

**God's Family:** Notes on Inculturation in *Ecclesia in Africa*  
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(1996 "God's Family: Notes on Inculturation in Ecclesia in Africa". *Grace and Truth*  
12,3:3-21)

### **Introduction**

Popularly, inculturation in Africa is often understood as the assimilation of African values, traditions and rituals into the Church's praxis. It is also seen as the Africanisation of the Church by ridding it of foreign practices and replacing them by African traditional ones.

The process of inculturation does include these elements but inculturation is a much deeper process than the assimilation, indigenization and accommodation which this popular understanding implies. Inculturation goes deeper than the importation of rituals and practices and the accommodation of values even though it can include these things. Inculturation is a theological term which is linked to the anthropological term "enculturation" coined by Herskovitz (1952:39) as "the aspects of the learning experience which mark of man from other creatures, and by means of which, initially, and in later life, he achieves competence in his culture". In Latin, the English word "enculturation" was translated as "*inculturatio*" since Latin does not allow the 'en' prefix. This word has now acquired theological significance and so is distinguished from the anthropological term in languages which allow this. The main European languages of Africa: English, French and Portuguese are languages which allow this distinction.

In English, then, inculturation is a theological term which refers to the cultural nature of the Church, its faith and its praxis. Misunderstandings arise in inculturation when we reify concepts such as culture, faith, church and praxis. What we are concerned about is people. It is people who are the subjects of culture, the church, its faith and its praxis. Inculturation is not just about mixing faith and culture it is about the faith becoming a culture in the Church and this culture becoming the culture of the people in the Church (EA 78).

### **Inculturation in *Ecclesia in Africa***

The Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Ecclesia in Africa* devotes a considerable section to the issue of inculturation. It notes that "the Synod considers inculturation an urgent priority in the life of the Particular Churches, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa...and one of the greatest challenges for the Church on the continent on the eve of the third millennium" (EA 59).

When *Ecclesia in Africa* speaks about inculturation it tries to avoid the pitfalls noted above by drawing clear theological foundations for inculturation (EA 60). These are the Incarnation, the Paschal Mystery and the Pentecost experience.

### **The Word must be flesh in all cultures**

In the Incarnation, God shows his love for humankind by being born into a particular culture in a particular time. From this we learn that the Word must take flesh and live in all times and contexts. So inculturation is incarnational. It is "precisely this insertion of the Gospel message into cultures" (EA 60).

### **From Incarnation to Paschal Mystery**

The incarnation is not sufficient a theological category to exhaust the meaning of Inculturation for "the inculturation of the revealed message cannot but follow the 'logic' proper to the *Mystery of Redemption*". There is no incarnation without Jesus' "Hour" and the Paschal Mystery. Inculturation also implies the transforming death and resurrection of our human condition and thus our cultures in order that they may become Christian cultures. "Every culture needs to be transformed by the Gospel values in the light of the Paschal mystery" (EA 61)

### **A Pentecostal Outpouring**

Inculturation is a movement of the Spirit which animates and inspires the people of faith in their journey to the Kingdom. The subjects of inculturation are the Christians, people of faith living through culture and inspired by the Holy Spirit. This inspiration comes in the tongue and culture of the people (EA 61). It is the Spirit who is the principal agent of the Church's mission and so of inculturation (cf RM 21-30).

### **Two Criteria for Inculturation**

*Ecclesia in Africa* calls for the respect of two criteria in the process of inculturation (EA 62). The first of these is that all inculturation should be **compatible with the Christian message**. Since Inculturation is concerned with evangelisation and the bringing of the good news to all people, then all efforts at inculturation should clearly be part of that same good news. Syncretistic attempts to incorporate practices and traditions in conflict with the Gospel message is not inculturation.

The second criteria to be respected is that of **communion with the Universal Church**. The "Ancient Eastern churches of Africa" are given as examples of areas where successful inculturation has been achieved whilst maintaining this union (EA 62).

### **The Church as God's Family: Principal Image for Inculturation in Africa**

The image of the Church as "God's Family" which appears in a slightly different form in *Lumen Gentium* (LG 6) has been taken as the "guiding idea for evangelisation in Africa" (EA 63).

This image incorporates a central African value, that of the family. This is a value which is found throughout the continent where emphasis on family life and the relatedness of people is of major importance. In Africa, human relatedness forms a central pillar of life and worth. There is little notion of the individual and of personal self-realisation. Community, particularly the community of the family, is the overarching understanding of human nature. A person is a person through other people. In this area, African cultures are closer to the Gospel values than modern Western cultures with their emphasis on the personal and the individual.

