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AMORIS LAETITIA IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

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Abstract

The debate on marriage and the family goes hand in hand with ecclesiological endeavours to fashion a thriving universal Church in the post-colonial era of globalisation. One of the issues involved is the development of a mutually respectful, intrapersonally authentic moral theology which is interpersonal and intercultural but not binding. There is a need to develop and jointly learn about processes so that, at the family synods and in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, there can be discussion marked by intercultural respect of questions concerning the cultural shaping of the family and the inculturation of traditional concepts of marriage and the family. In the universal Church debate about marriage and the family there is finally also the question of the inculturation of the faith of the Church and of the appropriate handling of culturally influenced moral theological approaches in different contexts. The universal Church debate on marriage and the family and the two family synods are a source of encouragement to engage in a departure of an experimental nature and to make further endeavours with a view to enabling the universal Church to constantly reassess its position in a universal Church polylogue.

Keywords: *Amoris Laetitia*, Contextuality, Family, Inculturation, Intercultural Theology, Polycentric Ecclesiology, Polylogue of the Local Churches, Relationalism

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“The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church,”¹ said the Synod Fathers at the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2015. Recalling this in his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*,² Pope Francis points out that “for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people.” He goes on to cite the Synod Fathers and says: “As a response to that desire, the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed” (AL, 1).

That is all very well. But the mere fact that the Post-Synodal Exhortation has a total of 325 paragraphs addressing issues relating to the family indicates that the debate about the family is far from uncomplicated. In fact, it can be really strenuous if you are involved in an exchange of views within the universal Church on family life – a matter which is so vital for us all. After all, the family is not a minor issue, a random ‘relationship’ of some kind. It is the most fundamental unit in society in which children the world over, regardless of their background, receive their primary socialisation and later seek happiness as adults.

While the family represents the fundamental unit of human society the world over, it is nonetheless experienced in very different ways in quite different contexts. Hence the debate about the family always takes place with reference to a specific context or against a contextual backdrop. Right at the beginning of his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, therefore, Pope Francis emphasises that questions about the family cannot be answered “by applying general rules” (AL, 2). He points out rather that “each country or region can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs” (AL, 3). At the very outset of the Post-Synodal Exhortation there is an indication of the great significance Pope Francis attaches to the principle of subsidiarity in general and to matters concerning the family and pastoral family care in particular.

¹Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Priests and Deacons, Consecrated Persons, Christian Married Couples and all the Lay Faithful on Love in the Family (hereafter, AL), https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf, 1

²It is significant, and a sign of the pastoral character of the Post-Synodal Exhortation, that the words Pope Francis chooses for the opening sentence reveal a great similarity with the formulation of the opening sentence of the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council *Gaudium et Spes* (and that he also refers in the document to the Pastoral Constitution. See, for example, AL, 67).

Moreover, he dampens expectations of any binding official teaching from the Church on controversial theological issues. Instead he says that “not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium” (AL, 3).

Pope Francis accepts polyphony within the universal Church, which must learn how to become a new kind of universal Church. That this represents a challenge for the Church was apparent at both the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2014 and the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2015, which was attended by 270 bishops selected from all parts of the universal Church. Ute Eberl, an auditor from Germany at the Extraordinary Family Synod in 2014, wrote the following about her specific experience of the Synod:

Present, as I was, at the heart of the universal Church it became very clear to me that I listen with very special ears. These are the ears of a woman from an open society with a liberal constitutional order, with the ears of a person from a Reformation country, one with a highly professional Catholic welfare organisation, with a social security system in which full-time lay people perform their duties.³

Looking back at the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2015, in which he participated as an auditor, Michael Sievernich wrote that “questions take on a different character in an inter-cultural context.” This was illustrated, for instance, by “marriage and family traditions in Africa⁴ and inter-religious marriage traditions in Asia.”⁵ In these contexts the Catholic Church was attempting to conceptualise unity in diversity and put it into practice.

This approach also finds expression in the second chapter of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* in which Pope Francis deals with the challenges and experiences of families in the various global

³See Ute Eberl, “Schaut in die Wohnzimmer der Familien, nicht in ihre Schlafzimmer,” *Lebendige Seelsorge* 66, 5 (2015) 333–340, here 333f.

⁴While some of the comments made before and during the Synods about the African view of marriage and the family seem awkward from a Western European perspective, they may under certain circumstances approximate more closely to the biblical understanding of marriage, since the purpose of marriage – as stated in the Bible and elsewhere – was the birth of children, especially of sons, who were entitled to a major social function in biblical times. Cf. Bettina Eltrop, “Zahlreich wie die Sterne. Gedanken zu Ehe/Familie/Beziehungen in der Bibel,” *Das Magazin* 14, 3 (2015) 5–7, here 6.

