

THE BEAUTY OF THE INCULTURATION CHALLENGE

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[Taken from: MARTÍNEZ FERRER, LUIS Y ACOSTA NASSAR, RICARDO JOSÉ; *Inculturación. Magisterio de la Iglesia y documentos eclesíásticos*. Promesa, San José, Costa Rica, 2006. Págs. 25-81]

“Our faith does not fail to recognize anything of the beautiful, generous, genuinely humane, which is down here”. – St. Josemaría Escrivá, “Is Christ passing by”, n. 24

1. The Empire of Culturalism

The great pioneer of romanticism, François René de Chateaubriand (1768-1848) published in 1802 one of his most representative works, *The Genius of Christianity*, bound to notably influence the western world of the first half of the XIX century. The great thesis of the treaty cannot possibly be today more “politically wrong” and *controversial*: Christianity is, morally and esthetically, superior to the rest of religions. Referring in this sense to the deeds of the Christian missionaries, he writes:

“Here it is again one of the big and new ideas that only belong to the Christian religion. The idolatrous cults have ignored the divine enthusiasm that motivates the Gospel apostle. The same old philosophers never abandoned the avenues of the Academies or the delights of Athena to go, following a sublime impulse, to humanize the savage, to teach the ignorant, to heal the sick, to dress the poor and to sow agreement and peace among the enemy nations: this is what the religious Christians have been doing and still do every day. The seas, tempests, ice of the poles, fires of the tropic, nothing hinders them; they live with the Eskimo in his wineskin of sea lion, they feed on whale oil with the inhabitants of Greenland, they spend loneliness with the tartar and the Iroquois, they ride on camels with the Arabs or follow the fool errant to his fire deserts; the Chinese, Japanese and Indian have become their neophytes. There is no island or reef in the ocean that escapes their zeal; and, as kingdoms missing for Alexander’s ambition, they miss kingdoms for their charity”¹.

We cannot assert that Chateaubriand despised the other cultures. His vision is fixed in the evangelizing mission, the bravery of the missionaries that, like St. Paul, has done everything for everybody to somehow win

¹ François René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme*, Lib. IV, Chap. I, Ernest Flammarion, Paris post 1848, vol. II, page 123. The translation is ours.

somebody (cfr. 1 Cor 9,22). In this apologetic master piece, the author's vision is not the dialogue neither rooting the Gospel in cultures, but to reach through christening as many people as possible to ensure salvation². Evidently, those were other times deeply marked by colonialism...and by religious persecution in Europe. But after all, Chateaubriand is not a wild ethno-centered, as he acknowledges that all people come not from the same culture. Regarding the Christian evangelizers, he asserts: "Their missions have taken the sciences and arts to the civilized people, and laws to the savage ones"³. It is important to underline that this centrality in Christianity is also based, from a natural point of view, in the equality of nature of all humankind. If it is true that every man can worship only one God, acknowledge the existence of an immortal soul and the retribution after death, thanks to Christianity it gives «a bigger humanity among men»⁴. Definitely, Catholic faith is the best answer to the deepest aspirations of all men and women in the history of humankind.

If we take one further step, we can look into the French-English historian Hilarie Belloc (1870-1953). In his unilateral devotion for Greek-roman and Christian roots in Europe, he asserts: «Faith is Europe and Europe is faith (...) The Church is Europe and Europe is the Church»⁵. We can agree with Belloc that the most profound essence in Europe are its Christian roots, but that does not mean in any way that *only* Europe has Christian roots or that *only* in Europe the Catholic Church has been deeply rooted. If we compare this position with Chateaubriand's, the ethno-center seems more inclined on the side of the French-English historian. The romantic apologist tends to exalt the virtues of the missionaries in distant and strange lands, but without scorn to non-Christian cultures: he even makes a distinction of the non-Christian group between «civilized and savage people». But in a definite way, with several nuances, Chateaubriand and Belloc are representatives of an ethno-centered spirit, which states the moral superiority of the West above the rest of the world, due to, in great measure, Christian faith.

Today we witness in our multicolored globalized cultures an opposite phenomenon. The continuous polemics against Christianity and its

² As clearly asserted by the apologist writer: "Those who no longer believe in their parent's religion, will at least admit that if the missionary is totally persuaded that there is salvation only in Christian religion, the actions which condemn him to extraordinary sufferings to save an idolatrous, are beyond the greatest enthusiasm". Ibid., page 124. The translation is ours.

³ François René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme*, cit., Book VI, Chap. XII, vol. II, p. 216. The translation is ours.

⁴ Ibid., Book VI, Chap. XIII, vol. II, page 216. The translation is ours.

⁵ Hilaire Belloc, *Europe and Faith*, Constable and Company Limited, London 1920, pages 5-7, cit. by Mariano Fazio, *Hilaire Belloc e la crisi della cultura della modernità*, in "Annales Theologici", 14 (Roma 2000) 539, note 4. For better understanding the ample spirit of Belloc, we recommend the integral reading of Fazio's article, pages 535-568.

pretention of truth have made that the ethno-centered western world of Christian beliefs take place, according to Girard, in a «superior Western world to other cultures but only because it is more advanced in the regal path of religious skepticism»⁶.

The studies on «other cultures», doubtlessly prosperous, have taken in some cases, first to a short-sighted exaltation and, consequently, to the criticism of Christianity as «true religion» and the imposition of the relativism dogma which actually rules in so many academic and ecclesiastic fields. As René Girard argues, this rejecting attitude of the same culture by the westerns is a typical western phenomenon. It could be a unique case in history that people strongly denies its roots for another culture. Maybe it is worth listening again to the author of *“The Violence and the Sacred”*:

“The western world, under this profile and under many others, has in itself something unique: together with the universal tendency to identify themselves with the various cultural adhesions which distinguish them – family, city, nation and finally the West as a whole – the contrary tendency has suddenly appeared, meaning the opposition to the same adhesions. In my opinion, this second attitude remains as minority, but especially in our times, it has succeeded in rooting and spreading to the point of seeming natural and legitimate. I reckon that outside the west the auto-critical culture does not exist or it remains in an embryo state.

In summary, the westerns have invented a way of conceiving a relation between their culture and the foreign cultures, a contradiction to the typical auto-exaltation of every civilization. To accomplish this singular attitude, those who share it refer to it most of the time as a cultural foreign system and, comparing it with the western one, they claim superiority”⁷.

Another intellectual, Marcello Pera, former President of the Italian Senate, liberal and non-believer, describes this phenomenon as a “mixture of shyness, carefulness, convenience, reluctance, fear that has penetrated the western fibers, reflecting a symptom which defines it. It is the way of auto-censorship and auto-repression that hides under the so called «political correct language» which is like a «neo-language» that the Western world uses today to wink an eye, to refer, to insinuate; but not to say, to assert or to hold”⁸. This cultural condition (better to be referred as «pathology») makes that «where a culture is to be found which does not have our institutions or firmly rejects them, it is not for us to say that our culture is *better* or at least *more preferable* to the other one». Everything

⁶ René Girard, *La pietra dello scandalo*, Adelphi, Milano 2004, page 47. The translation is ours.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 49. The translation is ours.

⁸ Marcello Pera, *Il relativismo, il cristianesimo e l'Occidente*, in Marcello Pera – Joseph Ratzinger, *Senza radici. Europa, relativismo, cristianesimo, islam*, Mondadori, Milano 2004, page 8. The translation is ours.

that we are allowed to say, politely speaking, is that cultures and civilizations are «different»⁹.

