

## REVISITING INCULTURATION AND ITS CHALLENGES IN INDIA

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### Introduction

It is the duty of every Christian to share with others the faith he/she has received as a gift from God. Unlike other religions, Christianity by its very nature is a faith sharing community. Sharing the Good News is a constituent element of its essence and existence. Therefore mission is not an extraneous element added to the Church. It in fact takes the form of tradition in the Pauline sense—*paradosis* as *traditio* (handing over or passing on). That is what Paul affirms when he says, “I handed on to you what I in turn had received” (1 Cor 15: 3). Tradition in that sense is “the ongoing self-transmission of the word of God in the Holy Spirit through the service of the Church for the salvation of all humanity.”<sup>1</sup> Again, seen from that perspective, mission is not so much of “converting” someone but sharing the Good News so that all may come to the fullness of life (Jn 20: 31). Therefore, all of us are called upon to participate in this *missio Dei*, the mission of God.<sup>2</sup> Had the first disciples kept the faith for themselves and did not pass it on to others, it would have died with them and it would not have reached us. How did they do that? There are different ways of handing on the faith. Inculturation is one of those ways in which the faith is shared and proclaimed. It is significant to note that inculturation is not an entirely new concept in Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup>H.J. Pottmeyer, “Tradition,” in R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella, eds., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994, 1123-24.

<sup>2</sup>Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter, *Ubi cumque et Semper*, 1. For the concept of *mission Dei* see David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, 390; Mark Laing, “Missio Dei: Some Implications for the Church,” *Missiology* 37/1 (2009) 89-99.

Though the term “inculturation” is relatively a new expression in theology and missiology, the Church down the centuries has been accustomed to the process of inculturation. For example, the Greek influence in the development of Christian thought is a case in point: “In engaging great cultures for the first time, the Church cannot abandon what she has gained from her *inculturation* in the world of Greco-Latin thought.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the Hellenistic idea of one God as infinite spirit served Christian theology to correct itself, if correction was needed, biblical anthropomorphism.<sup>4</sup>

In the Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us of our responsibility to proclaim the Word of God in today’s world. He tells us that we are not passive recipients of the Good News: “His word engages us not only as *hearers* of divine revelation, but also as its *heralds*.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, all the faithful are called upon to proclaim the Word in ways and means available to them. No one is exempted from this responsibility. Keeping in mind the words of the Pope, this article is an attempt to revisit the concept of inculturation in today’s context and to see some of the challenges and tasks it faces in India.

### **Inculturation and its Scope**

We all know that there is no standard definition of inculturation. This is partly because the concept is relatively new and still evolving and partly because of the elasticity of the concept of culture on which it is based. The term inculturation takes its root from cultural anthropology with a slight shift in meaning from the concept of “enculturation.”<sup>6</sup> Though today it appears that inculturation is a new concept, it would be a mistake to think that it is something completely new in the Church. According to Clark, the Acts of the Apostles are the first place where a struggle about inculturation takes place. “The whole Judaizing conflict of Paul was basically a question of inculturation. Did the new Gentiles coming into the Church have to pass through the Jewish Law, especially circumcision, before they could become Christians? Many thought that they had to, yet Paul fought who held this and ultimately won.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 72; emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup>P. De Letter, “Theology, Influence of Greek Philosophy on,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1967 ed., vol. 14, 59.

<sup>5</sup>Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 91. Hereafter as *VD*.

<sup>6</sup>Enculturation is the process by which an individual learns his or her culture and thereby initially and later in life achieves competence in it.