⁵Michael Sievernich, “Die Bischofssynode zur Familie,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 234, 2 (2016) 87–98, here 88.

contexts. In the first chapter he pointed out that the Word of God should not be stifled by family ideologies, doctrines or moral principles and urged that statements made by the Church should be seen “as a source of comfort and companionship for every family that experiences difficulties or suffering” (AL, 22). In the second chapter of his exhortation Pope Francis stresses that the Church “must be particularly concerned to offer understanding, comfort and acceptance, rather than imposing straightaway a set of rules” (AL, 49).

Just how differently people think about (marriage and) the family and how strongly individual attitudes depend, for example, on a monogamous or polygamous (Cf. AL, 53) cultural background,⁶ a matrilinear or patrilinear context, one’s personal situation as a single or married Christian or the specific perspective of a woman or man, became abundantly clear in the numerous statements made in the run-up to the two Synods which highlighted the challenges facing the universal Church in the era of globalisation.⁷ I would like to illustrate this by reference to a meeting I attended in 2014 of SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar), which was held in preparation for the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

African Views on Marriage and the Family

In June 2014 over 80 participants from 18 African countries came together in Cotonou (Benin) at the invitation of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) to discuss questions relating to the family in Africa.⁸ It was specifically intended that issues of great controversy in Africa, such as promiscuity, pre-marital sex, polygamy and homosexuality should not be swept under the carpet. Statements made by African bishops, particularly as regards homosexuality, had previously caused considerable irritation in Europe and elsewhere, because they expressed positive views

⁶For an appreciative attitude towards marriage and the family in non-Christian cultures see *Amoris Laetitia*, 77.

⁷See Klaus Vellguth, “Durch Veränderungen herausgefordert. Ein afrikanisches Vorbereitungstreffen zur Familiensynode,” *Herder Korrespondenz* 68, 8 (2014) 427-431; Preetha Varayilan, “Das Konzept der ‘Joint Family,’” *Lebendige Seelsorge* 66, 5 (2015) 371-376; “Das Konzept der ‘Joint Family.’ Das Familienverständnis im indisch-hinduistischen Kulturkreis,” George Augustin / Rainer Kirchdörfer, ed., *Familie. Auslaufmodell oder Garant unserer Zukunft?*, Freiburg, 2014, 364-380.

⁸For what follows see Klaus Vellguth, “Durch Veränderungen herausgefordert. Ein afrikanisches Vorbereitungstreffen zur Familiensynode.”

about a tightening of the legislation relating to homosexual acts and classified homosexuality as 'unnatural' and 'un-African'. In his welcoming address Antoine Ganyé, the Archbishop of Cotonou and Chairman of the Bishops' Conference of Benin, referred to the challenges to the traditional image of the family in Africa resulting from divorce, promiscuity, polygamy, same-sex partnerships, etc. In view of the transformation processes affecting the family in Africa he drew attention to the dual need to inculturate the Gospel into the specific social setting, which requires adaptability on the part of the Gospel, and to change society by the power of the Gospel. Not only does this constitute a hermeneutical challenge, it also ultimately implies accepting a paradox which always exists whenever theological thinking does not revolve around a single central point in concentric circles, but is arranged elliptically around two focal points which are not identical but are absolutely crucial for the elliptical shape.

I will admit that I could not identify with much of what was said in Cotonou about the family. Confronted with the position set out in Cotonou with respect to homosexuality, for example, European theologians find themselves asking whether there should not be acceptance or tolerance of the fact that an attitude to homosexuality, which has long been considered outdated in Europe, is now being embraced by representatives of African local churches and meets with general approval. Can the affirmation voiced by Cardinal John Onaiyekan that homosexuality (just like feminism and the ideology of gender –AL, 56) is a Western concept not rooted in African culture be regarded as out of place from a Western point of view (and a little embarrassing, too)? This would provoke the question of whether contextual approaches can only be accepted if they fit into one's own theological reference system or supply arguments in favour of it. How far must one go as a representative of contextual theology (in an attempt to overcome Eurocentrism in theology), if the issue at stake is whether or not to grant local churches their own theological positions, no matter how strange they might seem? Does contextual theology only stretch as far as one's own Western-influenced theological thinking and the frame of tolerance in which it is wrapped? What does appreciation of the local churches with their contextual perspectives and theologies mean for a dialogue among equals at the Synod of

Bishops and in a universal Church, the majority of whose members lives in the southern hemisphere?

