

Religious Life and Cultural Challenges

by Antônio Aparecido da Silva, fdp¹

Introduction

There is a general consensus about the importance and the relevance of certain themes. Among some of the principal themes we could list the question of globalization, the urgency of ethics, religious pluralism and the autonomy of culture. With regard to this matter, the theologian Jacques Dupuis notes that *there is a new situation that perhaps we are not as aware of as we should be; namely, that there exists in the world not only a pluralism of human cultures and religious traditions but also that each one of these cultures and traditions has certain rights.*²

These questions of culture and their manifestations have concerned not only the world as a whole, but also particular religious groups. In the Catholic Church, for example, the constant reflections on the theme of inculturation reveal the concern and interest concerning the question of culture and its religious manifestations. The same concern is also shared by Congregations and Institutes of Religious Life.

Today religious life finds itself in a process that presents a dual concern. On the one hand, religious life feels the inevitable need to be open to women and men candidates who seek religious life but come from different cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, this diversified presence, that is viewed with satisfaction and a hope for vitality for the religious institutes, brings with it new demands that are reflected especially in the area of formation.

In order to respond to the challenges that emerge from this new reality, religious life, in its distinct moments, is preparing and looking for ways that will help it to overcome these problems. Some conferences and numerous congregations have provided courses that were mindful of the orientation of the formators, that is, in the sense of how to work with this new group of candidates from various cultures who are entering religious life.

¹ Antônio Aparecido da Silva, fdp, is a priest and religious (a member of the Sons of Providence). He is a member of the theology faculty in San Paulo, Brazil and Director of the Atabaque Center: Cultura Negra y Teologia.

² JACQUES DUPUIS, "El diálogo Interreligioso en Epoca de Pluralismo," in *Selecciones de Teologia*, nº 153 / vol. 39-2000.

1. Religious Life and the Challenges that Arise from Culture

The problem between Church and culture and, consequently, the problem between culture and religious life is not something new. We are mindful of the observation of Pope Paul VI concerning this question when he referred to this problem in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, stating that: *the split between the gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times.*³

Perhaps more than a confrontation between the Church or religious life and culture, the problem is rooted in the fact that both of these realities have been historically connected with Western culture. The consequences of this bond become apparent in every place and on every continent where the actions of the Church and religious life are proposed from a Western perspective resulting in a very distinct way of life. This was noted by the bishops present in the Latin American Episcopal Assembly in Santo Domingo: *Although Latin America and the Caribbean are multicultural, they are deeply marked by Western culture, whose memory, consciousness and aspirations are even present in our prevailing common way of life.*⁴

Cultures are truly open to the gospel. *Culture means cultivating and expressing the full range of the human person in a loving relationship with nature and the community dimension of peoples. When, through the Incarnation, Jesus assumes and expresses everything human except sin, the Word of God enters into culture... Jesus Christ took flesh in his people's culture and therefore brings to each historical culture the gift of purification and fullness. All the central values and expressions that can be oriented to Christ foster what is genuinely human.*⁵ The action of God, through his Spirit, is forever given to the interior elements of all cultures.

1.1. The Emergence of New Cultural Subjects

In recent times, culture has reappeared with fundamental values of reference. This is a curious fact because, at a time when globalization forces a cultural homogenization, in all parts of the world, individuals and groups seek to recover their own identity in light of their culture. Perhaps this is an explicit form of resistance to the equalizing element of globalization. Castells notes that *during the last quarter century we have witnessed the advance of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenges globalization and*

³ PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20.

⁴ Fourth General Council of Latin American Bishops, Conclusions, 252.

⁵ Fourth General Council of Latin American Bishops, Conclusions, 228.

*cosmopolitanism in function of cultural singularity and control of persons over their own lives and environment.*⁶

On the American continent as a whole, this century, which has just been concluded, but especially the decade of the 1960s, has been marked by a recovery of cultural values, especially among blacks and indigenous people. Culture, though often fragmented by the process of colonization, is the primary reference point for the construction of black and indigenous identity. In these cases, the category of identity does not simply indicate a function or a role but rather *a process of construction of meaning that is based on a cultural attribute or, even more, based on a group of attributes that are interrelated and which prevail over other sources of meaning.*⁷

It is important to distinguish between two levels of cultural recovery. The first level, we might say, occurs in societies that are culturally homogenous. In these cases the cultural point of reference is the homogenous reality that configures the State-Nation. Today it becomes more difficult to find societies that are totally homogenous. What occurs frequently is that the dominant culture that is identified with the State or country impedes the emergence of other cultural expressions (minorities) and this includes the denial of their existence and their right to exist.

