

# **Inculturation and the Vincentian Charisma:**

## **An overview**

*Jan W.M. Ermers, C.M.  
Visitor of Ethiopia*

### **Remarks:**

When our General Superior asked me to speak to you about the above subject I gave it a thought and then decided to take up the offer mainly because he used the word "conference". This made me feel better: as Vincent de Paul talked away during his Tuesday conferences, so I will be able to talk to you without being hindered too much by undesired restrictions. I count it therefore a blessing that I heard rather late that publication would take place anyway!

The following is a **reflection** rather than a nicely-polished scientific essay.

The **method** I used was that a first draft of this conference was sent to most of the confreres of my Province, inviting them to freely give their comments and suggestions. Because some of their comments are in a way reflected in the final draft, this presentation is a kind of a communal effort; the responsibility for the end product however is mine.

Because of my 28 years in Ethiopia, Africa, I cannot help having that continent in the forefront of my mind. What I say though is, *mutatis mutandis*, applicable to any continent and any culture in any country.

After an introduction (I) to clarify the terms, I intend to present the following:

- II Teaching on INCULTURATION in the Catholic Church.
- III What do I understand by the term VINCENTIAN CHARISMA.
- IV Where do we end up applying INCULTURATION to VINCENTIAN CHARISMA (including some CRITICAL REMARKS).

### **I Introduction: clarification of terms**

The word "inculturation" starts appearing regularly in official Church documents as from the late seventies, after John Paul II in *Catechesi Tradendae*<sup>1</sup> used it right alongside the word "acculturation". The difference in meaning between the two words however is significant and relevant. I give the following examples to try and make this difference clear.

---

<sup>1</sup>CT no. 53.

1. Louise de Marillac in her "thoughts of the Cross"<sup>2</sup> exclaims: "O Holy cross! O suffering! How amiable you are, since the love of God has given way to you in his Son to gain through you the power to give paradise to those who have lost it by pleasure". By using this kind of language Louise shows that she (how else could she!) was "*acculturated*" to the French way of thinking and writing in the 17th century. That is how people used to talk and write at that time, in that country.

However, by living deeply the spirit of the cross as she did, she showed how "*inculturated*" she was in Christianity. This is how it is always done lest we lose the very core of Christianity i.e. the meaning of the cross in our lives and the suffering for the sake of others.

2. The second example is closer to home and has to do with the interpretation of the work of our confrere Justin de Jacobis in Ethiopia in the 19th century. With all due respect for the last book written about him by Alaazar Abraha, MCCJ,<sup>3</sup> I disagree with the author when he wants us to believe that Justin de Jacobis was already living Vatican II and post-Vatican II teachings on inculturation. Justin de Jacobis did not and could not have. He was an admirable and exemplary man regarding *acculturation, assimilation or adaptation*, because he learned various Ethiopian languages and respected the Ethiopian culture. He adapted to the local conditions: he dressed and ate as the Ethiopians did, he walked in locally made sandals and lived a life touching the sheer impossible. He could do this because his love of Christ was his "driving force", but his "energizing vision" was that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was heretic and should be brought back to Rome, the single and only true Church of Christ. He could not help but think that way because he was a man of his time. He lived the ecclesiology of his time and could not have read what is written now (and which today is only half understood!) about the concept of "Sister-Churches".

*Inculturation* for him would have meant more than adapting the liturgy and make it look like that of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. It would have meant becoming an Ethiopian Orthodox monk and recognizing that the full truth of Christ was already right there: a form of Christianity born, molded and grown up in Ethiopia, a truly inculturated Church, a Church of the people of Ethiopia.

So what do we understand when we talk about inculturation in our context? From a myriad of possible definitions I chose the following:

**Inculturation is "the earthing of the Gospel" or "rooting the faith in local cultures". It is the process by which the people of a certain culture are able to live, express, celebrate, formulate, and communicate their Christian faith and their experience of the Paschal Mystery in terms (linguistic, symbolic, social etc.) that make the most sense and convey life and truth in their social and cultural environment.**

## **II Inculturation in the Church's Teachings**

---

<sup>2</sup>As quoted in *He hears the cry of the poor*: Robert P. Maloney, p.39.