Accepting the Unfamiliar in the Universal Church Debate

The Synod showed how complex a universal Church debate on questions of the family is when it comes to a model of permanent coexistence.⁹ In particular the question of how the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* is to be interpreted – and I refer here to the response given by Pope Francis to a prior enquiry from Argentina in 2016 – highlights the difficulty of making the universal Church an everyday experience. But that does not dispense with the need to face up to this polyphonic discourse, to formulate personal positions, accept otherness and benefit from what is unfamiliar. A special challenge consists in leaving scope for what is different, to open up spaces for it without denying one's own position and attitudes. There is also a need to develop processes within the universal Church debate which can provide clarification, among other things, of the extent to which the variety of family models of long-term coexistence can subsist alongside each other and how the Church can operate and foster different models in different contexts. Both the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2014 and the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 devoted to questions of the family made it clear that it is not Church uniformity, but rather an ecclesial polyphony in key questions of the Christian faith and human coexistence within the Church that must be given expression at the outset of the third millennium. In all likelihood regional approaches and responses must be developed which can coexist in a certain heterogeneity. In the age of globalisation it is probably advisable not to be too hasty in formulating canonical regulations on marriage and the family within the universal Church but rather to give regional bishops' conferences the scope to develop suitable solutions relating to canonical dispositions. In this respect it is encouraging that Pope Francis should have emphasized in the introduction to his exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* that he is "conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralisation.'"¹⁰

⁹See Alois Buch / Petra Buch, "Weltkirche im synodalen Prozess. Beobachtungen und Notizen zur Familien-Synod," *Forum Weltkirche* 135, 2 (2016) 13-17.

¹⁰EG, 16; Cf. Bernd Jochen Hilberath, "Das Konzil verwirklichen! Papst Franziskus' ekklesiologische Agenda," *Diakonia* 47, 2 (2016) 87-93.

It is a challenge to give expression to the polyphony of family realities in a concert in which different instruments contribute to the overall sound experience. Moreover, numerous rehearsals are needed (in which there must be room for the wrong notes to be played) before such polyphony succeeds. Above all, a considerable sense of rhythm is needed to orchestrate the different players involved in such a concert. The exchange of views on *Amoris Laetitia* in the different cultures constitutes a very promising start.

Overriding importance attaches here to humility of the kind that radiates from *Amoris Laetitia*. In view of the reality of families in which the vagaries of human life are reflected, Pope Francis writes:

I thank God that many families, which are far from considering themselves perfect, live in love, fulfil their calling and keep moving forward, even if they fall many times along the way. The Synod's reflections show us that there is no stereotype of the ideal family, but rather a challenging mosaic made up of many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems (AL, 57).

It strikes me that it is not primarily the task of the Church to propagate a uniform family ideal which in all probability can very rarely be experienced in practice. Rather it is the task of the Church to accept what is imperfect and, along with Pope Francis, to address these 'many different realities, with all their joys, hopes and problems.' And to boldly engage in an open debate between different cultures from which the universal Church can emerge renewed.

Family and Inculturation

Ultimately the debate revolves around the fashioning of a vibrant universal Church in the post-colonial era of globalisation and the processes which must be initiated to achieve that objective, even though there has been discussion at the family synods and in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of questions relating to the cultural expression of the family and the inculturation of traditional concepts of marriage and the family. Also at issue in this debate is the inculturation of the faith of the Church in different contexts. Awareness of the significance of this inculturation process has grown over the past fifty years since the Second Vatican Council. Its broadening of the understanding of revelation was instrumental in ushering in use of the neologism 'inculturation' and the concept of

‘contextualisation’¹¹ to replace terms previously employed, such as accommodation, acculturation, adaptation, adjustment, assimilation, indigenisation, co-naturalisation, pre-evangelisation,¹² transformation, etc. and in ensuring their inclusion in missiology as new ‘mission theology objectives.’¹³ Inculturation describes the process whereby Christianity as a culture – in a specific cultural mediation – encounters a different culture, with cross-fertilisation taking place between the cultures in the course of a reciprocal hermeneutic process.¹⁴ As elaborated in *Gaudium et spes*, culture can be understood as

everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labour to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family (GS, 53).