<sup>7</sup>F.X. Clark, “Making the Gospel at Home in Asian Cultures: Some Questions, Suggestions, Hope,” *Teaching All Nations* 3 (1976), 136. Clark seems to suggest that it

Inculturation is situated in the borderlands between anthropology and theology. In missiological discussion inculturaton is understood as an expression of the process by which the Church becomes inserted in a particular given culture. In the words of Pedro Arrupe, inculturation is "the incarnation of Christian life and the Christian message in a particular cultural context in such a way that this experience not only find expressions through elements proper to culture in question but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation."<sup>8</sup> The scope of genuine inculturation is not about changing a culture from outside. On the contrary, its goal is pristine: sharing the Good News with the conviction that the Gospel will be firmly and permanently rooted only when it has been received, felt, celebrated and lived within the deep language of a local culture. Even before inculturation became a celebrated subject in theology and missiology, Pope Paul VI succinctly summarised the goal and purpose of such an endeavour:

The individual Churches, intimately built up not only of people but also of aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering, have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language... Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.<sup>9</sup>

Not long ago, in one of its official documents, the Society of Jesus defined inculturation as the existential dialogue between the living people and the living Gospel. The result of this dialogue is that the Word of God becomes imbedded in the heart of the culture. Like a buried seed it draws its nourishment not from alien cultural factors but from the earth around it. When it grows to maturity it exercises a power within the lives of the people.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, inculturation means more than mere dialogue. It is a decisive encounter between the

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was J. Masson who first coined the term (*Catholicisme inculture*) and popularized it in his commentary on Vatican II. Cf. *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>8</sup>P. Arrupe, *Jesuit Apostolates Today: An Anthology of Letters and Address*, vol.3, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1978, 173.

<sup>9</sup>Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 63.

<sup>10</sup>*Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus*, no. 77, Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Source, 1995, 50; hereafter cited as GC 34 with specific number.

Word of God and the world in a given culture. Thus it is a meeting between “text” and “context”. The Gospel is the text and the culture in question is the context. We may even say that inculturation is a way of doing theology in which the message of Christ is communicated in an effective way. It makes the Christian message open to all cultures. It comes from the conviction that the Gospel is not bound by any particular culture. Again, it is based on the conviction that the content can be separated from its container.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in the process of inculturation the Gospel introduces something new into the culture and the culture brings something new to the richness of the Gospel.<sup>12</sup> That makes us ask: what is culture? How do we understand it? Therefore, before going into the implications of inculturation and its challenges, let us briefly see the idea of culture.

### Different Ways of Understanding Culture

“Culture concerns the totality of life.”<sup>13</sup> Culture is a living reality in a continuous process of change. According to Lonergan, “culture is a set of meaning and values informing a common way of life.”<sup>14</sup> There is no “perfect” culture. However, in Lonergan’s view, there are three ways of understanding culture—univocal, equivocal and analogical. A univocal understanding would accept only one way of cultural reality and evaluate all other cultural manifestations according to the standards of that one culture. Lonergan calls it the classicist understanding of culture.<sup>15</sup> In the words of David Tracy, “it is the imposition of one cultural apprehension of values upon all alternatives.”<sup>16</sup> It does not know what “dialogue” is all about. By denying the existence of other cultures it claims cultural monopoly. This would lead to imperialism and other forms of colonial domination. Therefore, the classicist takes upon himself the job of “civilising” the world. This attitude is nothing but a cultural blindness emerging out of self-righteousness.

Equivocity<sup>17</sup> is another way of understanding culture. It is based on the assumption that all cultures are equally valid and every culture

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<sup>11</sup>G. O’Collins and D. Kendall, *The Bible for Theology: Ten Principles for the Theological Use of Scripture*, New York: Paulist Press, 1997, 76-77.

<sup>12</sup>GC 34, 76.

<sup>13</sup>O’Collins and Kendall, *The Bible for Theology*, 34.

<sup>14</sup>B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971, 301.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>D. Tracy, “Ethnic Pluralism and Systematic Theology: Reflection,” *Concilium* (1977) 96.