<sup>3</sup>*Saint Justin de Jacobis*, Paulines Publications Africa, 1995. See Ch. V.

How is this encouraged by Roman Catholic Church authorities?

Vatican II gives an opening to the process of inculturation where it says "the seeds of the Word" are already contained in different cultures and different traditions.<sup>4</sup> But very little was done after Vatican II as African theologians complain: "After Vatican II in spite of a growing awareness of inculturation, in practice very little room has been left for the implementation of inculturation. In reality what has been followed is the model of mere adaptation of a few selected African values into the Christian values and mere translation of 'Christian' values into African values. Inculturation both in concept and concrete realization, has been restricted to certain liturgical celebrations and to mere externals in this entire area."<sup>5</sup>

Little might have been done but obviously the thinking kept progressing. We find a whole treatment on the subject with striking and encouraging words in "the Church in Africa",<sup>6</sup> the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, where one of the five main topics dealt with was inculturation.<sup>7</sup>

It is officially acknowledged that Christ is present with any people in any culture. Missionaries do not bring Christ. "There is an echo of the Gospel" in the depths of human experience as Edward Schillebeeckx says. Or as Michael Amaladoss suggests: "every culture is animated by a religion which answers the ultimate questions".<sup>8</sup> The challenge now becomes to Africanize Christianity rather than to Christianize Africa.

Let us listen to what the African Synod has to say:

"The Second Vatican Council, basing itself on the mystery of the Incarnation, demanded that an inculturation of 'the seed which is the Word of God' be undertaken by the young Churches in every major socio-cultural area."<sup>9</sup> And the *Instrumentum Laboris* goes on to say: "The Holy Spirit sows the 'seeds of the Word' and leads human cultures and religions from within towards their full realization in Christ". Quoting John Paul II, the *Lineamenta* of the 1994 African Synod calls for "an active dialogue between faith and culture (that) is necessary on all levels of the proclamation of the Christian message."

In the "Final Message" of the 1994 African Synod we read the following exhilarating words addressed to the African theologians: "Your mission is a great and noble one in the service of inculturation which is the important work site for the development of African theology. You have already begun to propose an African reading of the mystery of Christ. The concepts of Church-as-family, Church-as-brotherhood, are the fruits of your work in contact with the Christian experience of the People of God in Africa".

---

<sup>4</sup>Vatican II, AAS 58.

<sup>5</sup>A.B.T. Byaruhanga-Akiiki, et. Al., in "Cast away fear" in *New People*, March-April, 1994.

<sup>6</sup>*Ecclesia in Africa* (EA), 1995.

<sup>7</sup>EA Ch. III.

<sup>8</sup>IMU Report July-August 1994.

<sup>9</sup>*Lineamenta*.

"The challenge of inculturation is to go beyond the superficial changes in liturgy or symbols to an all-encompassing pastoral inculturation that has African flesh and blood".<sup>10</sup> When the process of inculturation is *all-encompassing* it must also have the inner strength of *enriching* the universal Church in order to claim any authenticity. "The Church in Africa, having become 'a new homeland for Christ,' is now responsible for the evangelization of the continent and the world"<sup>11</sup> and "No particular Church, not even the poorest, can ever be dispensed from the obligation of *sharing* its personnel as well as its spiritual and temporal resources with other particular Churches and the universal Church".<sup>12</sup>

The deepest meaning of inculturation is supported in its validity from an unexpected corner. See what the Pontifical Biblical commission says:

"Missionaries, in fact, cannot help bring God's word in the form in which it has been inculturated in their own country of origin. New local churches have to make every effort to convert this foreign form of biblical inculturation into another form more closely corresponding to the culture of their own land."

and: "There is reason to rejoice in seeing the Bible in the hands of people of lowly condition and of the poor; they can bring to its interpretation and to its actualization a light more penetrating, from the spiritual and existential point of view, than that which comes from a learning that relies upon its own resources alone."<sup>13</sup>

Truly a confirmation of the epistemological privilege of the poor and marginalized, is it not!)