The African Synod, as well as *Ecclesia in Africa*, encourages theologians in Africa to work with the theme of 'God's Family' in order to "develop a theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept" (EA 63). Among the African values extolled under this image are the following: "care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (EA 63). Clearly the image of the Church as God's family needs further development in order to become a symbol of the nature and praxis of the inculturated African Church.

### **Fields for Inculturation**

*Ecclesia in Africa* singles out two areas for immediate action in inculturation. These are inculturation of the liturgy and the setting up of Episcopal Study Commissions to deal with "matters concerning marriage, the veneration of ancestors and the spirit world, in order to examine in depth all the cultural aspects of problems from the theological, sacramental, liturgical and canonical points of view" (EA 64). In both of these areas, the document, as well as the Synod itself, is extremely cautious. Whilst there is an encouragement to get involved in inculturation in these two areas, the parameters within which approved initiatives may occur are clearly set down.

With regard to liturgical inculturation, the requirement is made that essential elements not be changed (EA 64). The document does not say what is meant by "essential elements" but it is hoped that this allows more leeway than the rather bleak document on Liturgical Inculturation (Vatican 1994) from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments which declares that "inculturation responds to the needs of a particular culture and leads to *adaptations* which still remain part of the Roman rite" (§36 my emphasis). Such an approach which sees inculturation as adaptation has long

been absent from the discussion on inculturation.

Study commissions should be set up to consider difficult pastoral issues in the area of inculturation. At the same time, *Ecclesia in Africa* insists that "fidelity to the Church's teaching must be maintained" (EA 64) when considering those doctrines and practices which have been hard to "assimilate". Clearly the references here are to areas such as polygamy, initiation practices and the reception of the sacraments by people who remain faithful to traditional practices which are currently considered contrary to the Church's teaching. The hope is that more adequate study of these issues will allow the problems to be dealt with in ways that maintain the integrity of both the traditions in the local culture as well as those in the Universal Church. In the meantime people who find themselves in very difficult pastoral situations will not find much to comfort them in the sidestepping of these problems by both the African Synod and this Exhortation.

Other areas of concern for the Evangelisation/Inculturation process in Africa are highlighted in the document. These include: Ecumenical and Interfaith Dialogue (EA 65-67); The importance of integral human development including the cultural dimension (68-69); the importance of the Prophetic role of the Church in Africa to speak as the voice of the poor against unjust and corrupt Governments (EA 70) and the importance of the Church's involvement in the Mass media in Africa (EA 71). There is little that is new in the affirmation of these dimensions of the Church's praxis. However the cultural analysis made of the mass media is significant. Mass media is seen as a culture itself and as such it needs to go through the inculturation process. The mass media needs to be evangelised and transformed as any other culture. Similarly, this culture needs to enrich the Church and preachers as well as listeners and viewers need to be socialised into it (EA 71).

### **Final Comments**

*Ecclesia in Africa* brings the fruit of the African Synod to the people of the continent. It is clear that this document reflects the importance that the Synod Fathers and the Pope give to inculturation in Africa. Whilst some areas of urgency have been indicated, we must remember that inculturation is seen as "a process that includes the whole of Christian existence: theology, liturgy, customs, structures..." (EA 78). Inculturation in all of these areas of the Church's nature and praxis is a tremendous challenge to the continent.

I do not think that we should be put off by the cautious nature of the document. This is a trait common to all Roman

documents whose primary role is to maintain the Unity of the Church. In the fragmented ecclesial reality which we find particularly in Africa but also throughout the world, we ought to affirm the importance both of the maintenance of unity as well as the ecumenical search for it.

The actual work of inculturation will happen on the local level. In the Region under the Southern African Catholic Bishop's Conference we are already fortunate to have a *Pastoral Statement on Inculturation* from the Bishops (SACBC 1995). This statement is a response to the Synod and affirms the urgency of inculturation in this region of Africa. In the Bishops' statement, inculturation is linked to the notion of feeling "at home in the Church". Clearly the image of God's family coming from the Synod is already being developed here. The document encourages parishes to get involved in the inculturation process and says that guidelines have already been prepared "for all who will engage in the task of Inculturation".

We find ourselves, then, in a time of experimentation and reflection. It is a time for all to become involved in the promotion of inculturation in all areas of the Church's life.

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