The affirmations of Girard and Pera, which can be agreed or disagreed, show the worrying extension of relativism, as if a necessary budget for dialogue between cultures to the opening of the «other». And this has not been like this at all...and to our judgment should not be like this. John Paul II pointed three attitudes that Christianity must have towards the others: openness, dialogue, and friendship¹⁰, which do not quarrel the healthy self-esteem and the self «pride», for having received the gift of faith. But an open attitude thus conceived confronts almost radically with the prevailing cultural relativism, which cannot conceive the reality of evangelization, taking the Good News to other people and cultures. Joseph Ratzinger has dealt several times with relativism and his critic to the missionary personality of the Church. In one of his last writings before arriving to the Pontificate, he stated:

“On the other side, the dogma of relativism influences in another direction as well: Christian universalism, which takes place specifically within the mission, and is no longer a compulsory transmission of goodness bounded to everybody, which is, from truth and love; according to this vision, the mission becomes the naked and crude arrogance of a culture that considers itself superior and that would have shamelessly destroyed so many religious cultures, thus depriving peoples of the best and the most characteristic traits they had. From there comes the imperative: restore us our religions as well as the legitimate paths in which every town walks towards God and God towards them”¹¹.

In our judgment, with these reflections Ratzinger puts “a finger in the wound” which shows a well spread attitude. They could be used to frame the present study which offers an anthology of magisterium and ecclesiastic texts about inculturation. We face a period of great intellectual confusion. In the field which concerns us, we have gone from an ethno-centered pride (mainly typical in the XIX century) to a moment of great disorientation provoked in the West by the various effects of the two world wars. The perseverant rejection of Christianity and its metaphysical basis (started strongly on the XVIII century, illustrated and continued with the French Revolution) joined with this great European crisis of consciousness

⁹ Ibid., page 9. The translation is ours.

¹⁰ Cfr. John Paul II, Letter to the Artists (April 4, 1999), no. 11.

¹¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Fede Verità Tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo*, Cantagalli, Sienna 2003, page 76. The translation is ours.

from the period between wars¹², have given as a result a sad and concerning metaphysical rejection, a universal knowledge which searches the fundamental of the appearing reality and the according natural law, or divine design for all men, independently of their culture or religion.

This ferocious rejection from the capacity of men to know the truth and adjust it into their lives, has a repercussion in the conception that they may have about evangelization, inculturation or cultural dialogue. On the contrary, if we consider some of the great Modern Times evangelizers, great humanists, they did not doubt in accepting the genuine human and religious values of non-European cultures. The case, for example, of Brother Bernardino de Sahagún (ca 1499-1590), a great Franciscan who knew how to combine the missionary zeal with a deep study of ancient Mejicas. In his *General Preface* of his master piece *General History of Things in New Spain*, also known as *Florentine Codex*, he states about the Mejicas whom he knew:

“And so they are thought as barbaric and people from the lowest value - according to the truth, in police matters they are ahead many nations which bluff about being good politicians, throwing out some tyrannies that used to rule (before)”¹³.

It is precisely from these good human qualities that the Gospel can be introduced:

“From past times, and based now on experience, we can see that they are capable in all mechanical arts and that they practice them; they are also capable of learning all the liberal arts and the Saint Theology, as it has been seen, by experience, in those who have been taught in these sciences...”¹⁴.

From a realistic position, of natural law, Sahagún never doubts in recognizing enormous positive potentials in the contemporary Aztecs, inherited from a pagan, but not evil past. And using these potentialities the evangelizers used them to root Christianity.

Also many great Christian studios from the “alien”, however not missionaries, have valued the religious merits of other cultures without inclining towards relativism. An example is the German Jesuit Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680) encyclopedic wise man and professor at the Roman

¹² As an introduction of this intellectual and moral crisis, cfr. Gonzalo Redondo, General Introduction, in Idem, History of the Church in Spain (1931-1939), Rialp, Madrid 1993, pages 15-127.

¹³ Bernardino de Sahagún, Florentine Codex, faithful reproduction from the Government of the Mexican Republic, Government Secretary, México 1979, Prologue, f.2r. In that time, the words “police”, “politician” referred to what we call today “culture” or “civilization”.

¹⁴ Ibid., f.2v.

College, who declares in his Egyptology master piece *Oedipus aegyptiacus* (1652-53):

“The Egyptian Hermes Trismegistus, the first to establish hieroglyphics, thus becoming the prince and father of all the Egyptian philosophy and theology, was the first and most ancient among the Egyptians to consider divine things in a straight way, and recorded his thoughts for the eternity in everlasting stones and enormous rocks. From him, Orpheus, Museo, Linux, Pythagoras, Plato, Eudoxo, Parmenides and others learned straightly what they knew about God and divine things...And this Trismegistus was the first who in his Pimander and Asclepius asserted that God is One and Good, following in this the rest of the philosophers”¹⁵.

Father Kircher is not merely a studious erudite. With the “rule” of human nature, with his openness towards diversity, he knows to discover, to value and to exalt the contributions from pagan philosophers, who have known to give giant steps in their contexts so humanity can progress in the knowledge of God, the only God, equal to everybody. In this context, which we could easily find in other great missionary entities¹⁶, we could find a good line to overcome the alternative disgrace (even fake) to choose between loyalty to proper culture or to the catholic faith.

Whether we want it or not, we always find the reality of natural law in the dialogue between cultures, thus defined by one of the most important theologian characters of the XV century, the chancellor of the University of Paris, Jean de Gerson (1362-1429):

“The preceptive natural law has this reason (of being preceptive) as soon as it is an attached sign in every man who is not deprived of common sense which makes him know the divine will, that wants that the rational creature be submitted or obliged to do or not to do something according to the attainment of the goal that is natural; and this goal is human happiness and in many cases the proper family and political behavior: as man is by nature a civilized animal”¹⁷.

¹⁵ Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus aegyptiacus, hoc est Universalis hieroglyphicae veterum doctrinae temporum iniuria abolitae instauratio*, Typographia V. Mascardi, Rome 1653, vol. III, page 568, cit. by Ignacio Gómez de Liaño, *Athanasius Kircher. Itinerario del éxtasis o las imágenes de un saber universal*. Ediciones Siruela, Madrid 1990, page 15.

¹⁶ Among many others, the Jesuits José de Acosta (1540-1600) and Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) come to my mind.

¹⁷ Original text: “Lex vero naturalis praeceptiva talem habet rationem, quod est signum inditum cuilibet homini non impedito in usu debito rationis, notificativum voluntatis divinae volentis creaturam rationale humanam teneri seu obligari ad aliquid agendum vel non agendum pro consecutione finis sui naturalis, qui finis est felicitas humana, et in multis debita conversation domestica, et etiam politica; homo enim natura animal civili est”: Jean de Gerson, *Liber de Vita*

The text which cannot be more “politically wrong” gives explanation to the intellectual advances to which Christianity had arrived during the beginning of the Modern Age. Without delving deeply in the complex issue of the relation between natural and supernatural goal, Gerson exposes the importance of the natural law to achieve individual and cultural happiness. Culture should enable the access to happiness in order to be worthy of man, which comes designated by natural law, attached in the heart of a man. Natural law, which can be nominated in several ways according to cultures and religions, is something that runs transversally through all cultures.

The present inflation of cultural studies (and its sad analogy to relativism) does not mean that the process of dialogue between cultures, or relation between faith and human cultures is something of today. As we will see, even though the term “inculturation” is recent, “the reality of inculturation has long preceded the term. To say it once and for all, the phenomenon is co-extensive to the history of Judeo-Christianity, to the history of Salvation and even to the history of humankind and cosmos, in the measure in which Creation already implies the first shape of presence and revelation of God in the universe history”¹⁸. To illustrate this parallelism between inculturation and the salvation history, it could be eloquent to take a look at the Holy Scriptures.