G. Baum, eds., *Ethnicity*, New York: Crossroad, 1977, 96.

<sup>17</sup> Equivocity is a term that we find in the writings of David Tracy. For example, see D. Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, New York: Crossroad, 1981, 421.

has a right to exist as it is. It accepts cultural pluralism. Apparently, it looks to be an impressive ideal. In reality, it runs the risk of cultural relativism and autonomy of cultures. In the context of cultural diversity this would mean an assertion of unreflexive pluralism comprised of unrelated and exclusive cultural pluralism.<sup>18</sup> In the long run, it is no better than the classicist understanding of culture. Equivocal understanding glorifies the absoluteness of each culture within its own realm. It is an isolated exclusive realism. There is no intercultural relationship. In a subtle way, it refuses to be in contact with the rest of the world. There develops a sort of ghetto mentality.

The third way of understanding culture is analogy. This understanding of culture recognises the worth of its own culture and, at the same time, it is open to other cultures. It is not only a "cognition" of other cultures but also a "recognition" as well. While equivocality leads to "tolerance" and indifference, analogical understanding leads to mutual enrichment and dialogue between cultures. The purpose of dialogue is not to cancel out the diversity of different cultures. It does not amalgamate all into one single unit or claim cultural superiority. Dialogue does not entertain mutual competition and conflicts. Rather, the purpose of dialogue is mutual enrichment and recognising the other as other. In short, only an analogical understanding of culture can enhance dialogue.

Among the three, only the analogical understanding of culture is helpful in promoting inculturation. It does not approach cultures with fixed ideas and concepts. However, it does not mean that it endorses anything or everything. In a given culture one may find many positive as well as negative elements. The positive elements need to be nurtured and encouraged for the betterment of humanity. At the same time, the negative elements which are dehumanising, whether they exist in traditional or modern culture, need to be challenged and transformed.

### **The Gospel and Culture**

In his exhortation the Holy Father describes the Bible as *the great code of cultures*. In his words, "Sacred Scripture contains anthropological and philosophical values that have had a positive influence on humanity as a whole. A sense of the Bible as a great code for cultures needs to be fully recovered."<sup>19</sup> That makes us ask a relevant question: Does the Gospel have a culture? Where do we locate the Bible in the world of cultural diversity? We do locate its origin in the Judeo-

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<sup>18</sup>ibid

<sup>19</sup>VD, 110.

Hellenistic culture.<sup>20</sup> But we cannot identify Gospel with that culture. "The Word of God is not addressed to any one people or to any one period of history."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the core content of the Christian message cannot be identified with any one culture. Gospel is not a culture. It is beyond culture. That is why it remains unchanged down through the centuries. "The theological foundation of inculturation is the conviction of faith that the Word of God transcends the cultures in which it has found expression and has the capability of being spread in other cultures, in such a way as to be able to reach all human beings in the cultural context in which they live."<sup>22</sup> The Gospel has influenced different cultures. It has contributed to the growth and refinement of different cultures. In short, we can say that no single culture can ever become the criterion of judgment, much less the ultimate criterion of truth with regard to God's revelation. The Gospel remains the sole criterion.

However, we need to acknowledge that, while preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy. In order to make the Gospel accessible to that particular context, Christian thinkers adopted a philosophy that had been developed by Platonism, Stoicism and other philosophical schools. For example, Justin the Martyr made use of the concept of *logos* to bridge the gap between God's radical transcendence and his self-revelation in history, i.e. Jesus Christ. Thus in theology Jesus of history is identical with the *logos*, the Word of God, who appeared first to Moses and other prophets. In other words, it was an attempt to communicate the basic Christian truths in Greek concepts.<sup>23</sup> It does not mean that other philosophical thoughts are excluded from this mutual enrichment. Today, the Gospel is gradually coming into contact with cultures that once remained beyond the bounds of Christian influence. "There are new tasks of inculturation, which mean that our generation faces problems not unlike those faced by the Church in the first centuries."<sup>24</sup> Christian theology might have looked different had it been born and had it grown up in another ideological and cultural, say a Hindu milieu.<sup>25</sup> Though the message does not get changed, the

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<sup>20</sup>GC 34, 78.