¹¹In contrast to linguistic/ philosophical hermeneutics, contextuality in the realm of theology means not just the contextual setting or embedding of a text or the place in life of the biblical text. Giancarlo Collet points out that context is a term which, in theology, still awaits final clarification. See Collet, Giancarlo, headword “Kontextuelle Theologie,” *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 6, Freiburg, 1997, 327-329, 329.

¹²The term ‘pre-evangelisation’ goes back to the Jesuit missionaries in Japan, who were instructed by the Visitor, Alexander Valignano (1539-1606), to adapt their missionary strategy to the local customs. He regarded familiarisation with a foreign culture as the first step towards preaching the Gospel to the people and facilitating a deep understanding of the Christian message. See Takayanagi, Shun’ichi, “Für eine neue Missionsstrategie im säkularisierten Japan,” *Stimmen der Zeit* 234, 1 (2016) 15-22, 20.

¹³Cf. Walter Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, Freiburg, 2011, 459. For more on the term ‘contextualisation’ see Darren C. Marks, *Shaping a Global Theological Mind*, Aldershot, 2008. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, 2002. Clemens Sedmak, *Lokale Theologien und globale Kirche. Eine erkenntnistheoretische Grundlegung in praktischer Absicht*, Freiburg, 2000. Dean Gilliland, ed., *The Word Among Us. Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today*, Dallas et al. 1999. Klaus Vellguth, “Die Kirche muss raus. Frischer Wind durch Evangelisierung, Inkulturation und interreligiösen Dialog,” *Pastoralblatt* 60, 10 (1998) 302-303. Peter Beer, *Kontextuelle Theologie. Überlegungen zu ihrer systematischen Grundlegung*, Paderborn, 1995. Volker Küster, *Theologie im Kontext. Zugleich ein Versuch über die Minjung-Theologie*, Nettetal, 1995, also Heidelberg, Univ., Diss. 1994. Robert J. Schreiter, *Abschied vom Gott der Europäer. Zur Entwicklung regionaler Theorien*, Regensburg, 1992. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, 1985.

¹⁴Cf. Hans Waldenfels, headword “inculturation,” in Ulrich Ruh/ David Seeber/ Rudolf Walter, *Handwörterbuch religiöser Gegenwartsfragen*, Freiburg/Basel/Vienna 1986, 169-173, 171.

Inculturation in the Moral Theology Debate

While the relevance of inculturation has been emphasised in most theological disciplines in recent decades, a clear stance has yet to emerge on questions of moral theology. Does the need for inculturation also extend to issues of moral theology? Would this imply that the Church could no longer advocate universally applicable standards and that they might become blurred in the mists of cultural diversity – or of cultural relativism indeed? Or might it even mean, firstly, a broadening of the understanding of Christian standards and, secondly, a greater willingness to accept these Christian standards in specific cultural contexts, thus possibly providing an answer to the split between the Gospel and culture, to which Pope Paul VI referred in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* as ‘the drama of our time’? (EN, 20).

A look at the history of Christianity may prove useful here. Ultimately, Christianity owes its success primarily to its ability to constantly renew and adapt the message it has formulated and offered to people living in different cultures. This capacity was a distinguishing feature of Christianity from the very outset.¹⁵ In particular Christianity’s transition from a Jewish sect to a universal religious community emanating from Rome was characterised by a remarkable contextualisation, above all in Hellenistic and Roman areas, although individual contextualisation processes were going on at the same time in Africa (Egypt, Ethiopia, North Africa) and Asia (Syria, Persia, India).¹⁶ It was primarily through demarcation from

¹⁵While the ability to inculturate is a specific feature of Christianity, it is not a hallmark exclusive to it. Other (world) religions have also developed the ability to adapt to varying contexts. The liberal Muslim theologian Mouhanad Korchide, for instance, recently pointed to the sensitivity to context which is to be found in Islam: “The distinction between historical (context-dependent) and supra-historical (context-independent) statements made in the Koran is of great significance to avoid construing the Sharia as a collection of detailed rules and regulations. [...] The statements [...] remain a constitutive part of Islamic tradition – not literally, but in terms of their substance which is to be conveyed to us today. We must therefore derive universal principles from them, such as justice and the integrity of creation. [...] Our duty is to formulate this ourselves for our modern context.” (Mouhanad Korchide, *Scharia – der missverständene Gott*, Freiburg, 2013, 99.) See also Mouhanad Korchide, “Mekka und Medina,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 November 2015, 6; Joachim Valentin, “Scharia oder Liebesethik? Die Begründung ethischen Verhaltens in Islam und Christentum,” *Herder Korrespondenz* 68, 6 (2014) 295-299.

