

EVANGELIZATION OF CULTURES A TASK AT HAND

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What matters is to evangelize man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et spes*, always taking the person as one's starting-point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God.¹

The words of Pope Paul VI in the Post synodal Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* written after the Third General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops devoted to evangelization, was a game changer as far as evangelization was concerned. With this document an entirely new area and a new perspective was introduced into the concept of evangelization. A little earlier in the document, the far sighted Pope had written:

It is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.²

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¹*Evangelii nuntiandi*, § 20.

²*Evangelii nuntiandi*, § 19.

While the focus of Evangelization has always been on affecting a change in the human way of life, for some centuries the focus had shifted to the identification of geographic areas rather than a total transformation of cultures. With this path-breaking document which followed *Gaudium et spes* and its constant insistence on the interaction of Church with cultures,³ the emphasis shifted to a new concept, “evangelization of cultures”. In this paper we seek to define and apply the concept of “Evangelization of Cultures” to the mission of the Church today as identified in the mission command in the Gospel of Matthew, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (28:19-20). The foundations for the concept of the Evangelization of Cultures lies in the Biblical idea of the close relationship of love that a human being is called to live with his creator and with other fellow human beings.⁴

Cultures as the Object of Evangelization

The concept of “culture” itself has undergone a sea change. From the high pedestal that it had taken in the medieval ages being restricted to define proficiency in fine arts like literature, sculpture, music and other fine arts, gradually the word “culture” came to cover a much wider and comprehensive area of Human life. We owe much to the pioneer English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor who in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871 perhaps gave us the first real sound definition of culture calling it “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”⁵ Looked at in this way, culture practically pervades all areas of human life and social relationships and embraces the relationships, ethics, social interaction and practically every aspect of the rational beings living.

Gaudium et spes while speaking on the mission of the Church in the world highlights another important aspect of Culture, pointing out that

The word “culture” in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he

³Cfr. *Gaudium et spes* § 44, 53.

⁴See also, Mascarenhas Theodore, “Teaching & Response of the Universal Church on Cultural Challenges Today” in *Cultural Challenges in Christian Mission in the 21st Century*, ed., M. Michael SVD and Kuriala Chittakulam SDB, Media House, Delhi 2008, 305-325.

⁵Tylor, Edward, *Primitive Culture*, New York: J.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924 (original edition 1871), 4.

strives by his knowledge and his labour, to bring the world itself under his control... Different styles of life and multiple scales of values arise from the diverse manner of using things, of labouring, of expressing oneself, of practicing religion, of forming customs, of establishing laws and juridic institutions, of cultivating the sciences, the arts and beauty. Thus the customs handed down to it form the patrimony proper to each human community.⁶

The missiologist Louis J. Luzbetak, notes that culture is not just an open ended way of life. Rather it is a “plan, map or blueprint for living that is always in the process of formation and adjustment. It is a code for action, for survival, and for success in life.”⁷

From the three diverse sources that we have cited above, it is clear that culture has a wide ranging domain and covers the present in the sense of actual life lived in society, takes care of the past in the consideration of culture as patrimony of a group and enters into the future sphere by noting the question of changing and transforming cultures. Thus the need for Evangelization of cultures is evident and indispensable in its various dimensions:

1. The Gospel is addressed to human life as a whole, in its social, ethical, political, economical and anthropological entirety (Tylor).
2. The Gospel message becomes part of the patrimony of the culture into which it enters and this is specially true in its inculturation in the plurality of Cultures (*Gaudium et Spes*).
3. The Gospel has a role in the formation and transformation of evolving cultures (Luzbetak).

2. The Social, Ethical, Political, Economical and Anthropological Aspect of Evangelization

The need for the evangelization of cultures traces its roots to the story of creation, in which man and woman created in the “image and likeness of God” fell to the guiles of the tempter and lost the right to live in a pure divinely inspired culture. Thus while on the one hand, humanity did not lose its divine image and likeness, on the other hand it got tainted with original sin, whose effects have continuously seeped into cultures down the ages. Thus human cultures are filled with what is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, and contains excellence, attitudes and customs worthy of praise (Phil 4:8). But as the Apostle Paul reminds, because of the Tempter (1 Thess 3:5) “the whole

⁶*Gaudium et spes* § 53.