<sup>21</sup>John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 95.

<sup>22</sup>Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993, 117.

<sup>23</sup>R. Latourelle, "Revelation," in R. Latourelle and R. Fisichella, eds., *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994, 918.

<sup>24</sup>John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 72.

<sup>25</sup>P. De Letter, "Theology, Influence of Greek Philosophy on," 58.

methods could be different.<sup>26</sup> The message of the Gospel is meant for all time and all cultures. However, the message has to be re-read creatively in new situations. This calls for the actualisation of the Gospel. "Actualisation is necessary because, although their message is of lasting value, the biblical texts have been composed with respect to circumstances of the past and in language conditioned by a variety of times and seasons."<sup>27</sup> In order to make the message comprehensible, today it is necessary to translate the message into a language that is appropriate to the present time. Thus there is an urgent need of inculturation.

An evangeliser who is interested in the inculturation of the Gospel could take St. Paul as an example. His encounter with the people of the Areopagus is a paradigm for us. While he was in Athens he met with a sort of religious pluralism. He did not condemn them. Rather he "reasoned" in the synagogue with the God-fearing people. The result of it was that he could make the impressive and persuasive speech at the Areopagus. Though some did not like Paul's argument, others were enthusiastic about it. They wanted to hear him again on that subject (Acts 17: 32). What is particular about Paul here is that he let God speak to them. Here Paul indirectly tells us that the evangelizer or his culture should not stand between God and the people to whom he/she announces the Gospel. In other words, inculturation is a means through which the evangeliser allows the Word of God to be born again in a particular culture. We may even say that it is a new *kenosis*.

### **Incarnation as Inculturation**

Pope Benedict XVI in his recent Exhortation brings to the fore the relationship between Incarnation and inculturation. Quoting his predecessor, John Paul II, he writes:

The authentic paradigm of inculturation is the incarnation itself of the Word: 'Acculturation or inculturation will truly be a reflection of the incarnation of the Word when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought' serving as a leaven within the local culture, enhancing the *semina Verbi* and all those positive elements present within that culture, thus opening it to the values of the Gospel.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>See FABC document, "Methodology: Asian Christian Theology" in F.J. Eilers, ed., *For All the People of Asia*, vol.3, Manila: Claretian Publications, 2002, 329-419.

<sup>27</sup>Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 113-14.

<sup>28</sup>VD, 114.

In fact the Church encourages everyone to follow the model of incarnation. "In harmony with the economy of the Incarnation, the young churches, rooted in Christ and built up on the foundation of the Apostles, take to themselves in a wonderful exchange all the riches of the nations which were given to Christ as an inheritance."<sup>29</sup> Thus in different parts of the world sincere attempts are being made to promote inculturation in line with the Incarnation. For example, the bishops of Zimbabwe consider the Incarnation as the right model for inculturation: "Jesus is the model of inculturation. The incarnation is a good model for our own work of inculturation. Just as the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1: 14), so the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ, must take root in our life situations"<sup>30</sup>

The "Christ hymn" described in Philippians 2:5-11 can be considered as a model for inculturation, especially in a multi-religious context. Here, Paul asks them to have the attitude of Christ. "Your *attitude* should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness" (Ph 2: 6-7). He invites the Philippians not to be taken in by Judaizing preachers of the Gospel who insist the need of circumcision and other Jewish traditions. In this hymn Paul offers them a model to imitate: Christ. In calling upon the Philippians to forsake everything to attain the righteousness that comes from God, Paul draws a striking contrast between a righteousness based on the Mosaic Law and a righteousness based on faith in Christ.<sup>31</sup>

The Pauline text places Christians, especially those who are engaged in evangelization, in a state of receptivity. Thus one may develop an instinctive attitude of listening. "Jesus, in his mission of reconciliation, emptied himself by sharing our humanity and by living among us in order to show the love of God for humankind. The model of kenosis calls for imitation of the attitude of Christ's kenosis, in the context of a shared humanity."<sup>32</sup> From a missiological perspective, it helps us to grow in humility and identify ourselves with the others whom we encounter in our mission. This identification with the other means imitating Jesus' example of

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<sup>29</sup>Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 22.

