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Gospel and Culture Encounter in the Life of People

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Introduction

Culture is a design for living, inherited and transmitted by a group. One enters into culture by participating in the life of the community in all its activities, and understanding reality as the community understands it. By entering totally into the culture, one becomes part of the community. Real transformation of community takes place when Gospel values permeate these realities and the culture of the local community becomes more authentic, vibrant and proactive.

Identification with People

The Church of the people becomes effective and relevant when the Church identifies with the people concerned. Thus entering into the life situations of people and being shaped by their cultural patterns, the Church receives life. Identification with the people calls for a change in life-style and challenges the possessions and power of the Church. Such identity with the people reflects their suffering and pain, sorrows and sadness, victories and joyful celebrations of the community. This call demands an option for the poor, an option for their culture, and an option for the little traditions.

An Option for Culture

The Gospels present clearly the predilection of Jesus for the least, the small and lowly—the little mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-32), the poor widow putting two copper coins

in the temple treasury (Lk 21:1-4), the lost sheep (Lk 15:4-7), the children and babes in contrast to the big and powerful (Mt. 11:25-30). His love and compassion for the suffering and the outcasts knows no bounds. His proclamation of the poor as blessed (Lk 6:20), and the statement that the Kingdom of God is promised to the least (Mt. 25:40), are trendsetters of his action in society.

The accompaniment of the *paschal journey* of the poor demands that on embarking on the project of inculturation the Church espouse the perspectives of the culture of the deprived and marginalized. The Church can espouse those perspectives only if it opts for the culture in order not only to understand them, but also to change and transform them. For this process, a dialogue with the poor is an essential condition.

The Gospel community has to pay special attention to the realm of culture. Its religious challenge is addressed primarily and immediately to culture. Until and unless culture is taken seriously no transformation will ever take place. To be the Church is to be with the people like Jesus himself, manifesting the human face of the Divine. This requires that the Church is to be truly incarnate, and rooted among the people, enfleshing itself with the broken and tortured “flesh” of the oppressed and suffering millions. The

liberating mission of the Church implies a deep immersion into the culture of the people. Jesus’ death on the cross was God’s plunging into the brokenness of humanity to heal it from within.

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and it should always be ready to challenge not only the culture of the marginalized, but also the culture of the *élite*. The option for the poor does not negate the rich; it indicates the process of transformation. From the option for the culture of the neglected, the Church should move on to other types of cultures.

Cultures have to be analyzed and their good elements should be retained and energized and the bad elements rooted out. Through good elements, messages of the Gospel have to spread through authentic living in the community, and the inhuman structures, practices, customs and attitudes must be challenged. This challenge to transform cultures demands a love of the cultures and being immersed in them.

Identification with Little Traditions

Culture is not only a question of customs, manners or traditions; it is also a question of the identity of a people, affirmation of their legitimate selfhood deserving attention and respect. Culture also means power. To negate culture is to deny power and a legitimate place for people in society. Recognizing the power of weak persons in society and their aspirations, questions and anxieties and little traditions would make inculturation into an authentic process of liberation in which people become empowered by discovering their identity. Jesus went deeper into the agonies of people of the little traditions, but rose up empowered and transformed.

The mission of the Church is related to the identity of the Church. If the Church is negatively oriented to the cultures, religions and autonomy of the peoples, then its identity is questioned and thus the local Church may not be fully rooted in the soil of the country. This type of mission is easily susceptible to being accused of an anti-national activity, especially in the post-colonial era when nationalism is emerging as a defining element of an authentic Indian identity. (One should not fall into the trap of the fundamentalist's definition of nationalism). The Christian faith can be positively and intrinsically related to all genuine concrete expressions of various cultures, religions and aspirations of our people. "Here, evangelization should follow a reverse order, that is, an

evangelizer should first of all be evangelized by the cultures, religions and peoples to whom he is sent; he should be converted by them, i.e., be enriched by God's presence and grace present in them and become part of them before he starts evangelizing others" (CCBI Seminar, 1999:131).

Opting for little traditions does not mean negating the great traditions. It implies acknowledging the "little people", recognizing the values among the "small people", asserting the identity of neglected and marginalized persons in society. Inculturation also takes into consideration the great traditions and permeates them with the Gospel. An orientation towards transformation in society is sought to build up a just society.

In the process of transformation both dominant and popular cultures will undergo a transformation and a human community will emerge that resembles the divine and is truly the image of God. This community will be based on Gospel values. The Gospel, which evangelizes it, will also have undergone a change by allowing it to be interpreted through the culture of that community.

Insertion into the Mainstream of National Life: Social and Political Spheres

The primary task of the Church is to preach the Good News and to build communities. Mission is to spread the message of Jesus in communities. It calls for establishing relationship among the people and to build just communities. When we build communities, we want to give an experience of freedom, fellowship and justice. This community has socio-economic and political dimensions. At the social level, if the Church has to transmit the message of the Gospels, then it has to encounter the unjust society. The caste structure cannot be ignored with its present hierarchy. The Church confronts this and makes its presence felt in challenging this unjust structure.