¹⁶Cf. Joachim G. Piepke, “Theologie und Interkulturalität,” *Jahrbuch der Philosophisch-Theologischen Hochschule SVD St. Augustin/Theologie im Dialog mit der*

and absorption of the Egyptian, Hethitic, Sumerian, Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic cultures that Christianity began to take shape.¹⁷

Inculturation is not just about applying a superficial Christian coat of paint. It involves a far-reaching, radical encounter between Christianity and a culture which transforms that culture down to its very roots.¹⁸ Writing about the relationship between the two often synonymously used terms 'contextualisation' and 'inculturation', Ottmar Fuchs says:

Whereas contextuality tends to be described as the horizontal juxtaposition of different extensive networks and structural complexes of a state of affairs, inculturation designates its vertical, i.e. root-like, in-depth structure and tectonics in the cultural fabric. The issue is one of 'an in-depth comprehension of culture(s) down to the very roots.'¹⁹

Both terms, contextualisation and inculturation, presume that the processes associated with them are bound to the relevant text or to the Christian message to be communicated.²⁰ Endeavours to ensure that the message communicated remains close to what we have learned from Christ must always govern the action taken. Hans Waldenfels draws attention to this in the following words:

In a reversal of methods practised earlier, inculturation nowadays must not be transformed monophysically into a form of cultural romanticism in which uncritical support is given to the strange and unfamiliar and can even entail the surrender of Christian identity. Within the meaning of the Chalcedonian 'without confusion and without separation' Christian phenomena must signify both what is native and foreign in the respective cultures; hence they are neither identical with a specific culture nor do

Welt, Sankt Augustin: Philosophisch-Theologische Hochschule SVD St. Augustin, 2013, 9-22, 10.

¹⁷Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Glaube - Wahrheit - Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen*, Freiburg i. Br., 2003, 58.

¹⁸Cf. Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* Apostolic Exhortation of his Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to all the Faithful of the Entire World on Evangelisation in the Modern World http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html. Rivinius, Karl Josef, *Inkulturation*, in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 212 (1994) 10, 687-696, 687.

¹⁹Cf. Ottmar Fuchs, "Gott hat einen Zug ins Detail, 'Inkulturation' des Evangeliums hierzulande," in Ottmar Fuchs/ Norbert Greinacher/ Leo Karrer/ Norbert Mette/ Hermann Steinkamp, *Das Neue wächst, Radikale Veränderungen in der Kirche*, Munich, 1995, 72.

²⁰Cf. Hans Waldenfels, "Gottes Wort in der Fremde. Inkulturation oder Kontextualität," in Monika Pankoke-Schenk/ Georg Evers, *Inkulturation und Kontextualität. Theologien im weltkirchlichen Austausch*, Frankfurt: FS Ludwig Bertsch, 1994, 114-123, 122.

they develop separately from the cultures of the world as if in a ghetto of their own.’²¹

The process of inculturation therefore involves not merely an adaptation to a culture or the assumption of specific symbols, rituals or language codes, but a far-reaching penetration or absorption of a culture. In a complex process of transculturation the Christian message encounters and permeates different cultures, leavens them and refines them, each in their own distinct manner, with the Christian faith. However, this transforming or inculturating encounter with different cultures does not lead to ‘faded’ forms of pristine Christianity which deviate from the original. An understanding of inculturation is based on the paradigm that Christianity has never existed in a pure form independent of a particular culture. On the contrary, it has always appeared in a Judeo-Christian, Hellenistic, Latin, Roman, Germanic, Slavonic or some other guise. Thus inculturation constitutes a dialogue which moves back and forth in two directions. Christianity fertilises a culture while at the same time being enriched by that culture, which itself disposes of fundamental experiences, values and cultural treasures. Inculturation is a living, self-perpetuating process which, in theological terms, can be regarded as a Pentecostal event. It is

a kind of baptism in which the old must perish so that the new can emerge, although the new does not simply destroy the old but absorbs it in a triple sense in that it is preserved, cleansed and brought to innermost fulfilment. Dialogue proceeds in three steps: recognition and preservation – cleansing – completion.²²

From Inculturation to Interculturality

The term inculturation has developed into a theological paradigm and enjoys considerable plausibility. In *Evangelii gaudium* Pope Francis also refers to its relevance with respect to the missionary activities of the Church (EG, 68, 69, 122, 129). Many theologians in countries from the South go a step further and distinguish between ‘inculturation’ and ‘intercultural encounter.’ Their criticism of the common understanding of inculturation is that it is a term introduced into the churches of the South by Western missionaries and one which is ultimately rooted in their Western-influenced view of the

²¹Hans Waldenfels, “Stichwort ‘Inkulturation,’” in Ulrich Ruh/ David Seeber/Rudolf Walter, *Handwörterbuch religiöser Gegenwartsfragen*, Freiburg/Basel/Vienna, 1986, 169-173, 173.