<sup>30</sup>Letter of Bishops of Zimbabwe, "You Are My Witness to Make Christ Known," *L'Osservatore Romano* (English Weekly Edition, 12-19 March 1997) 9.

<sup>31</sup>F.J. Matera, *New Testament Christology*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999, 120-131

<sup>32</sup>M.T. Frederiks, "Kenosis as a Model for Interreligious Dialogue," *Missiology* 33 (2005), 216.



voluntarily laying aside power and status. It is this voluntary act of self-emptying that enables us to cross all barriers that stop us from entering into other's lives, be it caste, culture or religion.<sup>33</sup>

At the same time, this kenotic model does not demand from Christians who are involved in evangelization and inculturation a complete surrender of their identity as Christians. Here it is important to note that, though Christ emptied himself in kenosis, he did not cease to be the *logos*. Even in kenosis he continues to be the Word of God. Unlike Adam, who wanted to "grasp" equality with God, Christ in humility refuses equality with God as a thing to be "grasped" in favour of human beings. It is a great act of charity in favour of humanity. Yet he remains God for ever. In any inter-religious encounter it gives us a Christological basis for engagement and dialogue. Thus this Christological hymn, while advocating for a radical openness and respect for others, encourages us to preserve our identity as Christians so that we can share with others what we have.<sup>34</sup> After all, we share only what we have, not what we do not have!

### **Issues involving Inculturation in India**

In spite of many centuries of Christian mission and preaching, we may ask why India is one of the countries where Christianity is least represented. The sad thing is that many consider Christians as outsiders and exploiters, the residue of post colonialism. One of the FABC papers succinctly summarises the situation in Asia: "As a social institution the Church is perceived as a foreign body in its colonial origins while other world religions are not. The lingering colonial image survives in its traditional ecclesiastical structures and economic dependence on the west."<sup>35</sup> When it comes to India it becomes all the more obvious. We cannot deny the fact that many, especially the radical Hindus, consider Christians as an unwanted foreign body in the Indian culture and civilization. We may ask why such impressions still persist, even after 63 years of independence. It calls for serious introspections and reflections. Here I would like to draw the reader's attention to some of the issues related to theology and the Church.

First of all, the Indian situation calls for a fresh and creative interpretation of the Gospel and the Church. If the Church is the communion and fellowship of the disciples of Christ, we cannot

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid, 217.

<sup>35</sup>F.J. Eilers (ed.), *For All the People of Asia*, vol. 2, Manila: Claretian Publications, 1997, 195.

reduce it merely to an either/or category—either belonging to the Church or not belonging to it. Statistically Christians are less than three per cent of the population. However, it is a fact that there are very many people who are gripped by the person of Jesus and his teaching. They are his devotees, while they continue to belong to other religions. Can we dismiss them as non-Christians and syncretistic? Every person as a creature willed by God has a place in his plan. We need to recognize him/her as such, i.e. the image of God. Along with Rahner we need to remember that “the explicit word of revelation does not come to us as an utterly foreign body from outside us, but is simply the articulate expression of what we already are by grace.”<sup>36</sup> If we are convinced of this fact, our attitude towards non-Christians will also have to change. It does not in any way oversimplify the Christian faith. It does not make Christ irrelevant. Again, in the words of Rahner, “it will be foolish to think that the recognition of implicit Christianity must diminish the significance of the mission, baptism, etc. On the contrary it releases energies for the service of mission, since it banishes panic and enables Christians to have active and passive patience, which, according to the saying of Christ, will save their souls—their own and those of their brothers.”<sup>37</sup> Such an attitude may demolish the assumption which was central to the traditional theology of mission where the missionary would see his work indispensable if souls were not to be lost. If a person is conditioned by traditional understanding of mission, any fresh look at God’s work among people, i.e. implicit faith, may be seen as an attempt to rob mission its urgency and importance.<sup>38</sup> A genuine inculturation demands mature freedom in the Spirit which is characterised by docility and trust in God’s guidance.<sup>39</sup> Having said that, however, we cannot forget that inculturation is a responsible job that also demands creative fidelity, i.e. “how one can reconcile the absoluteness and the universality of truth with the unavoidable historical and cultural conditioning of the formulas which express that truth.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, those who work in this field, while being creative in making the Word of God “at