In a similar way, the Church permeates society at the economic and political levels. Relevance of the Church leads, to the extent it interacts with these dimensions, towards actualization of the Kingdom of God. Hence the

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Church has to enter into the mainstream of society and become salt, light and leaven in evolving a community, which is just and free.

Church and People's Movement

People's movements emerge from *loksakti* (the power of the people). Grassroots activists play a role in helping people to overcome divisive forces among them, and help them to organize themselves to play a greater role in shaping society. Nothing can have greater liberative potential than when the downtrodden stand together against exploitation. This was clearly proved by Ghandi's effort to unite the peasants of Champaran.

People's movements have a multi-class membership and they are basically non-political, i.e., not organized in terms of party politics, but political in nature showing a concern in organization and distribution of power. These movements are interested in people's total development.

God's action is discerned in people's own history and struggles. Discovery of God in one's own personal or social history is not the end, but only the beginning of the process to understand the depth of people. The Filipino people have discerned God's hand in their revolution that overthrew a dictator and a convict (Marcos and Estrada).

These people's movements deconstruct oppressive and enslaving cultural discourses that justify and mystify unjust socio-economic relations. They also construct new ones, which can provide a perspective for the establishment of an egalitarian society. Thus, the task of people's movements can be regarded as part of the process of inculturation of the Gospel, since Gospel values are already promoted in particular cultures.

The Church should join with people's movements and in the process the Church itself should become a people's movement, a movement that would promote Gospel values within society accepting all the aspirations of people. This calls for radical incarnation of the Gospel values in the Church's own internal forums, structures and institutions.

Being a Counter-Cultural Community

A counter-cultural vision proposes an alternative world-view and system of values. This can be done effectively, not by talking about them, but by living them. The Church could promote the nuclei of counter-cultural communities that give active witness to the values of the Kingdom of God.

To be counter-cultural is to challenge people in the name of a vision of what they ought to become, by embodying that vision. In this sense it will always be critical of the present. It is to be prophetic. The counter-cultural communities should be both "models of" and "models for" the communities of the Reign of God. The option for the power of truth and love is more than a strategic option. It is the only authentic way for a counter-cultural community. Counter-cultural communities can be lived by affirming life and also affirming community life.

Affirm Life

To affirm life is to affirm a life worthy of human persons, who are not machines, but spirit-in-bodies and bodies in spirit. To live humanly means also a life that is not dominated by the urge to consume. To affirm the spirit in the human is to affirm the divine presence in the human, the transcendent, which is immanent.

Affirm Community

Experience of community is lived at various levels—family, group, nation and world. To affirm community is to respect and accept other persons with all their differences of caste or creed, sex, or ethnicity, culture or social status.

Building counter-cultural communities is not opposing other cultures or their genuine life situation. The Church can spell out concrete ways in which people can

build the new global community based on justice, freedom and fellowship. This demands from us an openness to relate and to network, to dialogue and to collaborate. While rooted in the economic and political reality of life,

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we may need to concentrate on the personal, cultural and religious dimensions of the people's movements.

The Church needs to be self-critical so as to avoid encouraging and legitimating factors of globalization and to support alternative movements. The Church itself must avoid giving the image of being a globalizing agent in its own internal life and structures. The eschatological vision of the Kingdom is a global community of freedom, solidarity and justice, and to this vision, we are called to commit ourselves in transforming the local community and at the same time influencing other communities.

Building the Kingdom demands us to work against Satan and Mammon (profit-oriented market, hegemonization of universal culture, dominance of political powers over small nations) rather than against other religions and cultures. It calls for promoting and networking with the prophetic movements in every religion.

When there is Gospel and culture encounter, we need to attend to the transformative dimension of the culture. If the society is unjust with cast discrimination, oppression of women, child marriage, etc., the Gospel would demand a serious and sustained effort at promoting equality and freedom.

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Conclusion

John Paul II envisages in *Ecclesia in Asia*, "a wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia" (EA, n.22). This means that it is not limited to one or other sphere, but must embrace the whole of life. Since the inculturation of the Gospel involves the entire People of God, the role of the laity is very important. They are called categorically to transform society in collaboration with the responsible persons in the Church. They live the values of the Gospel in the mentality, customs, laws and structures of the secular world. "A wider inculturation of the Gospel at every level of society in Asia will depend greatly on the appropriate formation which the local Churches succeed in giving to the laity" (EA, n.22).

A Christian is an interrelated person. His faith is lived in interpersonal relationships and in a community.

The inculturation of a community is a process by which the People of God realistically live their faith in their everyday lives. They know and celebrate freedom in Christ in the midst of darkness and light. Filled with the Spirit, the inculturated Church continues the journey fulfilling the vision of Jesus in the world.

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