

## **Interculturality and Inculturation of Faith**

Interculturality is of course a vast topic that is particularly relevant to us as religious serving in Canada and abroad. The concept however is hardly of recent vintage: In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' sending of his disciples to the "ends of the earth" set the stage for innumerable intercultural encounters far removed from Christianity's Hellenistic and Palestinian roots.

### **Seeking to "In-Culturate" the Faith**

While western Christianity matured in a European context, the Age of Discovery found missionaries accompanying explorers and their armies to Africa, Asia, and (at least from their perspective) the New World. While priests and religious transplanted somewhat uncritically the spirituality and practices of European Catholicism, there were always voices seeking to adapt the faith to new cultural realities being encountered.

These voices are well known to us: Matteo Ricci in China; Bartolomé de las Casas in New Spain; and Marie de l'Incarnation in New France to name just a few. They sought to "in-culturate" the faith first by translating the Scriptures and prayers into native languages, then by identifying elements in the new culture capable of bridging the gap between Christianity and the spiritual traditions being encountered. The methodology was not far removed from Paul's preaching to the skeptical Athenians at the Areopagus.

Theologians have debated the extent to which the Christian message can be extracted from its cultures of origin and transmission, and then inserted into new and different cultural *milieux*. The rather optimistic approach to enculturation embodied in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Nostrae Aetate* gave way to something more cautious in Pope John Paul II's 1979 post-synodal exhortation *Catechesi tradendi*.

On the one hand the Gospel message cannot be purely and simply isolated from the culture in which it was first inserted [...] nor, without serious loss, from the cultures in which it has already been expressed down the centuries; it does not spring spontaneously from any cultural soil; it has always been transmitted by means of an apostolic dialogue which inevitably becomes part of a certain dialogue of cultures. [*Catechesi tradendae*, 53; see also *Fides et Ratio*, 72]

### **Shifts in the Approaches to Mission Work**

My own religious community, the Basilian Fathers, took up the challenge of mission work in Latin America at two different times with somewhat different approaches. Following the invitation to the Church from Pope John XXIII, our priests began work in an area of Mexico undergoing rapid urbanization. They saw themselves as missionaries and educators in the traditional sense of the term, attempting to move the population from a kind of cultural Catholicism to something more engaged and transformative.

Inspired by the invitation in *Gaudium et Spes* to read the signs of the times, there resulted a significant shift in both the content and methods of evangelization. This bore fruit both in Mexico and a generation later with a new community of Basilians ministering in Colombia. The latter experience was marked by a greater sensitivity to the cultural realities of Latin America in general and a deeper awareness that the local Church was rooted in its own history. There was also a sense of reciprocity: anticipating the teaching of Pope Francis, North Americans discovered that prior to engaging in ministry, they needed first to be evangelized by the local Church.

The rapid inclusion of Colombian vocations in local communities also contributed to an important shift in attitude. The terminology also changed: One no longer spoke of *missionaries* but rather of North Americans and Latin Americans together sharing in a common *mission*.

## **The Asian Experience**

More recent theological reflection on missiology has been significantly impacted by the experience of the Catholic Church in Asia, where for the most part Christianity is a minority religion. In 1995 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger called into question the very notion of inculturation, in part because of the way religion is inextricably related to other elements of culture: "For this reason, we should no longer speak of inculturation but of the meeting of cultures, or interculturality, to coin a new phrase." [Joseph Ratzinger. "Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures" *Origins* 24:41 (March 30, 1995), 681]

So in the process of evangelization, when does (and should) inculturation give way to interculturality? The latter term suggests a greater respect for other religious traditions that in Asia are often as old as Christianity itself. The Asian experience has also seriously called into question the facile western distinction between religion and culture. Finally, Asian Catholic bishops have forcefully argued that in their context, evangelization is always dialogical: "The vision of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) for the Church in Asia is to be in triple dialogue—dialogue with the poor, with cultures and with religions." [Archbishop Orlando Quevedo OMI, Secretary General of the FABC, 2009. Cited in "Dialogue: Interpretive Key for the life of the Church in Asia." FABC Papers, No. 130]

## **Conditions of Intercultural Dialogue**

The "dialogue of cultures" called for by Pope John Paul in *Catechesi tradendae* has given rise to important work by the Pontifical Council for Culture (which he founded in 1982) and the Congregation for Catholic Education. In a recent work by the latter, there is a valuable caution that dialogues should avoid an agenda that either relativizes all religious claims or assimilates one side of the dialogue to the other. In the absence of "metacultural critical judgement," no dialogue is possible.

Intercultural strategies function when they avoid separating individuals into autonomous and impermeable cultural spheres; they rather should promote encounter, dialogue and mutual transformation, so as to allow people to co-exist and deal with possible conflict. [Congregation for Catholic Education: *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools: Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love*. Vatican City 2013. 27]

## **Main Goal**

Finally, interculturality takes on a particular importance in the context of globalization. The explosion of social media coupled with the ever more rapid movement of capital and people across global markets has confirmed Thomas Friedman's basic dictum that the world is flat. Economic disparities between the west and the emerging economies of the third world exacerbate the challenge of proclaiming the Good News, particularly in countries where Christianity has historical associations with European colonialism.

Whether we identify the process as inculturation or interculturality, the goal remains the same: the organic development of a local Church that is truly Catholic and at the same time expressive of a local culture purified and transformed by the Gospel.

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