IN CULTURATION IN ASIA: GOING BEYOND FIRST GEAR

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Your choice of topic for this conference/workshop, ""Indigenization of Religious Forms: Church and Community Relation in Asia,""¹ appears to me to be another confirmation of the prophetic quality of the First Plenary Assembly in April 19, 1974 of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). From that meeting came the statement that a three-fold "dialogue of life" is the urgent call of the Spirit to the Church in Asia: dialogue with the culture of the people of Asia (inculturation), dialogue with the great religious traditions of Asia (radical ecumenism), and dialogue with the poor of Asia (solidarity for justice).² Today, twelve years later, we still perceive the undiminished (if not increased) relevance of the themes highlighted by the FABC. Our particular focus, as I understand it, is the relationship between inculturation and justice.

In earlier times the questions that kept us busy regarding inculturation were largely the following: "What is it?"; "Why should it be done?"; "Is it more than just a passing theological fad?" After the initial shock caused by the entry of a new key word into theological vocabulary, we have through the years perhaps learned to realize that inculturation simply belongs to the logic and dynamic of God's incarnation in human life and history. Inculturation, it became clear, had been happening ever since the dawn of Christianity even before the word was invented. The problem seemed to be that a certain epoch of inculturation, the Western one, managed to be considered as the only valid model, thus making it difficult for other models to be accepted by the Church.

1. Conference/workshop held by the Association of Christian Universities and Colleges in Asia, 31 Jan.-3 Feb. 1986 at the Ateneo de Manila University.
At any rate, we in Asia are asking or should be asking different questions now about inculturation: "Where is it happening?"; "Who is making it happen?"; "How is it happening?" We have, one trusts, gone beyond the stage of self-conscious grappling with terms and their definitions, and have graduated to the level of ongoing implementation and critical reflection thereon. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, there is an interesting caricature of the manner in which it comes to accept a significant idea. First, the hierarchy says, "It sounds dangerous; one has to be careful." Then, after the new idea has proved to be stubborn, refusing to die and even giving signs of flourishing, the magisterium says, "There's something in it, the Spirit may well be present here." Finally, when the idea has come to its own and everyone is enthusiastic about it, the Vatican says, "We have taught it all along; it's part of the deposit of faith." Inculturation may be a case in point.

We propose, then, not to continue asking the same old elementary questions about inculturation — its proper definition, its desirability, its claim to be heard. Instead, we should like to inquire into the topology of inculturation ("Where is it happening?") , the etiology — from the agent's standpoint — of inculturation ("Who is making it happen?") , and the methodology of inculturation ("How does it happen?").

TOPOLOGY OF INCULTURATION

I understand culture, in the broad sense, to comprise the livelihood system (economics), the power system (politics), the belief system (religion) and the value system (culture in the narrow sense) of the people. Each constituent system has its own specific nature and orientation, its own particular dynamics and objectives. The weaving together of economics, politics, religion and culture into a distinctive and organic unity is what establishes the special character of a people.

Religious forms, then, constitute one dimension of culture. When we speak of the inculturation of religious forms, we ordinarily mean the deeper integration between the Christian religion and the various cultural systems of a particular ethnic and historical community. Our understanding of this project may be as superficial or as profound as we make it. The indigenization of religious
forms could mean for us chiefly the adaptation of Church liturgy, music, art, preaching or theology to the native spirit or ethos of the particular locale or community. The composition of indigenous music for liturgical use, the construction of altars and crucifixes according to the demands of local art forms, the communication of doctrine and theology in the national language, may be seen as an end in itself without effective awareness of its potential impact on social structures and institutions. We would then have a "churcply" or "ecclesiastical" type of inculturation with little or no missiological dimension.

I am suggesting that religious forms and symbols have a mission to fulfill toward culture as a whole, including the social, economic and political spheres of that culture. Every culture, without exception, is a mixture of wholeness and brokenness. There are both humanizing and dehumanizing elements in any given society. Some aspects of a culture promote human dignity and human rights; others threaten human development.

It is the role of the Gospel to affirm and to deepen those cultural realities that humanize, and to criticize and reject those that dehumanize. In that sense, the Gospel is both pro-cultural and counter-cultural.

All cultures have in one way or another deviated from justice. Human society, left to its own dynamics, has an apparently ineluctable tendency to create structures of inequality and to absolutize them. With the establishment of structures of inequality come theories of legitimation, defending them, putting them beyond question or challenge, proposing them as the way things should be. Thus, we have a well-nigh interminable list of divisions and polarities between the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless, the educated and the unlettered, masters and slaves, lords and vassals, kings and subjects, capitalists and laborers, party members and outsiders, citizens and foreigners, West and East, North and South, First World and Third World, and so on. Structures of inequality and their absolutization continually produce marginalized groups in society.