2. Biblical Excursus

If there is a community of experts in the cultural dialogue, it is the Catholic Church with its Hebrew background from the Old Testament. Already in the book of Genesis, if it is observed in the tale of creation, the text makes evident the goodness and the beauty of a variety of orderly creatures:

“God said, ‘let the earth produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants, and fruit trees on earth, bearing fruit with their seed inside, each corresponding to its own species.’ And so it was. The earth produced vegetation: the various kinds of seed-bearing plants and the fruit trees with seed inside, each corresponding to its own species. God saw that it was good (...) God said, ‘Let the waters be alive with a swarm of living creatures, and let birds wing their way above the earth across the vault of heaven.’ God created great sea-monsters and all the creatures that glide and teem in the waters in their own species, and winged birds in their own species.

spirituali animae, lectio 2a., corollarium 5o. in Johannes Gerson Opera Omnia, ed. Louis Ellies Du Pin, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim 1987, vol. III, col. 21.

¹⁸ Michel Sales, *Le christianisme, la culture et les cultures*, in «Axes. Recherches pour un dialogue entre christianisme et religion » 1/2 (Paris 1980) 18. The translation is ours.

God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the waters of the seas; and let the birds multiply on land.' (...) God said, 'Let the earth produce every kind of living creature in its own species: cattle, creeping things and wild animals of all kinds.' And so it was. God made wild animals in their own species, and cattle in theirs, and every creature that crawls along the earth in its own species. God saw that it was good." (Gen 1, 11-12, 20-22, 24-25).

It seems very interesting for me to underline in this passage the creating will of God, Who diversifies His creatures in several "families" that worship the Creator in the same diversification, always following general guidelines which underline every one of these families: that constant refrain "according to its species" that we have emphasized. Diversification is not anarchical, it is already wisely inclined by God. And in this logic, in equal part and in a distinct part, the creation of the first human couple is placed.

"God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild animals and all the creatures that creep along the ground.' God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all the living creatures that move on earth.' God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good. (Gen 1, 26-28, 31)

Even inside of the absolute singularity of human creation, there is also here a clear divine will of creating a diversified humanity: the image of God is expressed in the male-female polarity of the first couple. A diversification summoned to rule over the other diversifications. And in all of this process, there is no evil shadow, "it was good". In the second tale of creation, it is interesting to point out a new element: Yahweh God took the man and "settled him in the garden of Eden to cultivate and take care of it" (Gen 2, 15). If we join the mentioned texts, we could point to an "initial theology of culture": The Trinity has created the world in a diversified fashion, organizing animals according to species. Man, the turning point of creation, is as well diversified in the male-female polarity, which precisely enables to carry out a new divine mandate: to multiply and fill the earth, employing profitably the diversified creatures to give earth a diversified tonality. The mandate to cultivate the Garden of Eden completes the picture: man and woman, with their effort, must print their trace in creation, and take it to fullness through history. It is true that the original sin frustrated a good deal of those beautiful perspectives...but they were lessened by the fundamental structures. Man and woman with their suffering, tiredness, hatreds, wars and revenges, but also with virtuous acts and healthy aspirations, must cover the earth culturally. John Paul II

asserts this in his writing *Memory and identity*; after quoting the verse “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen 1, 28) and also referring to the above passages, he asserts:

“These words are the first and most complete definition of human culture. To subdue the earth means to discover and confirm the truth of the self human being, of that humanity that is equally shared by a male and a woman. God has trusted in this man and in this humanity all the visible world as a gift and as a task at the same time; He has assigned him a concrete mission: to achieve the truth of himself and of the world”¹⁹.

In order to develop his mission in the world, man must acknowledge his condition of creature. From God, man and woman receive the being; and from God they receive the task of the world dominion. And the world, as a creature (as an entirety of creatures), must be shaped by men and women.

Another teaching given by the Old Testament is that it is not completely accurate to identify the People of the Alliance with the Jewish culture. The (positive) influx of the Hellenist culture in the post-exiled Jewish people demonstrates it: they did not lose their identities and were able to express their faith in the God of Israel in a new and even deeper way²⁰. Therefore, the cultural dialogue had not been less beneficial for the development of the written Revelation.

The Holy Land, where the people of Israel were created, where Jesus was born and from where Christianity disseminated, is a region of cultural crossroads like few existing in the whole planet: the joining of three continents has always favored the political, cultural and religious superposition. As Ratzinger says, “inter-culturation belongs to the original form of Christianity”²¹.

One of the pinnacle passages of the New Testament concerning the culture diversity as a companion to Christianity is the tale of Pentecost:

“They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves. Now there were devout men living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven, and at this sound they all assembled, and each one was bewildered to hear these men speaking his own language. They were amazed and astonished. ‘Surely’, they said, ‘all these men speaking are Galileans? How does it

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*. Conversations at the dawn of two Millenniums, La Esfera de los Libros, Madrid 2005, pages 103-104.

²⁰ Cfr. Theology Faculty, University of Navarra, *Holy Bible. Old Testament. Historical Books*, Eunsa, Pamplona 2000, pages 1068-1069.

²¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Fede Verità Tolleranza*, cit., page 89. The translation is ours.

happen that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; people from Mesopotamia, Judaea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya round Cyrene; residents of Rome – Jews and proselytes alike – Cretans and Arabs, we hear them preaching in our own language about the marvels of God”. (Acts 2, 4-11)

The miracle of languages in Pentecost reveals fundamental teachings for the processes of inculturation. In first place, it is meaningful because it is about the precise moment when the Church starts its earthly path, and there the cultural element plays a predominant role. The Apostles, representatives of the Hierarchy (besides being the first nucleus of the People of God), only humanly personify Galilean culture, but receive from the Spirit the gift of languages which makes them offer the Christian message in the different languages known in those times in the world. With the impulse of the Spirit, they address “all nations existing under the sky”, so that each one can tell that they listen “the marvels of God” in their mother tongue. Saint Luke, a good historian and a good geographer, makes a precise enumeration of the peoples represented in Jerusalem. The teaching, as far as inculturation is concerned, is clear and it is thus commented by John Paul II:

“While it demands of all who hear it the adherence of faith, the proclamation of the Gospel in different cultures allows people to preserve their own cultural identity. This in no way creates division, because the community of the baptized is marked by a universality which can embrace every culture and help to foster whatever is implicit in them to the point where it will be fully explicit in the light of truth”²².

The tale of Luke, *all receive the same message but each in its own mother tongue*. Christ and the Church, as the former Pontiff shows, does not cancel the human differences, but establishes a profound union link of the Gospel, the same for everybody.

To conclude this fast biblical *excursus*, I wanted to refer to what could be called “eschatological inculturation”, from some texts of the Book of Revelation. In fact, in several occasions the holy author presents the specification of peoples “from every race, language, people and nation” (Rev. 5, 9) that have been rescued by the Lamb-Christ, or an “enormous number, impossible for anyone to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language, standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7, 9) who worship God. At the end of the book when the definite eschatological reality of the New Jerusalem is described, it is noted that “the nations will come to its light” (Rev. 21, 24), the light of the Lamb.

²² John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio* (September 14, 1998), no. 71.

These are not the only occasions that the Book of Revelation mentions the sequence “race, language, people and nation” or similarities²³, but its use is of significance to describe the several moments the situation of the saved Christians.

God does not want that the original diversifications, which started with the man-woman polarity, to be lost in the next world. If the Scripture talks about the saved people as an “enormous number (...) of people from every nation, race, tribe and language” that means that those cultural specifics will not be lost after the Parousia. The European, the Central American, the Chinese, the Ecuadoran, the Aztec, and the Sioux will be so for the eternity, and man or woman as well. It is something that can makes us think over the divine origin of the cultural differences and its eternal projection. With this, we do not want to fall into an exacerbate culturalism, because during the life span granted by the Providence, many experiment deep cultural changes which lead them to finish their personal courses in a very different way than originally planned. The same applies to proper cultures, always evolving and changing through history. But we do want to stress that the cultural belonging is not something indifferent and without value, on the contrary, somehow it lasts in the next world.