²²Walter Kasper, *Katholische Kirche*, Freiburg, 2011, 459.

embedding of religion in a specific culture.²³ The objection raised here by the Indian theologian Felix Wilfred, for example, is that this view is not 'specifically Christian,' but is itself the product of the inculturation of Christianity in 'Christianised' cultures and that it takes on a different relevance in different contexts.

Whereas inculturation in world religions with a long Christian tradition means dialogue with the contemporary culture and an attempt to lend meaning to the Christian faith with a feeling for modern cultural and philosophical developments, this expression means much more in [...] many Third World countries. [Here] inculturation means primarily the recognition of cultures as something positive to which the Christian faith must relate.²⁴

Many theologians in the South regard the undifferentiated transfer of this form of Christianity, inculturated into a specific context, as a process marked by a post-colonial way of thinking (which can still be encountered today not only in the economic and social sphere, but also in the field of theology and missionary work).²⁵ To highlight this they likewise propose replacing the term 'inculturation' by the alternative designation 'intercultural encounter.'²⁶ This would highlight the fact that Christianity today does not encounter a culture in the form of a 'pre-cultural Gospel' or as the 'pristine Christian message in itself'; rather it has already been absorbed by a different (generally Western-style) culture and only enters into a dialogue with such a culture after this absorption process has taken place (generally in a Western guise).²⁷ Stressing the bridges between cultures, the German-Brazilian theologian Paulo Suess says that the Gospel does

²³Cf. Giancarlo Collet, "Akkulturation – Inkulturation – Interkulturalität. Neue Fragen für ein altes Problem oder alte Fragen für ein neues Problem," *Theologie der Gegenwart* 58, 2 (2015) 131-143, 139f.

²⁴Felix Wilfred, *An den Ufern des Ganges. Theologie im indischen Kontext*, Frankfurt a. M., 2001, 46.

²⁵Cf. Roger Schroeder, "Interculturality and Prophetic Dialogue," *Verbum SVD* 54, 1 (2013) 8-21, 9.

²⁶Cf. Collet, "Akkulturation – Inkulturation – Interkulturalität...", 140. Felix Wilfred, "Inkulturation oder interkulturelle Begegnung," in Felix Wilfred, *An den Ufern des Ganges, Theologie im indischen Kontext*, Frankfurt/London, 2001, 45-68.

²⁷Another argument advanced by Felix Wilfred is "that the Gospel is more than a set of dogmas; ultimately it is a mystery" (Wilfred, *An den Ufern des Ganges. Theologie im indischen Kontext*, 117). The transition from a notion of inculturation to an understanding of intercultural encounter would meet the challenge of "discovering and undergoing the Christian experience in its many dimensions and facets [in others] from our own roots." (Wilfred, *An den Ufern des Ganges. Theologie im indischen Kontext*, 131).

not identify itself with a culture (Cf. EN, 20), that “no culture has generally valid rights to ownership of the Gospel and that the message of the faith regularly transcends all cultural boundaries.”²⁸

An intercultural theology which paves the way for intercultural encounters must not simply pursue the goal of projecting itself into alien contexts, but should be distinguished by a willingness to embrace religious elements and views from other religions, to reflect on them and possibly take them on board in the perspective of the Gospel. Interculturality takes multiculturalism as a given in the age of globalisation, the characteristic features of which are worldwide communication (technology) and worldwide migration movements. The hallmark of intercultural theology is that it is multicultural, bridges cultures, is reciprocal in character, encourages reciprocal relations and facilitates dialogue.²⁹ There are mutual, reciprocal relations between the various cultural spaces which are brought together in such a lively and open dialogue that the cultural spaces fertilise, enrich and transform each other.³⁰