The most radical way in which Christian faith can be inculturated in human society, Asian or otherwise, is not by a simple

return to communal traditions but, rather, by embracing what has come to be called the preferential option for the poor. Every society breeds its sufferers; to be in solidarity with victims is the perennial mission of the Church. Never more deeply do the people make the Gospel their own, than when they learn to look upon society from the perspective of the marginalized and to give public witness of solidarity with them.

In the industrialized and more economically developed countries of Asia, oppression may come in different form due to the culture brought about by technology. The growing reliance on technology can lead to a situation where it is allowed to create the dominant metaphors for understanding human existence. This would be the prelude to thinking that all human problems can be solved by value-free scientific procedures. The impact of consumerism on people's perception of reality can easily give rise to a culture where individualism and utilitarianism hold sway. Much disorientation could result when people lose the sense of belonging together, of having inherited a common good and of being responsible for cherishing and protecting it. Here again, it is the mission of the Church to be in solidarity with the victims of a self-centered society.

When religious forms and symbols are pre-empted by the elite, inculturation comes to be understood largely in terms of the impact of Christian religion on that type of culture which is founded on leisure. The scope of inculturation is then limited to the belief and value systems of the human community, outside of their interaction with the livelihood and power systems, where injustice and oppression may be at the basis of the leisure that is enjoyed by the few and the alienation that is suffered by the many. The culture of leisure owes its existence to the culture of work and has the mission and responsibility in solidarity with working people to oppose all structures of injustice in the world of labor and to promote equality and participation in the socio-economic and political life of the community. When "high" culture — the culture of literature, art and liturgy — becomes an end in itself and is cut off from the culture of the poor, it quickly becomes insipid.

Where, then, is inculturation happening in Asia? It is happening most effectively at those critical points where the Church is responding to its mission to be in solidarity with victims; it is hap-

4. Ibid., p. 9.
pening where the Church is giving public witness to its preferential option for the poor. Which brings us to consider who the agents of this ongoing inculturation are.

ETIOLOGY OF INCULTURATION

We use the word etiology here in a restricted sense. It is the personal "causes," the agents of inculturation that we are interested in, not so much the impersonal social factors which cause inculturation to happen. Who in Asia today are most responsible for the advance of inculturation?

As one might have guessed from all that has preceded, it is the poor grassroots communities of faith, the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) who are the principal agents of inculturation in many parts of Asia today. As the BCCs struggle to discern and to put into practice what the Spirit indicates as the authentic Christian way in social situations marked by injustice and oppression, the Asian face of Christianity emerges little by little. Statements of the magisterium and resolutions of various theological conferences have, of course, helped to thematize and raise to a more formal level of conceptualization the direct praxis of Christian communities. Ultimately, however, it is the lived faith of the rank and file members of the Church which lends substance to the theology of inculturation.

The BCCs show that it is a participative Church which is most capable of inculturation. Inculturation requires a process of courageous transformation, an ongoing conversion, since every historical realization of Christianity is afflicted, as we have tried to explain, with the condition of brokenness. Any change in basic attitudes and values, especially one involving the reversal of structures of inequality does not come easy. Certainly, such a change cannot and should not be imposed from the top. It must be patiently and laboriously worked out from the bottom. The BCCs are not a call for others to change while one remains ever the same. The BCCs represent a major change within the Church itself in terms of participative discernment, involvement and co-responsibility.° For

this reason, inculturation that is achieved through their agency promises to be more effective and more enduring.

Membership in basic ecclesial communities empowers the poor to be the subjects of their own destiny in human society. This "freedom to be" does not favor the objectives and strategies of either the Right or the Left. No wonder the BCCs often attract the unhealthy interest of dictators and revolutionaries. Authoritarian regimes see them as subversive, a dangerous group that needs to be controlled or suppressed. Rebels, for their part, look upon them as potential allies and try to instrumentalize them for their revolutionary objectives.⁶

The experience of the poor urges the Church to take up the prophetic agenda. What aspects of life in the world are iminical to human dignity and human rights and, thus, need to be radically reformed or overturned? How can the Church by word and, especially, by action prophetically denounce injustice and oppression even at sacrifice of positions of privilege and security in civil society? Is the Church called to be partial to the little ones of this world in order to be truly universal in its affirmation of the absolute value of every human person?

It is such questions which lead the Church to uncomfortable decisional situations, demanding proof that it is ready to pay the cost of discipleship. A Church on the side of the poor is a Church that has to face persecution for such is the common lot of the poor. It is invariably the poor who suffer violations of their rights and who stand powerless before the might of authority. To be in solidarity with the poor means, in its fullest realization, to share the destiny and the sufferings of the poor.