At the same time minority cultures, because they are unable to bond together or react because of a lack of objective conditions, end up accepting the official discourse of the only culture, that is, the culture of the State-Nation. This practice becomes law and is undertaken with great nationalistic pride. In America, a classical example of what we are speaking about occurs in Argentina where, despite the presence of more than a million non-Europeans, people insist on speaking about one people and one culture.

The second level of cultural recovery occurs in situations marked by cultural pluralism and asymmetrical relationships. With few exceptions this is the case of our America as a whole: *Latin America and the Caribbean constitute a multiethnic and a multicultural continent on which indigenous, African American, and multi-racial peoples and those descending from Europeans and Asians live together. Each has its own culture, which provides it with its own social identity in accord with each people's world vision, but they seek unity on the basis of their Christian identity.*⁸

⁶ MANUEL CASTELLS, *O poder da Identidades*, Paz e Terra, San Paulo 2000, p. 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁸ Fourth General Council of Latin American Bishops, Conclusions, 244.

Therefore, on the second level, cultural recovery appears to be an awareness of one's own identity. It is a process marked by tension because not only are we dealing with the irruption of oppressed cultures, but also with the emerging social actors who arise from these cultures. These actors are being seen and designated as "new cultural subjects." Even though this term might not be totally appropriate, since they are not always "new," nevertheless they have helped to accentuate this new phase of awareness that arises from the oppressed cultures.

In America as a whole and, more particularly in Latin America and in the Caribbean, this new consciousness, that is expressed by new practices and that places new demands on the civil and ecclesial levels, has been in process since the decade of the 1960s, which saw the resurgence of popular movements. The black movement and indigenous organizations reorganized themselves and more and more the new cultural subjects, blacks and indigenous women and men, became present on the national, regional and continental stages.

2. The Openness of Religious Life to Black and Indian Men and Women

The difficulties of religious life and the Church in relation to non-Western and non-European cultures bring with them characteristics from the past. It was primarily with the Second Vatican Council that religious life and ecclesiastical structures began to open themselves to blacks and indigenous peoples. The few people who previously were able to overcome the barriers could be considered exceptions and, in those cases, very often had to submit themselves to a different treatment, as though there were two categories among the members of some institutes, where some were considered "choir members" and others "lay members." This meant that those who were white were destined to become teachers while those who were black were destined to perform servile work.

At the beginning of the 1960s, rather recently as can be seen, in many countries and regions, religious life and certain sectors of the Church discussed whether or not they should receive black and indigenous men and women. For example, this was the case with the Religious Conference in Brazil that held an assembly in 1960 to discuss with the major superiors if they should receive black men and women into the religious life.⁹ With the advent of the Council the impediments began to be withdrawn and a gradual openness can be verified.

⁹ Cf. ANTÔNIO APARECIDO DA SILVA, *Comunidade negra: Interpelações à la VR*, CRB, Rio de Janeiro, 1988.

2.1. Reasons for the Openness

It would have been good if the openness of the Church and religious life to Black and indigenous women and men was a natural result of the evangelical practice that was in vogue among both groups. But this was not what occurred. It was a gradual process, filled with innuendos, hints, suggestions, and implications, whose difficulties even today have not been completely overcome. Among others, I would like to call attention to three reasons that led to this openness.

The first reason is due to the action of the Black Movement in civil society, a movement that became strong during the second half of the 20th century. This action resulted in the promulgation of laws that legally penalized the practice of racial discrimination. For this reason, many congregations and orders, as well as diocesan seminaries that had directories that formerly prohibited entrance to blacks and indigenous candidates had to modify, under penalty of the law, these directories. They were unable to continue the practice of discriminatory acts with the same insensitivity.

The second reason can be attributed to the new air that the Church and her institutions began to breathe as a result of the convocation of the Second Vatican Council. Nevertheless, after the Council, there was a general break-up of religious life and also of the ministerial priesthood. As a result there began a period when the Church experienced a lack of vocations and this fact, in a certain way, led to the new openness.

The third reason is related to the new options that the Church and religious life made with regard to the evangelization of our continent, options that began with the Episcopal Assembly in Medellín. The option for the poor that was made with the popular sectors of society was seen not only as the primary place for the Church's pastoral action but also as an area for vocational recruitment. Vocations arose among the popular classes and, therefore, black and indigenous men and women were attracted.