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<sup>36</sup>K. Rahner, “Mission,” in K. Rahner, ed., *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. 4, London: Burns and Oats, 1969, 80.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>38</sup>E. Conway, *The Anonymous Christian a Relativised Christianity*, Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1993, 25.

<sup>39</sup>G. Rosales and C.G. Arévalo, eds., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, vol. 1, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1997, 139.

<sup>40</sup>John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 95.

home" in a given culture, need to be cautious of relativising its core message.<sup>41</sup>

Again, it gives the impression that the way common people perceive reality is often different from the way the Church looks at it. In this regard, for example, Felix Wilfred calls our attention to the claims of truth. For Indians, according to him, the concept of truth as conformity of mind to reality is a strange thing. Truth is more an ontic than a mental reality. From that perspective, the opposite of truth is not falsehood. Truth means to be firmly rooted in the real (*satyam*), in contrast to illusory (*maya*). Truth can be achieved not through concepts but through experience (*sadhana*) in meditation and contemplation. Given this approach to truth, it turns out to be difficult for many Indians to understand the Church as an institution proclaiming truth in the form of concept and "clear and distinct ideas."<sup>42</sup> The first step towards the inculturation of the Gospel therefore consists in translating it into a language that is comprehensible to people. "A translation, of course, is always more than a simple transcription of the original text. The passage from one language to another necessarily involves a change of cultural context: concepts are not identical and symbols have a different meaning, for they come up against other traditions of thought and other ways of life."<sup>43</sup> Pope John Paul II seems to address this problem when he says:

The presentation of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour needs to follow a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery. Clearly, the initial evangelisation of non-Christians and the continuing proclamation of Jesus to believers will have to be different in their approach. In initial proclamation, for example, the presentation of Jesus Christ could come as the fulfilment of the yearnings expressed in the mythologies and folklore of the Asian peoples.<sup>44</sup>

Another area that needs immediate attention is liturgy. Liturgy expresses the faith of the Church. The classical saying, *lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of prayer as the law of belief) expresses the relationship between faith and liturgy. Liturgy needs to be the expression of the faith-experience of a community. It cannot be an imported celebration where people do not understand its symbolism and significance. Liturgy needs to express their hope, faith and joy in

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<sup>41</sup>J. Ratzinger, "La fede e la teologia ai giorni nostri," in *Civiltà Cattolica*, 1996, IV, 477-490. Here, in order to avoid unnecessary panic and misunderstanding, it is highly recommended that one should not confuse pluralism with relativism. Cf. J.F. Eilers, ed., *For All the People of Asia*, vol. 3, 332-338.

<sup>42</sup>F. Wilfred, "Inculturation as a hermeneutical question," *Vidyajyoti* (1988), 422.

<sup>43</sup>Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 118.