One thinks of inculturation ordinarily in terms of the Church's openness to the world. The prevailing image of inculturation is that of the Church embracing valuable facets of culture. This is inculturation with a smile turned toward the world. But, as we have earlier indicated, the world to which the Gospel relates is one of ambivalence. When the darkness predominates over the light, then the Gospel must counter this with protest. This is inculturation with gritted teeth. It is the poor who best know inculturation as protest because it is they who are the usual victims of the evil side of society. As they confront the pressing social issues relevant to their

⁶. Ibid., p. 55.
life situations, and from their discernment born of prayer and reflection on the Word of God endeavor to give a Christian response, the poor in their basic ecclesial communities are making inculturation happen in Asia.

**METHODOLOGY OF INCULTURATION**

How, then, is the inculturation of religious forms taking place in Asia today? In this section of our paper we have no intention of entering into a technical discussion of the theological method involved in the process of inculturation. I made such an attempt some years back in a paper I wrote for a meeting in Pattaya, Thailand of the Association of Theological Schools in Southeast Asia (ATSSEA). Here, I merely wish to highlight one aspect of the methodology of inculturation, namely, the indispensable factor that is known as spirituality. Spirituality is a distinctive way of living the faith. It is implemented theology. At certain significant moments in history the Holy Spirit activates a special charism to enable the Church to respond to critical challenges posed by secular developments, for example, religious persecution, urbanization, colonization, industrialization, world poverty, war, technology, etc. The meeting of challenge and charism marks the birth of what we call a spirituality. The martyrs of the early Church, the monks of the desert and of the abbey, the mendicant orders of the middle ages, the contemplatives of the cloister, the secular institutes of our time, etc., are all ecclesial responses in the power of the Spirit to the evangelical needs of various generations of mankind. As these responses were made, as different types of spirituality were born, religious forms were also inculturated.

First, the faith must be lived, the Gospel must be made incarnate according to the charism bestowed on the Church by the Spirit. The beauty and truth of the Christian message must be made visible in a concrete spirituality. Only then will there be an intimate marriage between the Gospel and the world, between faith and culture. Only then will religious forms truly represent and express the unique character and genius of a particular people. Without the

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mediation of a spirituality, the inculturation of religious forms can only be at best a token and at worst an ideology.

Religious forms are nothing if they are not a call to holiness and authentic humanism. Creed which leads mostly to faith in doctrinal propositions instead of a surrender of life and destiny to the Transcendent can never take root in the genuine history of a people. Code which preoccupies itself with rule observance and forgets the weightier things of Gospel morality can never be really integrated with human behavior marked by self-forgetful love. Cult which strives after the aesthetic quality of rituals while failing to evoke in real life actual participation in the Paschal Mystery can only cause a split-level experience of religion and human existence. If the Church in Asia sincerely wishes to see a deeper inculturation of religious forms, there is no short cut to that objective. There is only the long road of difficult and painful options which alone can make the Gospel truly indigenous in our Asian cultures.

The basic option underlying all others is the preferential option for the poor whereby the Church unequivocally throws in her lot with the poor multitudes of Asia. Such an option will inevitably draw persecution from the powers that be which are extremely jealous of their own interests. It will set the Church on a collision course with dictators, ideologues, business lords, social engineers, technocrats and others of like identity. It will invite the wrath of various “isms,” systems whose common characteristic is to uphold another value as more important than the human person, for example, profit (capitalism), or the revolution (communism), or product enjoyment (consumerism), or power (totalitarianism), or worldly success (materialism), etc.

To take the preferential option for the poor is to become a confessing Church, a Church that witnesses to its faith unto sacrifice, suffering and whatever else loyal discipleship may demand. It is not an easy option to take, but the Church has really no alternative if it desires to be true to its calling as the continued presence and sacrament of Jesus Christ in the world. No one can predict what will happen in consequence of such an option, save that the Church in Asia will by the grace of God be walking the path that leads to holiness. It is exactly the same road and no other that leads to inculturation.

It is interesting at this point to recall Teilhard de Chardin’s definition of sanctity. “A saint,” wrote Teilhard, “is one who christian-
izes in himself all the human of his own time." In today's Asia, there is no christianization of present realities without coming to grips with the problem of poverty in the midst of plenty, of the oppression of the weak by the powerful. Under different circumstances, Jesus faced basically the same problem in his own time. His entry into human history was described by John the Evangelist as God's "dwelling among us" (eskēnōsen en hēmin). Literally, the Greek of John's prologue means, "he pitched his tent among us," i.e., "he built his house among us." Need we say that it was a house of the poor that God preferred to build? It seems he was convinced that it is in the hearts of the poor that religion can best find a home. Can God in 20th century Asia build his nipa hut in the Philippines? Can he build his simple pagoda-style house in Taiwan, in Japan, in Korea, in Thailand? Can he build his little gubuk in Indonesia? Can he follow the architecture of the poor in other countries of Asia?

One might say that in this matter of inculturating religious forms in Asia, this is ultimately the question that really counts.