3. Difficulties and Solutions

The number of Black and indigenous vocations are increasing and, at the same time that amends are being made for the past, we begin to see a new vitality in religious life. Pope John Paul II has been vocal about this increase of vocations from all cultures. In Santo Domingo he emphasized that it is necessary *to make efforts to encourage vocations to arise out of all the cultures present in our local church*.¹⁰ In his message directed to Afro-Americans on the occasion

¹⁰ Fourth General Council of Latin American Bishops, Conclusions, 80.

of the same assembly in Santo Domingo, he expressed this idea in the following words: *I ask God that your Christian communities may give rise to many vocations to the priesthood and the religious life so that the African-Americans of the Continent may be able to rely on ministers from their own culture.*¹¹ Speaking to the Indians he expressed the same desire: *What a great joy it will be to see the day when your communities can be served by missionaries, priests and bishops who come from your own families and can guide you in adoring God.*¹²

Today, in response to and in harmony with the appeal of the Holy Father, thanks to God, various religious congregations and diocesan seminaries have among their members a variety of cultures from distinct origins. This is a motive for great satisfaction. Nevertheless problems have occurred that can be considered normal within these circumstances but they also demand a profound analysis and some decision.

Difficulties that in other times were limited to the access to religious life are accentuated in three characteristic moments of the formation process of the institutes, that is, vocational promotion and acceptance of candidates, initial formation, and ongoing formation.

3.1. Vocational Promotion and Acceptance of Candidates

The problems that occur during this phase are in some way related to the ancient practice of barriers that impeded access to religious life and the seminary. There are Institutes that have promoted vocations only in areas where the inhabitants are of European descent or where the culture is homogenous. These Institutes do not trust the popular groups or the fact that “good” vocations can arise from the Black and indigenous population.

Vocations arise from a religious environment and this type of atmosphere is often found in Black families. It is necessary, however, that these young men and women have models whom they can look up to and who attract them to religious life and the priesthood. Boys and girls, who do not see black and indigenous religious women and priests, do not believe that they themselves are able one day to become priests or religious. It is necessary to have models whom they can see and who can affirm them.

Many times the difficulties in this phase of promotion and acceptance arise from the fact that candidates feel encouraged to enter religious life as a result of the contact that they have had with

¹¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Message to African-Americans*, 12 October 1992, 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

a particular man or woman religious and think that the whole Institute acts in the same way. When they enter the Institute they realize that the majority of the members feel differently. At times, the person who was known by the candidate and whose actions encouraged the individual to enter the Institute is, in fact, someone who is persecuted and viewed as on the margins of the same Institute.

Frequently there have been cases of “deceitful propaganda.” Vocational promotion presents expectations that, in fact, it does not have. Today there is much talk about the actualization of the charism of the founder when, in practice, religious life often presents itself as excessively institutionalized and unattractive. Only then does the candidate realize that he/she has been the victim of “deceitful propaganda” and that deception has occurred.

A number of times the problem arises because of the inadequacy of the environment. The candidate is withdrawn from his/her popular environment and is transported to a middle class situation where each religious lives his/her reality in an individualistic way without any community witness or commitment. The community has become a true religious boarding house. In these cases, the experiences and relationships of the candidates before entering religious life will be of help to them.

3.2. Initial Formation

It is in the formation process as a whole, but especially during the period of initial formation, that problems, in general and also those problems that revolve around cultural pluralism, arise with greater intensity. Frequently the formators are not prepared for this new and challenging reality. In their preparation to undertake their role, the formators were sent to Europe to drink from the fountain of the charism and fill themselves with the spirituality and the customs of the institute but they were in no way formed and at times the formators lack even the minimum information about the culture of the candidates they are forming.

3.2.1. Adapted Formation

From the perspective of formation and culture there are three situations that must be considered. The first situation occurs in cultural environments that are in proximity to the European matrix. This is the case, for example, of those environments where multi-culturalism predominates. In this situation one must try to provide a formation that is adapted to the candidates and their culture.

3.2.2. Inculturated Formation from an Indigenous and Black Perspective

The second situation occurs in environments that are predominately African or Indian. In these cases simple adaptation is not enough but rather an inculturated formation is necessary. This implies that the formators have knowledge of the fundamental elements of the African and Indian cultures. The lack of this knowledge has increased tension in houses of formation and provoked the departure of good candidates. More than ever it is necessary that formators be convinced of the fact that the candidates participate in the formation process.

It is necessary that the formation process contemplate the needs of the candidates especially in regards to cultural presuppositions. More than ever before it is necessary that the candidates be viewed as subjects in the formation process. The formation program ought to help an inculturated formation. For example, it is important that the candidates maintain contact with African groups and therefore it is very appropriate for them to become involved in pastoral ministry toward Africans and indigenous people.