The key words in the process of inculturation are:

### **From within**

not superimposed as used to be the case. The encounter is between the Good News (which is never presented in an abstract way) and the people. It is the people who receive the Good News which leads them to conversion. The people are both the receivers and the agents. To make the Gospel flesh and blood of a people can only be the task of the people themselves and the 'foreigner' has to be cautious, careful and respectful. He is mostly the onlooker in awe, wondering what great things God has done.

(Max Warren puts this very well where he says: "A deep humility, by which we remember that God has not left himself without witness in any nation at any time. When we approach the man of another faith than our own, it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find how God has been speaking to him and what new understandings of grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter. Our first task in approaching another

---

<sup>10</sup>*Towards an African narrative theology*, J. Healy, MM and D. Sybertz, MM, Paulines Publications, 1996.

<sup>11</sup>EA 56.

<sup>12</sup>EA 129.

<sup>13</sup>*The interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Pontifical Biblical Commission, November 1993.

people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival."<sup>14</sup>)

### **On all levels**

so not only liturgy but the whole range of creating, wording, expressing, interpreting and living, once the people are in the 'grip' of the Good News.

Ongoing, because no culture is static anymore or lives in isolation. The continuous 'rubbing of' against each other, provides an ever increasing interdependency and asks for continued change.

### **Enriching**

the result of the Gospel inculturated must be capable of feeding back into and be seen as enriching the Church in its universality.

## **III What do I understand by the term Vincentian Charism**

In his book, "*The Way of Vincent the Paul*", our Superior General offers a brief schema of Vincentian spirituality as taken from our Constitutions of 1984.<sup>15</sup> He puts it like this:

THE VINCENTIAN SPIRIT IS THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST AS SENT TO PREACH THE GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR  
AS EVIDENCED IN THE GOSPEL SAYINGS,  
EXPLAINED IN THE COMMON RULES  
CONCRETIZED PARTICULARLY THROUGH:  
LOVE AND REVERENCE TO THE FATHER  
COMPASSIONATE AND EFFECTIVE LOVE FOR THE POOR  
DOCILITY TO DIVINE PROVIDENCE  
SIMPLICITY, HUMILITY, MEEKNESS, MORTIFICATION, ZEAL FOR SOULS.  
"JESUS CHRIST IS THE RULE OF THE MISSION"  
AND THE CENTER OF ITS LIFE AND ACTIVITY.

The elements in the Vincentian spirituality thus seem to be:

- ***Rootedness in Christ*** as presented in the Gospel.  
His love of the Father made his will conform to that of the Father whose love for mankind is effectively lived by Christ.
- ***Willingness to follow Christ*** by living out His mission according to our common rules.

---

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Healy, op. cit., pp.25-26.

<sup>15</sup>p.14.

1. What is so particular to us, Vincentians, in the above, escapes my mind now as it always has. History makes it clear that as the understanding by Christians of their mission became less clear, certain groups came to life who took it upon themselves to preach the Good News of love and liberation through Christ. They took over the task every Christian promised to fulfill at baptism: to follow Christ and be a missionary.

(The emergence of these groups of "specialists" who claimed a fuller understanding of and commitment to spreading the "*good news*" ensured that *lay* people were "kept in their place" and ruled over (not only spiritually!) by the Church's "elite" members who then began to dictate what had to be done to inherit eternal life.)

This is the reason why the Roman Catholic Church has so many Religious Congregations and Apostolic Societies and this is why the Congregation of the Mission was started by Vincent de Paul, taken over as he was by the scene at Folleville which he describes so powerfully himself.

In short we, Vincentians, exist because Christians did not live as they should have, namely living a life fully dedicated to Christ's message of mercy, love and liberation. There is no way to follow Christ other than the one promised during baptism.