3. Defining Concepts

After having dealt with some preliminary subjects, it is time for us to define with a certain precision the concept of inculturation. But before, it is imperative to analyze the concept of culture, a basic notion to be able to delve deeply into inculturation. Let us say that they are two notions from different boundaries, ‘culture’ belongs to social science while ‘inculturation’, as here used, is a strictly theological word.

3.1 The Concept of Culture

Few concepts have suffered such a deep evolution as this one. As Hervé Carrier explains referring to the beginnings of the XX century, “the culture term had then an intellectual and aesthetic implication and designated erudition, refinement of spirit, artistic and literary progress. The concept was applied to people called of culture, to individuals or to cultured groups”²⁴. It is mainly an idea that is pointed to a concrete individual and to his personal perfectionism. And from there Carrier talks about a “humanist” meaning and, we could add, “subjective” because it is about a singular individual. This sense is reflected in one of the culture definition words of the famous 1913 Espasa Encyclopedia edition: “the outcome or

²³ See this expression in other contexts in Ap., 10,11; 11,9; 13,7; 14,6; 17,15.

²⁴ Hervé Carrier, “Culture”, in Culture Dictionary, Divine Verb, Estella 1994, page 151.

the effect of cultivating human knowledge and the refining by means of the intellectual faculties of men”²⁵.

Besides, there exists one more sociological concept, not centered only in an individual but in a community, which makes reference to the traits and values which define peoples. Taking the words of Carrier “for the Sociologists and Anthropologists, culture is all the humanized surroundings by a group; its way of understanding the world, perceiving man and his destiny, working, enjoying, expressing himself by the means of arts, and to transform nature by techniques and inventions”²⁶. Giving one more step from the psycho-social point of view, Hervé Carrier adds as follows:

“Culture is the result of human talent conceived in its widest sense: it is a psycho-social mold that is consciously or unconsciously created, (in) a collectivity, in its frame of life and universe interpretation; it is its own past representation and its project for the future, its institutions and typical creations, its customs and beliefs, its attitudes and characteristic behaviors, its original way of communicating, producing and exchanging goods, celebrating, and creating deeds which reveal its soul and ultimate values”²⁷.

The human way of being of a specific collectivity is what distinguishes it from the rest. With the words of the Argentinian Domingo Sarmiento (1811-1888): “the dramatic springs become unknown out of the country where they are taken, the amazing uses, and original the characters”²⁸. The Pontifical Council Vatican II in the Pastoral *Gaudium et spes* no. 53, has given a classical culture definition, which encircles both the individual and social dimension:

“Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is, through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected one with the other. The word “culture” in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities; he strives by his knowledge and his labor, 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

²⁵ Hervé Carrier, “Culture”, cit. page 151.

²⁶ European-American Universal Illustrated Encyclopedia, Madrid 1913, vol. XVI, pages 1105-1106.

²⁷ Ibid., pages 151-152.

²⁸ Domingo F. Sarmiento, Facundo, Chap. II, Ediciones Estrada (Clásicos Argentinos, 2), Buenos Aires 1940, page 61.

might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family”

It is important to highlight that the human person is at the center of the definition, that he is the grammatical subject of the principal phrases²⁹. It is clear that culture is at the service of man and not the other way around. It is man who should perfect through culture. With the words of John Paul II, “A man who in the visible world constitutes is the only ontological subject of culture, is as well its object and finality. Culture is that through which a man, as a man, becomes more a man, «he is» more, he has more access to «be»”³⁰.

The superiority of man over culture is a principle that must never be out of sight. The objective of inculturation is culture, but this is always understood in function with real men and women. Culture is for man and not the other way around. The following text of the Apostolic *Ecclesia in Africa* seems very eloquent: “Inculturation is a movement towards full evangelization. It seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit”³¹. Everything leads to an intimacy between a real human being with God. Culture is not an end in itself. Cultures change and men must proceed accordingly to improve them “distinguishing the valid elements in the tradition from false or erroneous ones, or from obsolete forms which can be usefully replaced by others more suited to the times”³². Thus, man is the “road” of the Church and not culture. With words of the *Redemptor Hominis*: “The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life”³³.

From an anthropological point of view, Louis Luzbetak points out that all the cultural elements do not relate confusedly or in an incoherent mixture, but forming a system³⁴. He points out three levels of cultural integration. In the first place the *external level* of “cultural forms”. They represent the symbol “without” the meaning: the folklore world. To only consider this

²⁹ I have taken care of this in Luis Martínez Ferrer, *L’inculturazione al servizio della persona umana. Il ricorso ai huehuehlahtolli aztechi per l’evangelizzazione del Messico (s. XVI)*, in José María Galván (a cura di), *Cristo nel cammino storico dell’uomo. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Teologia, Roma, 6-8 settembre 2000*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2002, pages 203-205.

³⁰ John Paul II, Speech at UNESCO, Paris (June 2, 1980), no. 7.

³¹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 14, 1995), no. 62

³² John Paul II, Encyclical *Centesimus annus* (May 1, 1991), no. 50

³³ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris hominis* (March 4, 1979), no. 13.

³⁴ Cfr. Louis J. Luzbetak, *Chiesa e cultura. Nuove prospettive di antropologia della missione*, EMI, Bologna 1991, pages 271-347.

level means, for example, to buy a picture of the Aztec Sun Stone just for its exotic representations without discovering its rich calendar-ritual significance. The second level is the *structural integration*. The different shapes or “cultural traits” are linked thanks to the “immediate why”, called “functions”. The significance relations could be causative, finished, logical or purely ideological. These relations could be “manifested” to the members of a society or unconsciously warned. Luzbetak explains that values and meanings must be “excavated” and not just understood, especially not by a stranger. They must be considered from within, according to the way in which the members of a society understand their culture. He gives the example: “Dancing can be a way of worshiping, a way of fun, a social event, a chance of courting, a way of educating a social group on their religion or their history, thus strengthening the group solidarity”³⁵.

And we get to the third level called “*psychological integration*”. It represents the “mentality” of peoples, the level of the deepest, implicit and final “why”. This dimension is rated by Esquerda Bifet as “integral and transcendent” and described as “connected criteria, values and attitudes of one person or peoples (...) in relation to the cosmos, with the other human beings and with transcendence (and the Absolute)”³⁶. According to Luzbetak, if culture is considered as a community life project, this level can be described as “the configuration, the dominant tendency, the orientation, the total cultural model, the accentuation, the complex, the system, the apex of culture”³⁷. If the point of view of the origin of community thought is adopted, one can talk about “subjacent premises, axioms, hypothesis, main ideas, thematic and internal logic”³⁸. If above all one thinks about fundamental motivations, one talks about “values and subjacent interests”³⁹. In any case, culture as a life community project is essential for evangelization. Without a life project, society dissolves. It is poetically expressed by the Mexican José Vasconcelos (1881-1959):

...“There cannot be a major calamity for peoples than not even having a definite ideal. If we do not know, even with fantasy, how to build, how can we make it with the rough and rebel elements which things offer us? Where has there been a constructor who does not begin his work with subtle substance, but luminous from dreaming, representing it as a whole in his mind, long before he can see it shaped in reality, before the subsequent and

³⁵ Ibid., page 282.

³⁶ Juan Esquerda Bifet, *Evangelization Dictionary*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid 1998, page 171.

³⁷ Louis J. Luzbetak, *Chiesa e cultura*, cit., page 301. It is our translation.

³⁸ Ibidem.