Intercultural theology of this kind presumes an open-minded attitude towards other people and unfamiliar phenomena as well as the ability to engage with what is different free of any trepidation – trusting that the one God manifests himself in other contexts, cultures and religions.³¹ Typical of such an intercultural theology, which can be interpreted as ‘inculturation in actu,’ is the understanding in sacred history that the salvational function of the Christian churches must initially be guided by the paradigm of the universal redemptive power of Christ. Moreover, this theology, operating against the backdrop of the ‘cultural turn,’ develops a new understanding of the temporal and cultural dependence of the Western Christian tradition and is thereby in a position to transcend the essentialist view of the world which continues to influence Western theology, moulded as it is by Greek philosophy, right up to the present day. Finally, intercultural theology engages in a critical exploration of pluralism in religious theology which, in contrast to exclusivism or inclusivism,

²⁸Paulo Suess, “Transfer des Evangeliums in andere Sprachen, Sprechweisen und Lebenswelten,” in Mariano Delgado/ Hans Waldenfels, *Evangelium und Kultur. FS für Michael Sievernich SJ*, Fribourg, 2010, 271-287, 275.

²⁹Cf. Gibbs Phil, “Interculturality and Contextual Theology,” *Verbum SVD* 54, 1 (2013) 75-89, 82.

³⁰Cf. Franz Xaver Scheuren, *Interculturality. A Challenge for the Mission of the Church*, Bangalore, 2001, 232.

³¹Cf. Joachim G. Piepke, “Theologie und Interkulturalität,” 20.

reduces the person of Christ to the role of historical prophet and is open-minded in its attitude towards 'macro-ecumenism' as an ecumenical movement of the world religions.³² Intercultural theology demonstrates an awareness of the fact that intercultural communication always involves an analogous (and not univocal) way of speaking which has its origins not in concepts but in experience; it describes facts in the realm of culture that are not denotatively precise and points connotatively to the spiritual level of reality. Franz Gmainer-Pranzl summarises his understanding of an intercultural 'world theology' of this kind as follows:

What does the pursuit of theology mean under 'global' conditions? It entails recognising this world as the place where God acts and where people believe; it means loving people and facing up to the 'signs of the times' – vigilantly and critically, openly and in solidarity, bravely and discursively. In this sense, intercultural theology can be the pacemaker of a form of responsibility for the faith which comprehends itself as a 'world theology': as intellectual answerability for a hope extended to all people.³³

The Universal Church and Relational Ecclesiology

Sociological studies have established that interculturality can contribute to a world in which individuals and nations engage with each other in a respectful and mutually beneficial manner.³⁴ If the Church sees itself as a Roman Catholic Church in the era of globalisation, the crucial challenge it faces is the development of an intercultural communication. At the same time there is a need to reconsider fundamental ecclesiological perspectives in theological terms. Whenever thought has been given in the past to the relationship between the universal Church, on the one hand, and the local churches, on the other, the issue has tended to be reduced very quickly to whether primacy should be accorded to the local church or the universal Church. There was an intense struggle over this issue and the ecclesiological and ontological understanding underlying it in what has come to be known as the 'Cardinals' Dispute' from 1999 to 2001 between Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger, who were

³²Cf. Thomas Fornet-Ponse, "Komparative Theologie und/oder interkulturelle Theologie? Versuch einer Verortung," in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 96, 3-4 (2012) 226-240.

³³Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, "Welt-Theologie. Verantwortung des christlichen Glaubens in globaler Perspektive," *ZMiss* 38, 4 (2012) 408-433, 432.

³⁴Cf. Roger Schroeder, "Interculturality and Prophetic Dialogue," *Verbum SVD* 54, 1 (2013) 8-21, 10.

Cardinals of the Roman Curia at the time.³⁵ It is very much to the credit of Walter Kasper that he persistently pointed to the dignity of the local churches and called for an understanding of the universal Church that was in keeping with the times: “The formulation (‘in and amongst the Church’) proves highly problematic if a universal Church is covertly identified with the Roman Church, de facto with the Pope and the Curia. [...] The balance between the local church and the universal Church is then lost.”³⁶

Over a decade after this ecclesiological debate, however, the question arises as to whether an ontological redefinition of the understanding of the universal Church and the local church really is pending or whether the issue at stake is not first and foremost the relationship between these two entities. It might be objected that the ontological understanding of the universal Church and the local church must be clarified first of all so that, in a next step (following on from the first), the relationship between them can be determined. This corresponds not to a holistic but rather to a reductionist belief that reality can be grasped by dissecting it into its parts and examining them in order to finally synthesise the partial findings.³⁷ Even though a methodical procedure of this kind can often be helpful in leading to an understanding of reality, it is frequently accompanied by an ‘overlooking of the spaces in between.’ If no thought is given to these spaces in between, especially in the debate over the universal Church and the local church, a decisive element of the relationship will have been overlooked, which plays a key role in what is ultimately a reciprocal relationship.³⁸ It may well be the case that the universal Church in the third millennium needs to be understood much more as