⁷L.J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*, New York: Maryknoll, 1988, 156.

creation groans and suffers together" (Rom 8:22). As the Gospel according to John will highlight time and again there is a perpetual war for the human heart, a battle that is well represented by the metaphors of light and darkness. If human cultures are filled with divine light, the evil one is also hard at work to promote darkness and iniquity.

Violence as found in the fratricidal war between Abel and Cain continues to fester in human cultures in different forms at individual, community, national and international levels. Ambition to greatness in its various embodiments symbolized with the disastrous attempt at the building of the Tower of Babel, itself a continuation of Satan's guile to make Adam and Eve feel the possibility of "being like God" continues to plague our cultures generating corruption, deceitfulness, chicanery and domination. Caste and class systems, regional and religious fundamentalisms are the living effects of the desire to dominate and subjugate others which have now got enmeshed in the cultural body of our societies. But at the same time, the power of the darkness of evil could not overcome the world. For as it is made clear to us, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16) and as the evangelist would announce in his prologue, the incarnated Word is the "true light that gives light to everyone" (Jn 1:9) and in Him was life "and that life was the light of all mankind" (Jn 1:5). Therefore the Gospel that Jesus entrusts to the church is capable of enlightening all cultures of mankind.

The Gospel with its incisive and transforming power alters, renovates and refreshes human knowledge and based on the commandment of love for God and for fellow humans provides a new set of morals, customs, and habits. In *Evangelii nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI After having emphasized the importance of evangelization for the very life and action of the Church, goes on to remind that for the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new which means that the Church seeks to transform solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims both the personal and collective consciences of people, their activities, their lives and their concrete milieu.⁸ Pope Benedict XVI was referring to this when he told the Bishops from Ontario, Canada "The fundamental task of the evangelization of culture is the challenge to make God visible in the human face of Jesus."⁹ Therefore

⁸*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, § 19.

⁹Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Bishops of Ontario, Castel Gondolfo, Italy Sept. 8, 2006.

in the evangelization of Cultures, the Church is called to make present the God in the visible face of the incarnate Word throwing light on those areas of cultures that are marked by darkness and infusing brightness by strengthening the positive realms and promote values proper to the Gospel message.

3. Evangelization in the Plurality of Cultures and the Inculturation of the Gospel Message

Pope Paul VI insisted that

The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures... Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.¹⁰

The Pope exhorts that “every effort must be made to ensure a full evangelization of culture, or more correctly of cultures. They have to be regenerated by an encounter with the Gospel.”¹¹ Therefore all cultures are open to the Gospel. While we speak about the relationship between the Gospel and cultures, it would be good to emphasise that this rapport involves two complementary and reciprocal aspects which go hand in hand: the evangelisation of cultures and the inculturation of the Gospel Message and the faith.¹² The evangelisation of Cultures should lead to an authentic inculturation while an inculturation not aimed at evangelisation or not a fruit of evangelisation is devoid of faith and becomes an empty gong. For inculturation will simply become, a “backward-looking archeologism and worldly mimicry.”¹³ The document *Pastores dabo vobis* had pointed out, “A further problem that is strongly felt these days is the demand for the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the message of faith.”¹⁴ In the encounter of the Gospel and cultures, not only are the cultures deprived of nothing, but they are actually stimulated to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel’s truth and to find in it an incentive for further development.¹⁵ In fact it is the mystery of Christ – his incarnation, redemption and mission – which is at the heart of the evangelization of cultures and of the inculturation of the faith. Just as through the assuming of human nature, Christ identified himself with humanity,

¹⁰*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, § 20.

¹¹*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, § 20.

¹²*Ecclesia in Asia*, § 21.

¹³Pontifical Council for Culture, *A Pastoral Approach to Culture*, § 5.