Does the above line of thinking mean that the foundations of our Society are shattered? No, because humankind lives in history and history can not be turned around. We have a place in history and thus we have a place in salvation history as well. All I wanted to do was to put our existence in an historical perspective to prevent us from over-emphasizing our importance and to prepare us for a possible future state of redundancy.

2. Leaving the above consideration for what it is, another question to be raised is what makes us Vincentians so different from other Apostolic Societies which, when closely observed, have the same organizational structure as we have, live the same kind of community life as we do and are, in general, involved in the same kind of work as we are? Consolata Fathers, Comboni Fathers. What kind of spirit makes us different from them? When this same question was posed to the now Superior General many years back when he conducted a retreat for us in Ethiopia, the answer was: "the flavour". Chicken soup made by one cook tastes differently from the chicken soup made by a second cook, yet the substance is the same.

3. I therefore see the substance of our Society as:

**a. Rootedness in Christ, the evangelizer**

**b. Willingness to follow him in his mission of adhering to the will of the Father and in his effective love for the neighbour.**

The 4 vows are the expression of our rootedness and willingness and the 5 virtues (the "smooth stones" of Vincent de Paul) are the way or the mode in which we live our rootedness and willingness.

All this is laced with the flavour of the Vincentian charism: our tradition as expressed in the statutes and common rules. This flavour given in 1625 by Vincent de Paul shifted and

broadened according to the outlook of the following Superiors General and other main interpreters of the now saint, Vincent de Paul.

#### **IV Where do we end up when applying Inculturation to our Vincentian Charisma**

1. As the Roman Catholic Church was created in the West with all its structures, interpretations of the Bible, Canon Law, theology and spirituality, so was our Vincentian Society set up in the West and conditioned by the culture of 17th century France and by the Church of that time.

The Roman Catholic Church thought of itself and made others think that it represented all the aspirations of Christ and went as far as saying *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Its laws, interpretations, theology etc. were readily applicable to wherever the Church was implanted. To be a missionary therefore meant having the physical stamina to stick it out rather than a flexible spirit and mind, because all the missionary needed he had in his bag of knowledge acquired during the time of his formation. The Catholic faith as found in the West was ready for export. No thought was given to the possibility that other Christian Churches even had the right of existence.

By and large this was the thinking until the middle of this century when, mainly through Vatican II, the "horizon-shifts" our Superior General speaks about in his book, "The Way of Vincent de Paul",<sup>16</sup> started to take place. And this in a very moderate way; see the haggling over the term "subsists in..."<sup>17</sup> during the debate on the Church during the Vatican Council II.

So it is no wonder that our Society followed the same pattern and the French had it their way for a long time, as the Westerns still have it their way today. In whatever country the Society started, it did so bringing all the traditions, interpretations and modes of living with it for **implantation** into the new country.

2. I noted that the main characteristics of the inculturation process were:

- **from within**
- **on all levels**
- **ongoing**
- **enriching**

If these characteristics apply to bringing the Gospel to a different culture, then they can and should be applied to bringing the Vincentian spirituality, its tradition and charism outside Western society (and also to different cultures within Western society!).

---

<sup>16</sup>Ch III, part II, pp.90-96.

<sup>17</sup>LG I.

**a. From within.**

"I want to encourage particularly those who are responsible for formation, both initial and ongoing, to use this document as a means for further inculturation of our Vincentian tradition, vows and spirituality within our own local circumstances".

These are the words of our Superior General introducing the newly issued INSTRUCTION on the Vows. Who else can better inculturate the Vincentian tradition into the local circumstances than those who know the "circumstances", meaning, the culture, best. In Africa these are the African Vincentians, in Ethiopia these are the Ethiopian Vincentians, in the Oromo culture these are the Oromo Vincentians. We outsiders can encourage and for the rest stand in awe waiting for the outcome of a "creative dialogue" which over time will evolve.