³⁹ Ibidem.

*subordinate effort of the work of his hands? First there is dreaming and then there is being*⁴⁰.

These important ideas for an anthropological approximation to a culture are fundamental for the Church and evangelization, for in this “third level” the religion of a culture is situated. Since the most ancient times, religion is the most intimate nucleus of each culture. As explained by Battista Mondin, religion, regarding culture “is like the cement which impregnates and consolidates all the pillars. Religion insinuates in all the essential components of culture: in language with its symbols and myths; in customs with its commandments, in the techniques with its rites; in values with its reality appreciations; in the institutions with its hierarchies”⁴¹. When therefore, missionaries arrive to a previously-unknown people, their proposal to embrace Catholic faith crashes frontally with the central core of culture: their religion.

A good historical example may be the dialogue held in 1524 between the famous “twelve Franciscan Apostles” in Mexico-Tenochtitlan with nobles and Aztec priests. Theatrically written by Bernardino de Sahagún in 1564, it reproduces the debates between the missionaries and the ruling classes of a newly vanquished town. After an essential exposition of catholic faith, where polemic expressions against pre-Hispanic religion are not missing, the priests (or “satraps” according to Sahagún,) reply:

*“You have told us that we do not know Him who has given us being and life, He who is the Lord of heaven and earth*⁴². *You also say that the ones we worship are not gods. This way of talking seems to us new and scandalous. We are shocked about this because the fathers and ancestors who created and ruled us never said such a thing. Moreover, it was them who taught us this custom of worshiping our gods, and they believed and worshiped all the time that they lived on earth. They taught us the way to honor them; and all the ceremonies and sacrifices that we make, they taught us that. They left the message that through these we live and are, and that they made us worthy of belonging and serving them...*”⁴³.

⁴⁰ José Vasconcelos, *Indología*. An interpretation of Ibero-American Culture, Agencia Mundial de Librería, París 1927, page 202.

⁴¹ Battista Mondin, *Cultura e religione*, in Pontificia Università Urbaniana, *Dizionario di Missiologia*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 1993, page 172. It is our translation.

⁴² References to Ipalnemohuani, “He for whom we live” and Ilhuicahua Tlaltpaque, “Lord of Heaven and Earth”, ways which the ancient Aztecs used to refer to the Supreme Divinity.

⁴³ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Dialogues and Christian doctrine used by the twelve Saint Francis friars sent by the Pope Adrian VI and by the Emperor Carlos the Fifth to convert natives of the New Spain*, in the Mexican and Spanish languages, Chap. VII, in Juan Guillermo Durán, *Monumenta Catequética Hispanoamericana*, Theology Faculty, Argentinean Pontifical Catholic University, vol. I, Buenos Aires 1984, pages 340-341.

With the limitations of a text which only reflects the first contact of the missionaries with pre-Hispanic priests, this paragraph shows the drama and authenticity of both “contenders”: the catholic evangelizers pretend that the Nahuas abandon their traditional religion voluntarily and convert to Christianity. The “satraps” can only offer resistance to an ancient tradition which hinders them to deny their elders. In both groups, religion is in the center of their cultures. Then, the way to exit from the blind relativism to solve this cultural dialogue is the capacity of cultures to open up to the truth without prejudices. If in our example, evangelizers as well as Aztec Indians are able to open up to the truth and be transformed by it, there can be a real dialogue, respectful but far away from relativism. Based on a previous tradition, Saint Thomas of Aquinas asserts that “all the truth, regardless of who says it, comes from the Holy Spirit as soon as its natural light spreads and moves us to understand and express the truth”⁴⁴. In our case, this notion is capital. In theory, the Franciscans could have realized that behind the reference “He who has given us being and life and who is the Lord of heaven and earth” is based on a testimony belief of one God, clouded, nevertheless, by the complex Aztec pantheon. And the Aztecs should be willing to accept that the religion of the priests is not simply “another religion” but the plenitude of all religions, the Good News of Jesus Christ. It is true that these are today’s arguments which are useful to interpret the evangelic deeds from the past⁴⁵.

What is definite here is the openness of each culture towards goodness, beauty, truth and God which distinguishes and qualifies it in the world concert. With the words of Ratzinger “trust is never anachronistic when it comes to look and find the truth: this is precisely what keeps man in his dignity, breaks the individualism and leads men to one another beyond the confines between cultures in its quality of common dignity”⁴⁶.

Only in this way one can avoid the double danger of despising the “other cultures” (ethnocentrism) or over-valuing them as auto-referential systems with absolute autonomous values (relativism). It is important to highlight this opening which enables the mutual enrichment. Meditating about the Latin American culture, Leopoldo Zea (1912-2004) does not hesitate in admitting that Latin American people, together with people from third-world countries are “determined in universalizing western

⁴⁴ Saint Thomas of Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 109, ad 1, translation of the edition directed by the Regents of Studies of the Dominican Provinces of Spain, BAC (Maior 35), Madrid 1989. Original text: “omne verum, a quocumque dicatur, est a Spiritu Sancto, sicut ab infundente naturale lumen, et movente ad intellegendum et loquendum veritatem ».

⁴⁵ In any case, the Dialogues of the twelve Saint Francis friars can only be a testimony of the serene dialogue between two very different cosmos-visions. The genie of Bernardino de Sahagún has been necessary to accede today to these dialogues, if in a re-elaborated way, with a predominant catechesis intention on history.

⁴⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Fede Verità Tolleranza*, cit., page 203. It is our translation.

culture by taking their best expressions as own expressions of humanity, therefore, of all men and peoples”⁴⁷. There is here a positive valorization from other culture traits that opens the possibility of progress. The conception of culture is not a closed one: “Latin American man is but a man among men, and his culture a specific culture of the humane”⁴⁸.

3.2 The concept of inculturation

Once we have considered the concept of culture in a more or less essential way, we can start with inculturation as these two terms are intimately related. If the process of dialogue and establishment of the Good News comes from far away, the concept of inculturation is of recent date, even though today it circulates normally.

3.2.1 The adjustment

The most immediate precedent is the concept of “adjustment”, commonly used in the missionary literature of the XX century fifties and sixties. According to Standaert⁴⁹, adjustment can be understood in two senses. On one side, if one thinks about the evangelizers themselves, they must adjust in their person, customs, and ways of life in order to dialogue with the destined of the mission. And in the other side, it can refer to the gospel message itself, which cannot change but adjust in the presentation to the language and culture of the non-Christians. We have many examples of both realities during the first evangelization of America. Some evangelizers – at least some of them - adjusted to the American native culture with such passion that they ended up loving their cultural manifestations. It is worth reading some phrases of the Dominican Domingo de Santo Tomás (1499-1570), taken from the prologue of his Grammar of the Quechua Language (1570) addressed to the king of Spain, Philip II:

“(...) My main interest, your Majesty, (in) offering you this craft is that you can clearly realize how false it is in what many have been trying to persuade you about the naturals of the Peruvian kingdoms about being barbaric and unworthy of the gentle treatment and freedom that the rest of your vassals enjoy. His Majesty will clearly recognize that it is false, if he sees by this art the great police⁵⁰ of this language, the abundance of terms, the convenience which refer to the things they mean, the different and curious ways of speaking, the soft and good hearing sound of pronunciation,

⁴⁷ Leopoldo Zea, Latin America and the World, Editorial Universitaria, Buenos Aires 1965, page 10.

⁴⁸ Ibid., page 11.

⁴⁹ Nicolas Standaert SJ, Le terme « inculturation » dans les documents romains, in « Nouvelle Revue Théologique », 110 (Tournai 1988) 555-570. Here the author re-takes bibliography about it.