This applies not only to those candidates who are aware of their cultural values, but more especially to those who do not have this awareness. Candidates who do not wrestle with the question of their African or indigenous ethnic-cultural identity will be problematic religious later on. They will be religious who carry with them inferiority complexes and, in general, will manifest an exaggerated sensitivity that will see everything with racial overtones. Therefore, in these cases it is necessary that the formators help the candidates to discover and assume their proper identity.

An inculturated formation motivates the candidates to express their cultural values through liturgy and other moments of community life. It is necessary to allow the candidates to have an experience of the common charism of the founders without setting aside their own cultural values. This will enable them to enrich the charism from their own experience. Many problems in formation occur because of a lack of sensitivity to important particular elements of culture. At times the formators themselves have problems with their identity, because they have not assumed their identity.

3.2.3. Inculturated Formation from the Perspective of Pluralism

The third situation occurs in those formation environments where there is no predominance of one culture but a true diversity of cultures: popular, African, indigenous and others. In these cases an

inculturated formation process is also necessary. Sensitivity to the distinct cultures of the particular candidates is very important.

In the first place we must realize that just as in the past formation in the tradition of religious life was marked by discipline and uniformity of action, so now creativity and awareness of the cultural differences are necessary in an inculturated formation in multi-cultural environments. At times in the same community a *no* spoken to one candidate has different connotations from the same *no* that is said to another candidate. The reactions reveal different cultures. The inattentive formator is tempted to treat everyone the same when, in reality, the candidates are quite different.

Experiences in the houses of formation, where there exist a diversity of cultures, show that the charism of the institute has a certain bonding function. It is in this environment that the individuals, though they maintain their differences, will find a common point of connection. An inculturated formation is a path with a double meaning; that is, it concerns the formation that is directed toward the candidates, but also involves their formation in the charism and the culture of the tradition that gives shape to the institute as a whole. It can be said that the charism forms a certain culture, that is, a certain way of being and acting that includes one's own identity. A Jesuit is different from a Franciscan and both are equally distinct from Dominicans. The charism makes them different even though they have before them the same ideals of religious life. Therefore, it is necessary that the candidates be open to and willing to assume this tradition; that is, to be aware of the fact that the institute is not now beginning with them but rather has a history in which they are now participating and has a mission that they must carry on.

3.3. Ongoing Formation

The three moments of the formation process in religious life, even though distinct, are closely related and their boundaries are at times confused, especially when dealing with the question of initial formation and ongoing formation. During the process of formation, and through experiences of insertion or of a committed community life, the candidates must find ways to express their solidarity. They must open themselves to people living on the margins of society, to the realities of African, indigenous and popular groups. This option, that ought to be natural in order to enter into the incarnational process that is necessary for religious life, provokes serious difficulties. Many congregations do not allow their candidates to work in specifically poor areas and prefer that they are in middle or upper class schools.

In this phase religious candidates, who are identified with their cultural origins, in some circumstances, feel the need to participate in initiation rites of the religious tradition of their people of origin: African, Indian. When this occurs, a tense climate and powerful pressures are created. Perhaps a minimum knowledge of these religious phenomena and their legitimate manifestations enables one to overcome prejudgments and seemingly unfathomable barriers. Not everything is so simple, but certainly not everything is as complicated as one might imagine. Nothing that is profoundly human ought to scandalize us.

It is important to note the reasons that lead a woman or man religious to the practice of African or Indian initiation rituals. This practice should not be seen as contradicting their Christian faith or the ideals of religious life. Rather they should be understood as actions that identify these individuals with the reasons that have led them to donate themselves as women and men religious. These are questions that ought to lead to more profound reflection. In the meantime, it is necessary to be careful, and yet open, so that there is discernment and so that we do not lose men and women religious because of false motives or even less because of gross ignorance.

4. The Question of Identity

In the three previous moments we spoke about identity. It is a central theme but it is not easy. In face of the challenges today, we do not speak of identity in a homogenous or primitive society where the anthropological (ethnic), cultural (religious forms) and geographical elements characterize and express the totality of one's identity. Today the great challenge to any reflection on identity is the factor of pluralism and racial diversity.

We are not going to enter into the particular aspects of this theme, nor are we going to enter more profoundly into this reflection. It would be too long of a reflection. We only want to highlight some questions that frequently arise in religious life. Formators and those being formed and other religious women and men are equally convinced of the importance of identity and yet very often find themselves in difficult situations because they are heirs of diverse ethnic-cultural origins. There are some people who are descendents of the white race or the black race, the Indian race, etc. In these cases the question is frequently: What identity do I assume?