Here I would like to make a remark about the Instruction's commission:

If the composition of the commission compiling the "Instruction" had been more representative, then perhaps we may have found in it already some hints of how the vows could be more inculturated (contextualized) into an African or Asian context and "the hermeneutical hegemony of the First World academic elites" could have already started to be broken down.

**b. At all levels.**

It is not only the spirituality which will be reshaped according to the "local circumstances", but the whole range of Constitutions, Statutes, common rules, vows, formation, both initial and ongoing, missionary approach, the works we are involved in, etc. All will have to be scrutinized against the light of the prevailing culture.

Let me insert here some critical notes:

**\* *On vows:***

***Poverty:***

Addressing our 37th General Assembly in 1986 John Paul II asked us to "search out more than ever, with boldness, humility and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short- and long-term solutions."

Where are we Vincentians in the world of lobbying for the poor? Being charitable is good, setting up projects to empower certain marginalized groups is better, but where are we Vincentians, the advocates of the poor, when it comes to fighting the inhuman structures governing the world? Where are we in standing up against the trends of liberalization in western countries. Le Pen is everywhere and those millions of people who have made Holland, Germany, France and Italy "heavens" of economic prosperity are threatened now and accused of living off the backs of the "real" people of these countries. Is there any Vincentian involved in motivating groups, influencing politicians and unnerving the threat of the 'skin heads' even if these wear suits and ties? Where are we non-western Vincentians

when it comes to letting our voices be heard in our countries where politics is used to siphon off funds at the expense of the poor, and where political and economical corruption is rampant?

### ***Celibacy:***

How can we demand from a 25 year-old African boy that he take a vow of celibacy and be a celibate priest for the rest of his life? Who of us is willing to throw the first stone when it comes to living out the letter of the vow of chastity, let alone the spirit? Is it fair to ask our students to take on something they cannot live out as presented? The air in Africa is swollen with a spirit of fertility and fecundity, procreation is inbred in the African nature and the actual state of very many African priests (and bishops) in this respect cries for a change in official policy. This is not to say that they are not able to live up to the ideal but it is to say that the ideal is only an ideal. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is". Who of God's people is able to live this ideal? Why then place so much emphasis on the celibacy ideal? When we examine our daily faults against the spirit and letter of poverty, nobody cares, but as soon as somebody sins against celibacy all hell breaks loose and we speak about "a public scandal". Are we not a bit too hypocritical here? Let us lift our heads out of the sand and see. After seeing, discern and after discerning, act.

(What could be some of the possibilities:

- leave it to the particular student and his mentors to decide when to take vows and when to be ordained: an individual grace period.
- To adopt the system of the Jesuits, i.e. take the vows after a tertianship which can take place many years after ordination.
- Start working at higher levels within Africa and Rome so that at least a married priesthood will come about in countries with an Eastern Church tradition where we find a married priesthood alongside the unmarried monk/priests.)

### ***\* On Formation:***

Our African students are brainwashed for years on end with philosophy and theology taken from the shelves of Europe. By this their authentic thinking and "theological selfhood" (John Mbiti) is replaced by a standardized form which is strange to them, corrupts their (African) mind, discourages flirting with their more orally orientated theologizing and sets them on the path of continuing the Western tradition still seen as superior.

#### *How can this circle be broken?*

By a more creative and reflection demanding schedule for the formation to the priesthood. By daring to ordain people rooted in their culture and rooted in Christ even without any theology or philosophy Western style. If we really believe in "the seeds of the Word", let these men (and women) develop an oral theology which speaks to people, which resonates with something "from within", which rings familiar (belonging to the family). And if systematization is needed for the sake of textbooks, let it crystallize gradually so as to let it gain in authenticity. Does the Church really believe in the "seeds of the Word"? "African

oral theology is a living reality. We must come to terms with it. We must acknowledge its role in the total life of the Church. It is the most articulate expression of theological creativity in Africa. This form of theology gives the Church a certain measure of theological selfhood and independence."<sup>18</sup> (Why then be so fearful and why not let go? If Christianity means anything, it means freedom from fear of any kind. It means real liberation because we know that the path we are going is paved by the 'seeds of the Word' who goes in front of us, even when not recognized, and makes us as free as a bird.