⁵⁰ As already mentioned, in the 16th and 17th Centuries “police” precisely meant refinement, education, culture.

the easiness of writing it with our characters and letters, very easy to the pronunciation in our language, to be in order and adorned with inclination property and all other properties of names, modals, tenses and person of the verb. And briefly, in so many things and ways of speaking so according to Latin and Spanish, in its arts and skills that it only seems as a sign that the Spanish should possess it. Therefore a language, your Majesty, so refined and wide, regulated and contained in the rules and precepts of Latin such as this one (as described by this craft), non barbaric, which according to Quintilian and the rest of the Latins, full of barbarisms and defaults, without manners, tenses or cases, without order or rule, but, as could be called, very refined and delicate. And if such is the language, the people who use it, not among barbarians, can be counted as refined, according to the Philosopher (Aristotle) in many places there is but one thing to know the genius of man, word and language, which is the beginning of the understanding concepts”⁵¹.

After a patient study of Quechua language, Friar Domingo, a professor of the first generation of teachers at the University of San Mark of Lima, had come to positively value the Incas Indians. A language “so refined and beautiful” could not be the work of barbarians but of people with a high education level. By the knowledge he arrived to admiration.

A key matter is based in the consideration from “step” of “adjustment” to inculturation. Not as much as the word but the essence of it. The main character in the adjustment is the missionary, while inculturation is in the local community which, in its own way assumes lives and expresses the Good News. In the adjustment, the Gospel mainly “adjusts” to the external aspects of culture, but, according to Luzbetak, they do not reach the “third level” of *psychological integration*.

Standaert gives an example: “following the accommodation method, the missionary is going to translate theology to the language of the other, but this theology will be essentially western. Depending on the model of inculturation, the local culture will give a new expression to that theology, coming from its own idea”⁵².

Keeping in the same idea, Yves Congar talks about the transition from “adjustment” or “acculturation” to the “inculturation”: “Here is something relatively new, the acknowledgment of the other as such. Through the centuries one has tried to bring the other to me. He was loved, esteemed

⁵¹ Domingo de Santo Tomás, Grammar or Art of the General Language of the Natives in the Kingdoms of Peru. Re-edited by Professor Friar Domingo de S. Thomas, Dominican Order, living in such kingdoms, printed in Valladolid by Francisco Fernández de Córdova 1570, Prologue, folios AVr-AVlr. We have slightly modernized the Castilian.

⁵² Nicolas Standaert SJ, Le terme « inculturation » dans les documents romains, cit., page 556.

by those who he could have become, in the direction in which we were. The innovation consists in getting interested in the other which makes him precisely another”⁵³.

These “critical” adjustment⁵⁴ positions clearly show the present problematic of inculturation. Until the XX century there has only been “adjustment” and not inculturation. Congar’s above sentence is very hard, and in our judgment, not missing injustice: “He was loved, esteemed by those who he could have become, in the direction in which we were.” It is logic that a Christian wants to see Christ in the others and that those who not know Christ may know him and love him; and if they do not belong to the Catholic Church, it is logical that if one appreciates a person, one wishes him the best, the encounter with God in Christ, which is the plenitude of all religion and of all ambition to the truth, beauty and goodness. It is another thing to only see in the other a future proselyte, despising his human and cultural aspects. It does not seem to me that this has been the tonic of many missionaries. In the previous mentioned text of Domingo de Santo Tomás, it seems to me that there is a sincere esteem in itself of a capital feature and the ancient Peruvians, their language, and not only as an instrument to evangelize. The fact of comparing it with Castilian language is not something ethnocentric, it is to highlight that Peruvian language is open to communication with other languages, which is a very positive feature.

3.2.2 Inculturation. Introduction⁵⁵

Concerning the appearance of the concept in scientific literature, in 1959 R.P. Segura titled an article *Initiation, permanent value of inculturation*⁵⁶. Three years later, father Joseph Masson used the expression *inculturalized Catholicism*⁵⁷, which comes from a present inculturation meaning in anthropology: the personal assimilation of the individual’s own culture

⁵³ Yves Marie J. Congar, *Diversités et Communion : dossier historique et conclusion théologique*, Les Editions du Cerf (Cogitatio Fidei 112), Paris 1982, pages 55-56. It is our translation.

⁵⁴ We could also quote Luzbetak, *Chiesa e culture*, cit., pages 105-106.

⁵⁵ I partly follow Nicolas Standaert SJ, *Le terme “inculturation” dans les documents romains*, cit. ; Arij Roest Crollius, *What is so new about inculturation?*, (*Inculturation. Working papers on living Faith and Cultures* 5), Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma 1991, pages 1-18; Adam Wolanin, *Fede e inculturazione a 500 anni della scoperta dell’America*, in “*Magazine of Religious Science*”, 6 (1992/2) 399.

⁵⁶ R.P. Segura, *L’initiation valeur permanente de l’inculturation*, in « *Museon Lessianum Section Missiologie* », 40 (1959), 219-235.

⁵⁷ Joseph Masson, *L’Eglise ouverte sur le monde*, in « *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* », 84 (Tournai 1962) 1038. By the form of expression, it gives the impression that the term was already known. Cfr. Andrew Byrne, *Some ins and out of inculturation*, in “*Annales Theologici*”, 4/1 (Roma 1990) 111, note 7. In fact, Carrier asserts that the term was around since the thirties. Cfr. Hervé Carrier, “*Inculturation of the Gospel*”, in *Dictionary of Culture*, cit., p. 278.

since his birth⁵⁸. From that moment, and before, in missionary literature, used by studios and priests, several concepts appeared: “acculturation”, “nativization”, “contextualization”. A bishop from Kenya asserted in 1976: “it seems that a proposal to *Africanize Christianity* should not be approved. Mainly, the term *Africanize* should be substituted by the term nativization, to be applied not only in Africa but in the whole world”⁵⁹. The different authors underline the importance of the term – in continuous evolution – than that of the contents. Among the Jesuits, the inculturation concept was widely used during the 32nd General Congregation from 12.1.1974, 4.7.1975, particularly in the decrees IV and V⁶⁰. In a letter of May 1978, father Arrupe defined inculturation as:

“Inculturation means the incarnation of life and of the Christian message in a specific cultural area, so this experience will not only express with the proper elements of a culture (which would only be a superficial adjustment) but that it can be the inspiring, normative and unifying principle, which transforms and re-creates a culture giving origin to a “new creation”. In any case, it is about the Christian experience of the People of God who lives in a determined cultural area and has assimilated the traditional values of the proper culture, but opens up to other cultures. The experience of a local church which discerning from the past, builds the future in the present”⁶¹.

In this wide definition-description, there is a maturity in the concepts where a “minimalist” conception of adjustment is exposed, only intrinsically⁶² understood, by contraposition to inculturation. The true protagonist of the process is the local community, which re-creates from faith, penetrating in the intimate nucleus of culture. Not always performed, the openness towards other cultures is very important.

Once the matter was deeply analyzed in 1978 not only by theologians and isolated bishops but by the Vatican II as well, it was already time that the concept became part of the magisterium. In this matter one has to consider: a) the reality of inculturation comes beforehand to the concept

⁵⁸ In this sense, one must make a difference between a social-anthropological sense of inculturation (integration process of an individual in his social group since birth), and of missionological sense used by theologians, shepherds and Church Magisterium. For an inculturation description on social-anthropological sense, cfr. Louis J. Luzbetak, *Chiesa e culture*, cit., pages 236-247.

⁵⁹ Report about the Plenary of the Sacred Congregation of Peoples, Rome 1977, cit. by Jesus López Gay SJ, *Indigenization of Theology*, in “*Missionology Studies*”, 3 (1978) 101.