I would like to remind you that, besides the anthropological, cultural and historical elements, identity for us is, above all, a theological and spiritual question. The foundation of this spiritual question resides in the fact of the Incarnation. Jesus, even though he

was divine (cf. Philippians 2), that is, even though his identity was divine, took on the human condition in all things except sin. That is to say, Jesus took on a human identity in its totality. Therefore, to take on our identity in light of the faith is to repeat the event of Jesus and go out to the poorest of the poor. Hence, if there are some doubts about the anthropological references, these doubts do not exist from a faith perspective. Even though we might have different origins, this does not impede us from assuming our identity with the poorest of the poor.

5. New Forms of Religious Life

The history of religious life has been characterized by the immergence of new institutes and forms of life. In our current history this phenomenon continues to occur. At the same time we have also witnessed the “re-foundation of religious life.” The causes of the immergence of new institutes and new forms of consecration are diverse. At times we have the impression that certain older forms no longer respond to the needs of today. At other times it seems that the new forms respond to new challenges. This phenomenon is also present in African and Indian religious life.

In light of the challenges that arise from cultural realities, we are able to visualize, among others, two prominent possibilities. The first one expresses the desires of founding new institutes of religious and consecrated life that are inculturated from the perspective of the realities of the culture of the new candidates. This is not surprising since in Latin America we have seen the establishment of indigenous congregations of women. Also during the post-Conciliar years autonomous religious institutes have arisen in some African nations.

The creation of new institutes has led to new forms and styles of religious life that have drawn their members closer to poor people who are black and indigenous. These institutes, which are not closed to those who are neither black nor of mixed ethnic background, seek a community life more appropriate to the African and indigenous cultural values. They give a privileged place to the insertion of the new candidates into those neighborhoods that are forgotten about, or areas where members of the black community live, as well as zones where indigenous people are found.

The second possibility is found in that which is in process, that is, a multi-cultural common life. In order for this process to move forward, it is clear that much work is necessary in the sense of helping the religious candidates to overcome the only cultural reference to which they are accustomed. It is not right that black and indigenous candidates should continue to experience themselves as

disregarded, sacrificed and unattended to. Congregations have to be aware of the fact that the process of inculturation is urgent.

One of the primary tasks is to eliminate the evil of racist language. At times the words that are used, either directly or in some veiled way, express a profound racism against blacks and indigenous people. Many times these are the motives behind the jokes that people tell and which are not seen as “funny” by those people who are being referred to. At times, when things are going bad, it is said that “things are looking black.” There have been times when a racist expression of a superior has discouraged candidates in the community. The process of inculturation in religious communities demands overcoming these habits and, at the same time, substituting new practices, that is, being born again.

6. Final Considerations

As can be seen, it is not enough that religious life has opened its doors to black and indigenous men and women, but rather an adequate cultivation of these candidates is necessary. The presence of black and indigenous candidates is giving a new face to religious life. The difficulties will certainly be overcome. The way to overcome these is not achieved by going backwards. Rather, we are on a path of no return. Recently, in a Central American country, a religious congregation decided not to receive native vocations for a two-year period, believing that this would resolve the existing tensions. This is truly a mistaken position and equally mistaken is that attitude of men and women superiors who think that they will *save* the men or women candidates by depriving them of all contact with their people and traditions.

Religious communities, which have become more pluralistic from the point of view of ethnicity and culture, demand that superiors and all the members of these communities become sensitive to this new reality. Nevertheless, while this constitutes a challenge to religious life, it is good to affirm the fact that we are not dealing with something that is impossible. Giving culture a value and making culture a way in which one is able to give witness to the original following of Jesus are practices that enable communities to recover the universal spirit of the Gospel. Jesus has come for all people so that all people might become his disciples.

An inculturated religious life is certainly one of the important proofs of the reality of *re-founding religious life*. This presents us with a double demand. On the one hand, we have to be sensitive and open to culture. We have to understand the richness and the values of culture, as well as respect the cultural characteristics of the brothers

and sisters who form part of our communities. On the continent there are very good examples of communities that live this spirit of multiculturalism. On the other hand, it is also necessary to keep before us the fact that for ourselves, as women and men who are following Jesus, culture is not the ultimate reference point. All of us must allow ourselves to be challenged by the Gospel that moves beyond culture and yet helps us to understand culture.

Perhaps we, blacks and indigenous people, will be the last flower of religious life on this great continent. We are, however, also sure that here we are making the garden more beautiful and that we are awakening people to the cultural richness that God has bestowed on us.

(CHARLES T. PLOCK, C.M., translator)