Why then do we hold on to fossils and choking remnants of a western past in our formation when all the freedom in the world is given to experiment and come up with something alive, fresh and fertile? Again fear plays a role, "the fear of difference",<sup>19</sup> the fear of becoming "ex-communicated", being put outside the communion with "the rest", uncertainty plays a role. But also the people in charge of our seminaries work according to their views and insights which are again limited and western, even when the teachers are not from western origin. How many of our teachers do not have a degree from some university in Rome?) When do we stop sending our confreres to western centers of learning and dare to rely on our own resources in Africa or Asia. When do our confreres and students stop looking up to the powerful West and see this as an ideal, as the only true, liberating and empowering saviour.

A moratorium on sending students to Western institutions of learning is in place and I plead with this group in front of me to come up with a resolution to this effect.

It is also useful here to consider setting up Centers of Vincentian Formation closer to home, in Africa, Latin America and Asia to stimulate Vincentian local thinking and thus help the process of inculturation.

**\* *On Missions for target groups***

- At present international groups for missions in new territories are created and sent on mission. This is an extremely difficult undertaking in view of what is said about inculturation. The composition and flexibility of the groups needs careful attention and not everybody presenting himself in his generosity to the Superior General is fit to go. Vincent de Paul could send his men to Madagascar, Poland and Ireland because there was only one package of teaching. We cannot do this anymore in our time because the package to teach is to be made up carefully along the line of activities, and requires careful listening and great humility.

- Fr. Donald Dorr argues that "work at the frontiers of the Church" means moving out of the familiar world where the Church is at home and moving into different "worlds" surrounding us.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup>J. Mbiti in *Cattle Are Born With Ears, Their Horns Grow Later*.

<sup>19</sup>John Paul II in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on its 50th birthday.

<sup>20</sup>IMU Report, January-February 1994.

To my mind more attention could be paid to target groups which also have their own very specific cultural environment, even when this entails abandoning some of the respectable works we are engaged in.

To mention only a few of those marginalized and other cultural groups screaming for the help of enlightened Vincentians:

- Refugees/displaced
- Blacks in inner cities
- Child prostitution
- Drugs addicts etc.
- Gender issues
- HIV/AIDS patients and support groups
- Environmental groups
- Pro-life groups
- Unemployed people
- Homosexuals and lesbians
- Anti land mine campaigns

c. **Ongoing.** When this process of inculturating is on its way, the temptation to crystallize the gains and put them on paper will be hard to resist. We human beings need rules and regulations in whatever society we live in. It is however of utter importance to keep the flexibility and leniency alive because not only do the circumstances differ from culture to culture and from time to time, but also from person to person. Each person has his/her own "circumstances", to be respected within the boundaries of certain rules and regulations.

d. **Enriching.** No culture, however it differs from others, stands on its own, but is influenced at least by its neighbouring culture. In our time there are not many cultures left without TV, radio or newspaper of some sort. The world of the media is very invading and very persuasive. It is imperative that the gains of an inculturated Vincentian tradition have the power to feedback into the existing stream and that the total of the Vincentian community feels all the richer by it.

## Conclusion

I am aware that we are not living on an island and that in the chain of Church institutions we are allowed to change only at a pace which suits the slowest.

I am also aware that any change is painful and needs time. Treading on the heels of Providence was not encouraged by Vincent de Paul. But this should not prevent us from going ahead with wisdom and the "sweat of our brows".

Would it be useful to have a group of people with vision on each continent who would follow and stimulate the process on inculturation on that continent?

My last question is: where do we end up and where could this process of inculturation lead us, Vincentians? The answer is:

As long as we remain rooted in Christ, follow his Spirit in his Mission, and trust in Him we will be flexible enough and be able to reach out for a long time to embrace all sorts of inculturated Vincentian traditions and recognize them as part of our own. Important in the process is that we constantly keep reminding ourselves of our own limitations and clay-footedness.