⁶⁰ Besides the already mentioned authors, I continue with Davide Magni SJ, *L’inculturazione. L’insegnamento di padre Arrupe*, in “*Chiese e religioni in dialogo*”, March 2005, electronic edition: <http://www.popoli.info/anno2005/03/ar050305.htm> (02-06-2006).

⁶¹ Full text in Pedro Arrupe, *Lettre et document du travail sur l’inculturation*, in *Acta Romana Societatis Iesu*, XVII/2 (1978) 282-309. It is our translation.

⁶² When the term adaptation is used in the Vatican II, it is not only understood in an external sense: cfr. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 38, *Gaudium et spes*, no. 44; *Ad gentes*, no. 22.

itself, and from a point of view it begins, as we have seen, at Pentecost; b) reflections of experts and bishops have hesitated to choose an appropriate word. Thus, it is not fair, for example, to unilaterally understand adjustment, when there has been a period that, in practice it belonged to inculturation, and the use given to this concept by the Vatican II; c) one must understand the magisterium about inculturation like any other magisterium: the *normative* assumption position of the hierarchy of the Church which uses the advancements of theology, the experience of shepherds and the assistance of the Holy Spirit to lead a Christian community. It is not about a private position among others⁶³; d) one can say that this magisterium has had two phases: one previous to John Paul II where the concept never appears and a second one from 1978 with the more common use of the word. But the first phase is immensely rich and it can be pointed that it begins with some documents previous to Vatican II, and continues with the doctrine richness of Vatican II (just as an example, we mention the doctrine of *semina Verbi*⁶⁴) and with the magisterium of Paul VI, particularly in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964) and his apostolic admonition *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1975). Paul VI saw in the programmatic encyclical, on one side the serious danger of relativism, and on the other the need of listening to the souls and cultures of people. Specially addressing to bishops, he gives a deeply pastoral thought:

“To what extent should the Church adapt itself to the historical and local circumstances in which it has to exercise its mission? How is it to guard against the danger of relativism which would make it untrue to its own dogmas and moral principles? And yet how can it fit itself to approach all men and bring salvation to all, becoming on the example of the Apostle Paul ‘all things to all men’ that all may be saved? (1 Cor, 9, 22).

Since the world cannot be saved from the outside, we must first of all identify ourselves with those to whom we would bring the Christian message-like the Word of God who Himself became a man. Next we must forego all privilege and the use of unintelligible language, and adopt the way of life of ordinary people in all that is human and honorable. Indeed, we must adept the way of life of the most humble people, if we wish to be listened to and understood. Then, before speaking, we must take great care to listen not only to what men say, but more especially to what they have in their hearts to say. Only then will we understand them and respect them,

⁶³ Standaert’s position is not acceptable in this sense, which criticizes the Magisterium for mistaking adaptation with inculturation, or, according to him, for having selected a “minimalist” inculturation interpretation. In his article he pretends to analyze the use of the term inculturation in some Magisterium documents, “non pour y chercher un enseignement du Magistère, mais pour examiner comment s’est transmise l’originalité de l’inculturation” (Nicolas Standaert SJ, *Le terme « inculturation » dans les documents romains*, cit., page 555). A critical answer to this position in Andrew Byrne, *Some ins and out of inculturation*, cit.

⁶⁴ Cfr. Decree *Ad gentes*, nos. 3, 9, 11.

and even, as far as possible, agree with them. Furthermore, if we want to be men's pastors, fathers and teachers, we must also behave as their brothers"⁶⁵.

The Pope's concern can be clearly noted to conciliate the impelling need of evangelizing, with the respect that God requires, of the legitimate natural realities. There is here a great wish of profound esteem and of dialogue together with love for the truth which cannot forget the divine commandments. In 1975, the matter was still unsolved, and in the important encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi*, number 63, he says:

"The question is undoubtedly a delicate one. Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people whom it is addresses, if it does not use their «language»⁶⁶, 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. But on the other hand, evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the pretext of translating it, if, in other words, one sacrifices this reality and destroys the unity without which there is no universality, out of a wish to adapt a universal reality to a local situation. Now, only a Church which preserves the awareness of her universality and shows that she is in fact universal is capable of having a message which can be heard by all, regardless of regional frontiers."

One can see here the logical exposition from the magisterium, contrary to the one of missionology authors. Above all, they emphasize the need of abandoning the adjustment models, which they understand as external and preparatory, and focusing on the fact that communities find by themselves a proper way of expressing the Gospel. But the shepherds, and in this case the Pope, regard as well the integrity of the message of Christ, which should not suffer in the cultural dialogue. That does not mean that the Church should not make an effort to recognize and value the different cultural and even religious traits, but value them in the light of the Revelation, and not the other way around. And so we arrive to the pontificate of John Paul II.

3.2.3 The Church Magisterium and inculturation

During the fruitful pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005), the magisterium and ecclesiastic teachings about inculturation have experienced a notorious advancement in continuity with the previous magisterium. In view of the magnitude of the matter, we will limit to a

⁶⁵ Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (8-6-1964), no. 33

⁶⁶ Formerly and immediately, the Pope clarifies that: "Here, language must not be understood in a semantic nor literary level, but in what could be called anthropological and cultural".

certain master writings⁶⁷. After taking care of the theme in the admonition *Catechesi tradendae* no. 53 (1979), in the encyclical *Slavorum apostoli* no. 21 (1985) the Pope gives a classic definition:

“The work of evangelization which they carried out (Saints Cyril and Methodius) as pioneers in territory inhabited by Slav peoples – contains both a model of what today is called “inculturation” the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church”.

In our opinion, it is very important to point out the two dimensions of the process: on the one side the insertion of the Gospel in the very soul of a definite culture, transforming it from the inside. Not only this. On the other side, the new culture becomes part of the universal communion and makes its own contribution to all the Church, presenting a new way to live Christianity. It must never close in itself, even though it has already been evangelized. As pointed out by John Paul II in the encyclical *Familiaris consortio* no. 10, it must exist in inculturation: *“the two principles of the compatibility with the Gospel of the various cultures to be taken up and of communion with the universal Church”.* In order to receive the Gospel, cultures must be purified from the unworthy elements of the human person or from the catholic faith. And at the same time, they must enter with the communion of the universal Church without closing in themselves, which in most of the cases impoverishes culture.

Retrieving the teachings of the Magisterium and contributions from some theologians, in 1989 the International Theological Commission describes the process of inculturation:

“The process of inculturation may be defined as the effort of the Church to convey the message of Christ in a specific socio-cultural environment, summoned to expand according to its own values, in agreement with the Gospel. The term inculturation includes the idea of growth, mutual enrichment of people and groups, and the encounter with the Gospel in a social environment”.

This is followed by the definition of *Slavorum apostoli*. The perception of inculturation becomes very clear as a gradual process⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ We recommend the wonderful anthology in Italian: Pontificio Consiglio della cultura, *Fede e cultura: antologia di testi del magistero pontificio da Leone XIII a Giovanni Paolo II*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2003.

⁶⁸ The previous numbers of the document are very interesting, which deal with “Nature. Grace. Culture”, as basic notions to understand inculturation.

