church and the missionaries established. Here the primary agent of Evangelization was the missionary only. Their goal was to plant a local church which was an extension of the Universal Church. The main process they used was translation of foreign materials and the depth of their evangelization was generally superficial and haphazard. They had a limited understanding of African culture. The justification of their evangelization was the good thing they were doing for the mission church in the name of the universal or sending Church. They saw the established churches as immature local churches, which needed to depend on the universal church. Thus they stressed unity without any room for diversity. Their approach depended only on the missionary.

An awareness of the danger and insufficiency of the system of Accommodation, later led to another system, **Adaptation**. This only concentrated on external change, change in dress, music, architecture and religious symbols. It also looked for similarities and contact between Christianity and concepts in African traditional religion and cultures. An example is the names and concept of God. The traditional names and concepts of God are now Christianized.

**Indigenisation** was the next epoch in correcting the earlier missionary inefficient communication of Christianity. This approach recognises the fundamental difference between the core of the gospel and Christianity as we have it today. It also accepts that there is nothing like pure Christianity, for in the process of living and transmitting, Christianity acquired cultural elements which were incorporated into the gospel. And at times, these cultural elements were not separated during transmission to another culture, but given as part of Christianity. So this approach enters into the dynamism and roots of for example, the African culture with the Gospel and kingdom of God, making it relevant to the culture and life of the people.

The last development is **Inculturation**, which is the topic of this session. Inculturation defies definition but has been described in the following ways:

1. Incarnation of the divine message in a culture; earthing the gospel in the particular cultural conditions of Africa.
2. Letting Jesus Christ and his message enter deeply into the minds, hearts and lives of the people in their culture, becoming their deepest meaning and motivation.
3. Speaking the Good News of Jesus Christ in such a way that it touches, illuminates, strengthens and challenges the lives of people in their actual concrete situations, and that they can find their own ways of celebrating faith in worship, prayer, organization, symbols, practices, discipline and laws.
4. Embodiment of the gospel message and its openness to the positive traditions of the African peoples in such a way that 'it will be more clearly understood by what means the faith can be explained in terms of philosophy and wisdom of the people, and how their customs, concept of life and social structures can be reconciled with the standard proposed by divine revelation' (Ad Gentes, 22). 'We do not know what we believe unless we can say it in our own language' says the African Christian.
5. The African believer being fully African and fully Christian, the church of Africa being fully African and fully Christian, the cultures of Africa being inseparably both Christian and African.

From the above descriptions, we can conclude that Inculturation aims at ensuring the authenticity and depth of faith in the African Christian; healing cultural alienation; bridging the gap between life and faith, and thus resolving the instances



of ‘spiritual schizophrenia’ and double life afflicting many people; and at salvaging lost or disappearing spiritual values, giving them the possibility to survive, grow and be elevated and purified in the spirit of the gospel.

The table below categorizes carrying out Inculturation.

Primary Agent of Inculturation	The whole Christian cultural community, i.e. the local church.
Goal of Inculturation	The penetration of the Gospel message into, and its integration with the community’s culture as a single system of belief, values and behaviour, making the Gospel message generative and creative with the culture. This is called evangelization of culture.
Chief Processes of Inculturation	Integration. The blending of the Gospel message with the rest of the culture by insiders
Depth of Inculturation	To the very roots. ( <i>Eang. Nunt.</i> 53). Holistic. Based on a good understanding of the nature, structure and dynamics of the culture.
Justification for Inculturation	It is a necessity and right to express one’s faith in terms of one’s own culture
Beneficiaries of Inculturation	Every member of every culture
Emphasis of Inculturation	Unity in diversity, where both unity and diversity are seen as sacred.
Approach to Inculturation	Tripolar dialogue between the Gospel, the universal Church tradition and the local culture, where there is mutual enrichment

The best biblical image or event that describes Inculturation is the Incarnation. Jesus Christ, the Word of God ‘was made flesh and dwelt amongst us’, and we should allow this same Jesus to enter deeply into the minds, hearts and lives of Africans, to be the new centre of our religious experience and all aspects of our lives.

In scope, Inculturation is about the whole person and the whole African culture.

‘For the church, evangelization means bringing the Good New into all strata of humanity, and through .... The church evangelizes when she seeks to convert both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieus which are theirs’ (EV 18, 20).

The whole of the Church’s life should undergo Inculturation. These areas, theology, spirituality, the three-fold ministry of the Word (preaching, evangelization, catechesis), worship/liturgy, organization (leadership structure), arts (architecture, sculpture, paintings, music, vestments, dance, drama) must be subjected to the spirit of Inculturation.

### Challenges to Inculturation

1. The continuous control over local churches by the universal church organs of authority, mostly in the name of unity and orthodoxy, fear of heresy and schism. This could result in local churches fed with what to do pray and believe, which stifles their own expression of belief and prayer.
2. The ‘dependency syndrome’- theologically and financially on Rome and other western countries- that African churches continuously suffer from. For fear of losing these if they step out of line, some bishops and pastors might not undertake some locally inspired initiatives.

### Review

1. ‘When Africans want to get in touch with ancestors, or when they seek promotion in government, children in marriage or success in business, traditional oracles are flooded’
2. The early missionaries who brought the Gospel to Africa did not see the need for an encounter between the Gospel and African cultures.
3. Most of the success of the early missionaries was in the following areas:
  - A Christianity that departed from the people’s situation
  - Accommodation
  - Adaptation
  - Indigenisation
  - Inculturation

4. Inculturation aims at ensuring the authenticity and depth of faith in the African Christian; healing cultural alienation; bridging the gap between life and faith, and thus resolving the instances of 'spiritual schizophrenia' and double life afflicting many people; and at salvaging lost or disappearing spiritual values, giving them the possibility to survive, grow and be elevated and purified in the spirit of the gospel.
5. The challenges of inculturation are:
  - The continuous control over local churches by the universal church organs of authority.
  - The 'dependency syndrome'.

## Reflection

Discuss and review with examples, the best church structure suitable for Africa:

- Parish structure with outstations, parish priest etc
- Small Christian Communities as foundation for ecclesial life in Africa
- Village pastors and Eucharistic communities issues in Africa.

## Relevant Skills

Create a relevant, meaningful and culturally understandable liturgy in the following areas:

- The Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA): Baptism, Confirmation, and the Catechumenate
- Rites of Healing (Reconciliation, Anointing-Sick, Dying; Burial)
- Rites of Vocation: Orders, Marriage, Religious Profession
- The Liturgy of the Eucharist: Inculturated Order of the Mass, Inculturated Eucharistic Prayer
- Periodic Cultural Rites: rites of passage, planting, harvesting, fishing etc.

## References

AMECEA and IMBISA. Communication Culture and Community. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1999.  
Louis Luzbetak. The Church and Cultures New York: Orbis Books, 1991.