³⁵Cf. Walter Kasper, “Zur Theologie und Praxis des bischöflichen Amtes,” in *Auf neue Art Kirche sein* (FS J. Homeyer), Munich, 1999. Joseph Ratzinger, “The Local and The Universal Church,” *America* 185, 16, of 19 November 2001, 7-11. Joseph Ratzinger, “Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens. Kirche als Communio,” Augsburg, 2002. Medard Kehl, “Der Disput der Kardinäle. Zum Verhältnis von Universalkirche und Ortskirchen,” in *StdZ* 128, 5 (2003) 219-232.

³⁶Walter Kasper, “Zur Theologie und Praxis des bischöflichen Amtes,” in *Auf neue Art Kirche sein* (FS J. Homeyer), Munich 1999, 44.

³⁷Cf. Leonardo Boff/Mark Hathaway, *Befreite Schöpfung. Kosmologie-Ökologie-Spiritualität. Ein zukunftsweisendes Weltbild*, Kevelaer, 2016, 66-68.

³⁸Leonardo Boff very effectively describes the importance of the ‘spaces in between’ and their reciprocal relationships with the subjects by referring to the formation of birds of passage, whose structures and dynamics are not attributable to a structured impulse on the part of a single subject. Boff draws here on the theory of morphic resonance (which does not enjoy general scientific recognition). Cf. Leonardo Boff/Mark Hathaway, *Befreite Schöpfung*, 132-140.

the relationship between the individual local churches. In this context the universal Church should initially not be accorded any materially decisive function, but rather a formally moderating and modally serving function in the dynamic network of the local churches.

The universal Church debate on issues concerning marriage and the family, along with the two synods on the family, provide an initial indicator of how the universal Church can gain a new understanding of itself in a universal Church polylogue of this kind and show that the Bishop of Rome has an outstanding role to play at the outset of the third millennium. The authority and, together with it, the office of the Bishop of Rome will not be diminished by the invitation to participate in the universal Church debate and its careful handling. On the contrary, it will be enhanced.

The Universal Church Lives as the Family of God

Whenever African bishops attending synods have brought up the situation facing families in Africa, the outcome has been that the everyday reality of polygamy, androgamy, traditional religious marriage ceremonies, etc. has broadened the synodal discussions. Specifically African aspects of the family have been debated which were hitherto regarded at best as an 'exotic peripheral phenomenon' (and one deemed to have been overcome) in the eyes of European theologians and bishops. Expressions of criticism and a lack of understanding – or rejection even – tended to come from African quarters whenever bishops and theologians from Europe and the USA attempted to bring about a relaxation of the Church's attitude and pastoral stance on matters of homosexuality. There was a clash of worlds in Rome when bishops from all over the world attended the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to discuss questions of the family.

The universal Church is a reality. In the encounter between different cultural worlds the challenge for Christians from different cultural contexts is not to try and formulate the better arguments and present them to others who find them incomprehensible or to approach their fellow believers with the maximum assertiveness (behind which there might lurk a 'hidden cultural arrogance'). On the contrary, they should rather communicate hermeneutically with the requisite intercultural empathy and, in so doing, risk their own position being called into question by what might initially even be

shocking alternative views (especially on such sensitive issues as marriage and the family).

The Church has embarked on a long journey to overcome its own (essentially European) provinciality and to become a universal Church. After the Second Vatican Council, Karl Rahner cautiously stated that the Council was “engaged in an initial approach, groping its way forward to find itself, the first official realisation of the Church as a universal Church.”³⁹ The Church took a big step forward down the road to a universal Church when, in 2013, it chose a non-European as pope for the first time in its over 2,000-year history. But now the Church must learn to move around on the often winding and not always smoothly asphalted paths of the universal Church. The Church regards itself as the family of God – a fact to which the African bishops have repeatedly referred. For a family to ‘function’ in practice it must be able to tolerate dissent, develop a culture of debate and repeatedly renegotiate roles in order to satisfy the needs and states of development of its members. If the Church sees itself as the family of God, these qualities will be called for not just by its African family members. They are indispensable if the Church as a family is not to founder on the diversity of its members but to grow instead.

³⁹Karl Rahner, “Theologische Grundinterpretation des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils,” in *Schriften zur Theologie*, Bd. XIV: In Sorge um die Kirche, Zürich, 1980, 287–302, 288.