¹⁴*Pastores dabo vobis*, § 55.

¹⁵*Fides et Ratio*, § 71.

by inculturating the faith his Mystical Body the Church is called to relate to human cultures. But even as Christ while assuming human nature sanctified it and infused it with Grace thus transforming it, the Church is entrusted the task to evangelize cultures. The offer of grace and salvation to all humankind is a call to dialogue with those who do not believe.¹⁶ Thus the mystery of Christ becomes the paradigm for all Evangelisation and all inculturation. This refers to both the entire purpose and the meaning of the mystery of Christ and the way it unfolds. The two components of the mystery of Christ: transcendence and immanence are translated into the process of the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the faith.

For the Church, evangelizing means proclaiming the Good News into all the areas of humanity, and renewing it and transforming it from within by the very life it lives. The Gospel is for every culture and every culture is for the Gospel. It is a matter of being conscious that culture is a human reality to be evangelized and that evangelization is to be understood in its totality. If it is true that only persons can convert, make an act of faith, receive baptism, adore and contemplate God, evangelisation must also reach the heart of cultures through persons. To evangelize cultures is to incarnate in particular cultures the universal Gospel message. In the remarkable words of John Paul II, "a faith that does not affect a person's culture is a faith not fully embraced, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived."¹⁶ The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, is certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures. Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them.¹⁷

The word "inculturation" is not even found in most language dictionaries, but it certainly has a prominent place in the documents of the Church. Basically, inculturation has a twofold nuance: on one hand, it means to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of a culture or cultures and on the other it means an expression of the faith evoked by the proclamation of the Gospel message, in categories and manifestations proper to the culture of the believers.¹⁸ It

¹⁶Paul Poupard, Keynote Address to the Pan-Asian Convention on culture, held at Bali, Indonesia from 26-30 November, 2006.

¹⁷*A Pastoral Approach to Culture*, 5.

¹⁸*Catechesi Tradendae*, § 53, *General Directory for Catechesis*, § 109, 202.

recognizes that every culture has its values, codes and practices, customs and usages, traditions and ethos, often its own language, music, art, and even its own way of dressing. Inculturation allows the Gospel message to speak through and in the language, music and expression of the people. It allows the images and axioms, adages and proverbs of the culture to be used to speak to the truths of the Christian faith. It uses the stories, parables, and mores of a particular culture to help the people of that culture understand Christian values, the story of salvation and to respond to it in faith. The Word becoming flesh or the incarnation was absolute and real, precisely because it was also an incarnation in a particular culture. Jesus Christ, the incarnated word of God was true man and true God. His life and ministry on earth happens in a concrete time and place and that means conditioned by the cultural ambience of Palestine and its inhabitants. He spoke the language of his culture, communicated to his hearers in ways that they could understand him and evoked a response to his message in the cultural patterns available to his listeners. As the document of the Sacred Congregation for Clergy, the General Directory for Catechesis, recaps, "the Word of God became man, a concrete man, in space and time and rooted in a specific culture. Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the men among whom he lived."¹⁹

Jesus is the original "inculturation" of the Word of God and is our model for inculturation. He used the best in the culture to proclaim the Good News and he sought to transform that which soiled man's relationship to God and to one another. An authentic inculturation touches people at the personal, cultural, economic and political levels of individuals and communities so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit and in the service of humanity. In inculturation the Church lives the mystery of the incarnation and the mystery of Christ. This in fact is the ultimate model and example of genuine inculturation. Any inculturation effort of the Church, would aim at a thorough transformation of true and positive cultural values through the power of the Gospel, and at the same time the penetration by the Gospel message into human cultures.

