

Inculturation of the vincentian charism: community in the Congregation of the Mission

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For some years now, religious congregations and societies of apostolic life, like our own, seriously ask themselves what it really means to be an international community. Among the chief challenges that have led them to this questioning are:

First of all, the consciousness arising in many parts of the world about one's cultural identity has motivated some religious communities to ask serious questions about the oppression and domination that some groups experience within the congregation because of differences of race (racism), class (classism), culture (hegemony), age (antiquity), physio-mental capacity (competence), religion..., etc.

Secondly, many of these communities, with historical roots in the First World and the majority of their members there, are receiving the major part of their vocations from the Third World. This phenomenon is new internationally and needs to be faced in a gospel spirit and intelligently.

Thirdly, criticism grows sharper of the self-sufficiency of Western Christian culture, of the Church, of religious congregations and naturally, though on a lesser scale, of missionaries.

All of this has led to the conclusion that international character does not signify simply physical presence inside religious communities and the different nations of the world. What is needed is the "internality of 'inter-culturality'"* and the "externality of inculturation** in order to respond to the challenges we have noted.

The letter to the confreres of our 37th General Assembly, Rome, July 25th, 1992, said, among other things, about renewed communities, the following: "The diversity of situations which our communities live, the international character of some of them, especially in the Foreign Missions, the variety of our missionary activities, and adding in differences in age, formation and mentality, clearly constitutes a richness, but brings with it dispersion and isolation." It is urgent that we seek, therefore, as other congregations must, responses on the personal level, on that of the local communities and consequently, on the level of the whole Congregation, to make possible "inter-culturality" and inculturation.

**"inter-culturality": the process of reciprocal influence between/among two or more cultures.*

***inculturation: an evangelization process by which the gospel message is gradually inserted in a culture and the gospel becomes more and more lived within the characteristics of that culture.*

I. The personal level

On this level, I see three requirements as fundamental to achieve an international community both inter-culturated and incultured.

1. *Discovery*

I must try to know the internal and external world around me and accept it as greater than my own world. I ought to be open to new discoveries, it is worth saying, to new forms of self-expression, new ways of doing things, of seeing and interpreting the surrounding reality. A true discovery ought never to be a compensation to hide my own imperfections. A spirit of discovery will be strengthened as I grow in the ability for this interchange and as I adapt myself to the world around me. This process never ends, that is, discovery and reaction, I grow by necessity and later I discover new aspects to that reality. If I refuse or am unable to adapt myself, then the discovery process is interrupted and life becomes static.

2. *Detachment*

So that this process be concrete and true, a "letting go" and a "taking on" are needed. On certain occasions I should let go of things to gain the freedom to acquire other things more valuable and important for my life as missionary and minister than those things I believe necessary and whose value perhaps I have never questioned. To let go and to acquire are part of healthy human growth. Detachment refers to priorities between equally valid realities. I establish priorities according to what will better my life and my ministry, taking into account the context of my commitment.

3. *Dying to self*

The process of "inter-culturality" and inculturation places me in the truth and the experience of the Paschal Mystery. There will be death in accepting the responsibility of internationality, "inter-culturality" and inculturation. To avoid death, to escape the cross, becomes an expression of egocentricity, of stubbornness in wishing to walk alone, which is nothing but pride. The challenge is to believe and live "If the grain of wheat does not fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). It is then that there is resurrection.

II. On the local community level

I consider that there are three requisites for an inter-culturated and incultured local community.

1. *Internality in cultural diversity: "inter-culturality".*

Today more than ever we begin to find in the Congregation multi-cultural and multi-national local communities. Cultural diversity here can never be a non-transcendental fact. As long as it is not given importance, it can generate confusion and ambiguity. Dialog becomes necessary for clear communication and healthy personal interchange. The challenge is really to accept the rich differences existing in a local community. But it is possible that unexamined differences degenerate into divisions and then we lose time erroneously interpreting conduct or expressions or attributing motives that have nothing to do with the real intention of the person. The challenge is that community members be open to share mutually their feelings, to trust, to listen and to understand on different levels. Otherwise our efforts to live diversity will be merely varnish and we will not have a truly "inter-culturated" community life.

2. *To appropriate the external culture: inculturation.*

We must not remain isolated from the cultural context in which we live and work as if it were not worth being taken into account. Our presence among the people ought to lead us not only to insertion and a preferential option for the poor, but also to take on that treasure most intimate and profound flowing in the soul of the people: the culture, legacy of the influence of different identities which over thousands of years have occupied our continental geography.

Thanks to the work of anthropologists of non-Western societies, we have come to know that culture is not a simple refinement added to my being, nor an inheritance of traditions at the same time valuable and impenetrable, but fundamentally a "pattern of life", fruit of the historical constructions and deconstructions of a particular group.

If culture is basically a "life pattern", the stage on which to study it is not the academic, the museum or the cultural page of the paper, but the daily life of the people. Everyday life refers back then to the basic relationships of each of us: relation with nature, with others (society), with one's self and finally with the task of meaning. Everyday life, in referring us to relationships, speaks to us also of the worlds of affect and value: of tenderness, of likes and dislikes, of sadness and joy. It is also the place of specifying what are accepted as values.

The daily life of the people, therefore, inter-subjective experience, also arranges its "spaces", its rituals and even its institutions. There are privileged spaces like family, work, neighborhood, market. There are rituals of daily life: food, travel, purchases of the day or of the week... etc.