<sup>44</sup>John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, 20.

a language that is understandable and common to all. If liturgical celebrations are not related to their culture and life situations, the faith experience of the people will always remain superficial. Though some efforts are being made in certain areas, liturgy remains by and large an alien celebration. The Church in India is yet to adopt a credible Indian custom into its liturgy.<sup>45</sup> Non-Christians would look at our liturgy a sort of dramatic performance, lacking the sense of sacredness. In other words, we failed to utilise the resources of the culture of the people. If the Church is serious about inculturation it has to give serious attention to what Vatican II encourages us to do:

There are many ties between the message of salvation and human culture. For God, revealing Himself to His people to the extent of a full manifestation of Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken according to the culture proper to each epoch. Likewise the Church, living in various circumstances in the course of time, has used the discoveries of different cultures so that in her preaching she might spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, that she might examine it and more deeply understand it, that she might give it better expression in liturgical celebration and in the varied life of the community of the faithful.<sup>46</sup>

In the context of inculturation perception too is important. What is the image of the Church in India? Does it represent the Church that Christ founded? During Vatican II one of the important questions that the Council Fathers had to deal with was: *Quid dicis de te ipsa* (What does the Church say about itself)? We may ask the same question today in our context: What does the Church say about itself in India? How do people perceive the Church in India? A sincere introspection is in order. Again, the observation of FABC document is indeed thought provoking: "Often enough the Church is afraid to take stand in defence of the poor because of a vested interest in her institutions. Like David, the Church cannot move, she is weighed down with the armour of Saul."<sup>47</sup> In the eyes of the people, at least in some areas, has not the Church reduced itself to the level of an NGO, who runs a chain of institutions, especially in education? Has it not become a religion of institutions? Or perhaps worse, is it not being seen an organization which is interested in making profit in the name of service. Looking at some of the huge edifices of the Church and the type of conduct and contacts we entertain, will ordinary people ever perceive it as the Church of Jesus Christ? Is it the Church that Christ envisioned for his followers? Of course, institutions are important for

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<sup>45</sup>At the same time, we need to be aware of the fact that, due to the existence of different rites and traditions, the process of inculturation in this area is not an easy task.

<sup>46</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 58; see also Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 119.

<sup>47</sup>J. F. Eilers, ed., *For All the People of Asia*, vol. 2, 197.

the Church. But we need to remember that institutions and structures are for the Church and its mission, not the Church for the sake of institutions. Such issues need serious introspections.

## Conclusion

Vatican II Council was an important event in the history of the Catholic Church. The Church began to see the world in an entirely different way. It made an effort to discover the original meaning of the Gospel and the Church. The Church needs to continue the process of discernment according to the needs of the time. The Council in fact encourages the Church to continue the process: "The Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing *the signs of the times* and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel."<sup>48</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that the Gospel is not a set of norms or moral precepts. We do not deny ethical norms or laws as the consequence of knowing the Gospel—the person of Jesus. In the same way, Christianity is not merely an institution having some moral principles as its deposit of faith. If Christianity is only a set of Christian principles or moral laws, how sublime they may appear, one may notice that such morality or principles had already been existing in many non-Christian communities, for example Buddhism. Only the Word of God (*norma non normata*) is the supreme norm for us.

Again, it needs to be made clear in a convincing manner (like St Paul in Athens) why the Christian faith still needs to be preached. In such a situation, a reinterpretation of the Gospel is called for. However, a rootless interpretation of the Gospel is to be avoided by all means. What is important is to bring the message of the Gospel to the ears and hearts of people of our own time.<sup>49</sup> If evangelisation is a goal to be achieved, the Church needs to transmit the Gospel faithfully and at the same time creatively. The bedrock of our work of evangelisation should be the authentic human experience of the people, their needs, struggles and concerns. It is where the Spirit of God is actually present and fashioning the body of the Risen Lord. There we realise that Jesus Christ has inscrutable riches (Eph 3:8), and he does not reject any culture or human condition. Inculturation is an invitation to all believers to recognise the new spiritual reality made available to them in the person of Jesus Christ. Inculturation should not be reduced to some sort of rhetorical flourishes in theological discussions but it needs concrete action. Inculturation is not a finished product. It is a process. It requires regular evaluation and updating. We need to summon up all our courage to make it an ongoing mission of the Church.

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<sup>48</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

<sup>49</sup>Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 117.