The motivation, the model, the criterion, the content and the purpose must be the Word of God become Man, who is himself the subject and object of this Word. The good news is Jesus Christ. He is both the starting point and the destination. Because, like the Incarnated Word,

¹⁹*General Directory for Catechesis*, § 109.

the Church living in a specific time and place, in a definite society, and in a particular culture, proclaims conversion to the Gospel to particular cultures (Mk 1:15). As the “body of Christ” (LG 7) and “sacrament of salvation” (LG 1), but also as a community and witness, the universal and particular Church is thus, in history, the setting, the agent, and the guarantor for a true culmination of the inculturation process. Just as a culture is the result of a life and activity of a human group, so the persons belonging to that group are shaped, to a large extent, by the culture in which they live. Therefore as the Theses on the Local Church in the FABC documents points out, “Each culture not only provides us with a new approach to the human, but also opens up new avenues for the understanding of the gospel and its riches. When the Gospel encounters the tradition, experience and culture of a people, its hitherto undiscovered virtualities will surface; riches and meanings as yet hidden will emerge into the light. That is why it is so important to reinterpret the gospel through the cultural resources of every people; this reinterpretation truly enriches the Christian tradition.”²⁰ In this connection the Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI at the Conclusion of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops with the theme, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church puts it succinctly*, “to the traditional religions with their spiritual values expressed in the rites and oral cultures, we would like to pay our cordial attention and engage in a respectful dialogue with them.”²¹ And again, “Because of this, the Bible – which teaches us also the *via pulchritudinis*, that is to say, the path of beauty to understand and reach God (as Ps 47:7 invites us: “learn the music, let it sound for God!”) – is necessary not only for the believer, but for all to rediscover the authentic meanings of various cultural expressions and above all to find our historical, civil, human and spiritual identity once again. This is the origin of our greatness and through it we can present ourselves with our noble heritage to other civilizations and cultures, without any inferiority complex.”²²

The obvious question to us is, “How are we to go about in the evangelization of cultures and the inculturation of the faith among the different peoples of Asia?” Let me take recourse to what *Ecclesia in Asia* says: The “engagement with cultures has always been part of

²⁰FABC Papers, No. 89, 31.

²¹Final Message of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2008, No. 14.

²²Final Message of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, 2008, No. 15.

the Church's pilgrimage through history. But it has a special urgency today in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural situation of Asia, where Christianity is still too often seen as foreign."²³ An effective evangelization and a genuine inculturation calls for a dialogue between the Gospel Message and cultures. Here there is nothing better to say than to repeat the words of Ecclesia in Asia in the same article: It is good to remember at this point what was said repeatedly during the Synod: that the Holy Spirit is the prime agent of the inculturation of the Christian faith in Asia. The same Holy Spirit who leads us into the whole truth makes possible a fruitful dialogue with the cultural and religious values of different peoples, among whom he is present in some measure, giving men and women with a sincere heart the strength to overcome evil and the deceit of the Evil One, and indeed offering everyone the possibility of sharing in the Paschal Mystery in a manner known to God. The Spirit's presence ensures that the dialogue unfolds in truth, honesty, humility and respect. In offering to others the Good News of the Redemption, the Church strives to understand their culture. She seeks to know the minds and hearts of her hearers, their values and customs, their problems and difficulties, their hopes and dreams. Once she knows and understands these various aspects of culture, then she can begin the dialogue of salvation; she can offer, respectfully but with clarity and conviction, the Good News of the Redemption to all who freely wish to listen and to respond.

4. The Evangelization of Transforming Cultures

The contemporary cultural world is in a flux. In the early sixties, the Council Fathers had warned, "The circumstances of the life of modern man have been so profoundly changed in their social and cultural aspects, that we can speak of a new age of human history. New ways are open, therefore, for the perfection and the further extension of culture. These ways have been prepared by the enormous growth of natural, human and social sciences, by technical progress, and advances in developing and organizing means whereby men can communicate with one another."²⁴ The Church is experiencing today the challenges of changing cultures in as much as the Evangelization of Cultures is concerned. The *Lineamenta* for the next synod of Bishops on New Evangelization reminds that

cultures and whole societies have undergone significant and sometimes unforeseen changes, whose effects – as in the case of the financial-economic crisis – are still being visibly seen and actively felt

²³*Ecclesia in Asia*, § 21.