Inculturation situates us dynamically towards the inside of culture. It is distinguishable, therefore, from acculturation (which comes from a loss of cultural identity), from inter-culturality (which refers to relations established between cultures) and insertion itself (the process identifying us with the poor). This last is a condition for inculturation but it does not end there. Once inserted in the culture, the gospel must be incultured, that is, a re-reading must be done of the faith experience within the socio-cultural characteristics of a

particular group so that God's word can convert itself into a message pertinent for that group.

To take on another culture, therefore, is a task involving many aspects of our life. Two areas especially help us with this task: language and cosmovision. Inculturation requires on the one hand learning the language of the people, verbal and symbolic language; on the other, to know its cosmovision: the mentality or meaning not only of words but also of conduct, of gesture and also of perspectives.

Local communities must go farther than simple cultural adaptation. The challenge is to seek true inculturation, and not only to tolerate the cultural practices of a people or to continue to import our own practices, which definitely does not require great effort. To assimilate another culture is not a simple task. It implies knowing and loving it, but also challenging it, since we are sent as pastors and prophets inside that culture. In this respect I cite an Hispanic-Peruvian theologian:

"Inculturation is popular, certainly. But a whole revolution of thought exists, a metanoia. Every effort to change the forms, language, eating habits, housing styles, etc., if not the fruit of a deep contemplative attitude towards what God asks of me beyond the appearance of each concrete reality, gradually becomes mere folklorism. Frequently we find candidates, novices and young professed who have been yanked by the roots through the influence of urban spirituality, and who attempt too late to return to live artificially that which was natural to them and which their families continue to live. And so one deformation is added to another" (Joaquin Garcia, "The Local Religious Community, Source of Renovation" in the Bulletin of CPR, 1, 1996, pg. 2).

There are congregations, ours as well?, present in a place for more than a century, in which not even the least contact or influence of the social atmosphere felt, depriving the local community of the infinite riches which the Lord has placed in different people who have been making their history there for millennia. This could be one explanation for the diminishment of vocations, since indirectly we only accept those who do not provoke (in us) too much anxiety and who are docile to our styles and norms.

If we are born in one context by initiative of our ancestors, in that context we are renewed in the Spirit and we return to give to our congregations and to the Church the varied and multi-colored character of our deepest spiritual experience.

"Our theologies, also writes Joaquin Garcia, are centralized, norms flow from the nucleus of hierarchal systems, and to the last we feel responsible for adapting them to our specific conditions. But this is not the way and the sense of what the Santo Domingo document says about inculturating the Gospel. It is not about a disjunctive but of a balance of focus of change in the direction of a process working inversely up from below, from the periphery to the center. The most extraordinary richness for maintaining identity amid myriad possibilities from inspired spiritualities to human

culture spiritualities with an open ecumenical character. The letter (uniformity) kills; the spirit (diversity) enlivens. Including when diversity can make other juridical forms emerge equally inspired, producing often heartbreaking growth crises. Why think we are the only ones, that we are eternal, like the Church, and not accept that there are forms of consecrated life (of local community life) unimaginably new as yet unknown? (Ibid. Pg. 3).

This thinking leads us to the need to decentralize our spiritual reflection and be capable of formulating permanently from our practice, from the culture in which we live, from the people we listen to, proposals for life which can be shared openly with those of other places and circumstances.

3. *Loving the people*

Whatever the task a community is to accomplish when it lives and works in a particular cultural context, the top priority is to love the people. Without love true inculturation is impossible, a prophetic proclamation of the Gospel is impossible, continuing the mission of Jesus is impossible. The challenge is to embrace the people as a medium of our salvation and not an object of our ministry; to build community among the people and with the people, conscious that among the people are the seeds of the Word.

4. *Expressing identity and charism*

The community must be clear concerning its identity and charism. It ought to express them and invite others to follow the Lord through them. It ought also to be able to identify the gifts which it brings to the culture and how the culture helps these to grow, even when it questions and challenges certain aspects of this same culture. This supposes that the community is sufficiently updated in knowledge and comprehension of its identity and charism.

III. Some theological-spiritual advances

Our missionary vocation is also a vocation for the life of the Community, but Vincentian community is for the mission. Such was the original intuition of St. Vincent: "Our little company has been instituted to go village to village" (Coste I, 550-562). Fraternal communion can and ought to be, therefore, a source of energy for the mission among diverse peoples and cultures (cf. Lines of Action for the Congregation of the Mission 1986-1992, pg. 8).

We must en flesh the Gospel in each of the cultures of our peoples in inseparable unity with the option for the poor, because we follow Jesus, Evangelizer of the Poor who assumed all the human in the culture of the people, accomplishing the liberating mission that the Father entrusted him. He is our inspiration, strength and way. The experience of

following him in history ought always to be the motivation of the being and doing of each community.

The gracious and merciful God is revealed to us with the face of each culture. It is God who is inculturated and is manifest above all in the excluded, the "gentiles". This God is manifest in the Son enfleshed who invites us to follow him in poverty and weakness, in kenosis and cross, with the joy and the hope of the resurrection, alive in our people.

Let us be captured by the Spirit in the newness of God's life in the spirituality of each culture. Let us contemplate God already present there. Let us know the patience of God to walk the way of the people, which calls for wisdom and evangelical patience, openness, humble respect and freedom of spirit. The Word of God and prayer, shared daily, will reveal to us a new spiritual path in cultures which will enliven the spirituality of our Vincentian charism.