²⁴*Gaudium et spes*, § 54.

in our respective local situations. Having been directly affected by the changes, the Church had problems to be considered, phenomena to be understood, practices to be rectified and programmes and real-life situations to be imbued in a new way with the Gospel of hope.²⁵

Thomas Carlyle the great Scottish essayist emphasised, "Culture is the process by which a person becomes all that he was created capable of being."²⁶ Cultures are complexes of learned behaviour patterns and perceptions within societies which are groups of interacting organisms. Human societies and cultures are intricately connected because culture is created and transmitted to others in a society. Cultures are not the product of lone individuals but are continuous evolving products of social interaction. Cultural patterns such as language and politics make no sense except in terms of the interaction of people. Moreover cultural traits are transmitted from generation to generation. Therefore education, upbringing and transmission of values become an important part of the longevity of a culture. The famous dilemma "is culture caught or taught?" is resolved by an effective balance. Culture is not only inherited or is "caught" but it is also learnt or "taught". The highest Culture is not the one that provides the greatest comfort but rather the culture that promotes the peaceful and harmonious relationship between peoples. Let me hurry to add that for me, the most elevated and evolved culture will be the one in which the commandments of loving "God with all your heart, all your mind and all your strength" and loving "your neighbour as your self" come to be fully lived.

Pope Benedict XVI has time and again emphasised the necessity of the evangelization of cultures. Addressing the participants of the Fourth National Italian Ecclesial Convention at Verona he said,

Indeed, Christianity is open to all that in cultures and society is just, true and pure, to that which gladdens, consoles and strengthens our existence... Therefore, the work of evangelization is never a simple adaptation to culture, but it is always also a purification, a courageous break that leads to maturation and healing, an openness that brings to birth that 'new creation' (II Cor 5: 17: Gal 6: 15) which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.²⁷

Since cultures are learned behaviour, evangelization becomes an important vehicle through which cultures are formed, shaped and

²⁵ *Lineamenta for 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization* § 4.

²⁶ *Lineamenta for 2012 Synod on the New Evangelization* § 4.

²⁷ Address Of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants of the Fourth National Ecclesial Convention, Verona, Pastoral Visit to Verona on the occasion of the Fourth National Convention of the Church in Italy, October 19, 2006.

moulded. Cardinal Ravasi points out how the understanding of culture has been very much linked to the Biblical concept of knowing which in itself denoted the intellectual, volitive, affective and executive aspect thus not limiting itself only to the intellectual facet.²⁸ Therefore when we talk of Evangelization of culture, it refers to a total formation of those to whom the Gospel is preached. Hence, the evangelization of cultures forms an essential and indispensable part of the Church mission. For the Gospel and its values should be the basis of the formation of the heart, the mind, the soul, the will and the spirit, in short the total human person. And as cultures change, the Gospel message must guide and control the formation and perfection of the new culture. The church has to find new means and use modern techniques to make the presence of the Gospel message to be felt in the changing globalised cultures.

Conclusion

Cultures are born from human beings and are therefore divine in the sense that man was made in the image and likeness of God. From this fact flows all that is good, honourable and beautiful in human cultures. But this same divinely created human being also sinned and therefore our cultures are soiled by the stain of this fall. However, Jesus Christ came to redeem humankind and human cultures. As St. Paul would write in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned...For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." Consequently, the evangelization of cultures becomes an absolute necessity as the Gospel of redemption is to be brought to the heart of culture.

The Church has the obligation and duty to evangelize. Evangelization means proclaiming metanoia to individuals as well as groups, to communities and to peoples. The *raison d'être* of the Church is the Mission entrusted to it by Christ and there can be no Church without mission. The Evangelization of Cultures has two basic aspects, very important in our Indian situation: a respect for cultures in their plurality and the desired possibility of penetrating all cultures by Christ and his Gospel. We are called to announce the Gospel that infuses our Indian cultures with the message of divine love, that will inspire us to love each other and eradicate all forms of division, domination, oppression.

²⁸Gianfranco Ravasi, Address to the Seminar for New Bishops, 14-22 September 2009.