A Magisterium milestone about inculturation can be found in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) which deals widely about the matter, explaining some important doubts which arouse concerning the present times and the need of Christian mission. The most important sections of the encyclical are parts II of theological nature: “The Kingdom of God” and “The Holy Spirit: The Principal Agent of Mission”, because they proclaim the trinity and salvation nucleus of the mission *ad gentes* (to the non-Christians.) The only savior of humanity is Jesus Christ. Only from faith the mission makes sense, and it does not mix up with inter-religious dialogue or merely human promotion works. Thus the meaningfulness of inserting the paragraph in part V “Incarnating the Gospel in Peoples’ Culture”, “The Paths of Mission”. In our opinion, it is important to consider inculturation not as primary but as a necessary process inside the spreading saving action of the Church. A subordinate process to the true aim of the mission *ad gentes*: “in first place the individual conversion, personal, to Christ; and in second place the formation of a particular Church”⁶⁹. It is the only way to describe in its most adequate context the process of inculturation. In fact, the encyclical references are mainly warning voices to possible deviations:

“The process of the Church’s insertion into peoples’ culture is a lengthy one. It is not a matter of purely external adaptation, for inculturation “means the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures” (Extraordinary Assembly of 1985, Final Report, II, D, 4). The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, which involves the Christian message and also the Church’s reflection and practice. But at the same time it is a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith” (no. 52)

The Pope underlines the *process* category which defines inculturation, a process that besides being lengthy is difficult; due to its “profound and global” character which implies many elements – message, reflection, practice – which demand a great serenity and patience. In the same no. 54, John Paul II points out various criteria. First, he repeats the lines stated in *Familiaris Consortio* no. 74: the compatibility with the Gospel and the communion with the universal Church as a perception line on the right or wrong direction of the process. Besides, he warns about the “risk of passing from a sort of culture alienation to an over valuation of the same, which as a man product is consequently marked by sin. She must be “cleansed, raised up and perfected” (*Lumen Gentium*, 17). Cultures must be “humble” in accepting that some of their cultural traits are not agreeable

⁶⁹ Jesús López Gay, SJ, *Redemptoris missio*, in Pontificia Università Urbaniana, *Dizionario di Missiologia*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 1993, page 419. It is our translation.

with the dignity of God's sons and daughters. Next, he warns again to consider the process of inculturation as certainly lengthy.

The last discernment is relevant if one takes into consideration the practice of some regions where only a group of "experts" guide inculturation:

"In effect, inculturation must involve the whole people of God, and not just a few experts, since the people reflect the authentic sensus fidei which must never be lost sight of inculturation needs to be guided and encouraged, but not forced, lest it give rise to negative reactions among Christians. It must be an expression of the community's life, one which must mature within the community itself, and not be exclusively the result of erudite research. The safeguarding of traditional values is the work of a mature faith". (no. 54)

It is about promoting the creation of small believer communities as the ones described in the Acts of the Apostles, reunited around the Eucharist, the Apostles joined by charity (Acts 2, 42-43).

The last pontifical document that we will review in this section is the encyclical *Fides et ratio* (1998) especially dedicated to the "diakonia of the truth" (no. 2), the Church has made her pilgrim way along the paths of the world to proclaim that Jesus Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14,6). Besides dealing dialogue with philosophy, the document is about the relations between evangelization and cultures in numbers 70-72. From the start, the pope asserts: "From the time the Gospel was first preached, the Church has known the process of encounter and engagement with cultures" (no. 70) and not something that has just appeared in the XX century, not to say the least.

Making an historical reflection about the Christian dialogue with cultures, John Paul II asserts:

"Cultural context permeates the living of Christian faith, which contributes in turn little by little to shaping that culture. To every culture Christians bring the unchanging truth of God, which he reveals in the history and culture of people" (no. 71).

This means that Christians have the capacity of renewing cultures from the inside. "When they are deeply rooted in experience, cultures show forth the human being's characteristic openness to the universal and the transcendent" (no. 70). And this openness leads to accept Christianity as an enrichment. Concerning this, the Jesuit missionary José de Acosta (1540-1600) refers to a story, which should not be over-looked *a priori*, about the reaction of a Mexican native when questioned about his fast embracing of Catholic faith:

“Do not believe, Father, that we accept the law of Christ as unthinkingly as you say, for I want you to know that we are so weary and unhappy with the things that the idols commanded us to do that we had tried to leave them and accept a different law. And as it seemed that the one that you people preached to us had no cruelties and was much to our liking, and was so just and good, we realized that it was the true law and so we received it very willingly”⁷⁰.

This text would be banished by the “ultra-culturists” to the condition of “a justificatory anecdote”, but it shows, nonetheless, a truth expressed in *Fides et ratio*: “Lying deep in every culture, there appears this impulse towards a fulfillment. We may say then, that culture itself has an intrinsic capacity to receive divine Revelation” (no. 71). Men, who are above culture, can clearly perceive the Gospel as a great improvement in respect to their pre-Christian condition.

The Pope also asserts that from Pentecost on, a cultural dialogue has been taking place through Church’s history, where the new successive Christians did not have to give up their cultural identity. “This in no way – says John Paul II- creates division, because the community of the baptized is marked by a universality which can embrace every culture and help to foster whatever is implicit in them to the point where it will be fully explicit in the light of truth” (no. 71). It exists as a refrain in the document about the intrinsic openness of each culture towards the truth, which enables dialogue and the disposition to receive perfection from the “outside” of the culture itself. This, which in several cases is elemental in the technical or economic matters (cultures are willing to accept advances from the outside which make life easier) is essential when the integral perfection of men and women of a determined human group is at stake.

Keeping on the line of culture openness, the Holy Father says:

“This means that no culture can ever become the criterion of judgment, much less the ultimate criterion of truth with regard to God’s Revelation. The Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if in engaging a culture the Gospel would seek to strip it of its native riches and force it to adopt forms which are alien to it. On the contrary, the message which believers bring to the world and to cultures is a genuine liberation from all the disorders caused by sin and is, at the same time, a call to the fullness of truth. Cultures are not only not diminished by this encounter, rather, they are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel’s truth and to be stirred by this truth to develop in new ways”. (no. 71)

⁷⁰ José de Acosta, *Natural and moral History of the Indias*, Book V, Chap. 22, Atlas (BAE 73), Madrid 1954, page 165.

The persistence of the Pope to point out the no-homogeneity between the Gospel and culture (they are not elements of the same order), leads him to assert that a concrete culture could never erect itself as the last judgment criteria in reference to Christian faith. When contacting a new culture, it is not faith, the Gospel, which should change, but the other way around. A change, a conversion, should occur in the culture which will greatly benefit from it as it will be purified of the so many ill-fated elements which all cultures carry with themselves.

Regarding the relation between faith and reason, in number 72 of the encyclical, “it includes a new element, which is at the same time one of the most current and important elements”⁷¹. Even though the Pope mainly refers to the Indian culture, these three criteria also refer to any culture which makes contact with the Gospel:

“The first of these is the universality of the human spirit, whose basic needs are the same in the most disparate cultures.

The second, deriving from the first, is this: 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. To reject this heritage would be to deny the providential plan of God who guides his Church down the paths of time and history.

(...) Thirdly, care will need to be taken lest, contrary to the very nature of the human spirit, the legitimate defense of the uniqueness and originality of Indian thought be confused with the idea that a particular culture tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions” (no. 72).

It is clear in the three criteria the element of each culture to openness (already mentioned) to the truth and towards its own perfection. Each culture is a multi-factor system which moves and evolves towards a self objective. The second criterion is the most ticklish as it demands discerning the cultural elements that the Church has acquired through history and which are dispensable from those which cannot be given up without jeopardizing the integrity of Tradition. There are some elements which are clearer, as the realistic philosophy primarily incarnated in Saint Thomas. It is true that the doctrine of the Aquinas cannot be found in the Holy Scriptures (even though it is based on it), but it would be harmful that in the dialogue with a great culture Saint Thomas would be left aside, to try the dialogue with a “pure Gospel” which has not existed. If danger existed before in the lack of valuation of the positive elements in cultures, now it is precisely the contrary, it is idealized and totalized to cultures, making them the last criteria of discernment.

⁷¹ Janusz Królikowski, Dialogo con le cultura. Attualità e criteri alla luce della Fides et ratio, in « Annales Theologici », 15/1 (Rome 2001) 177. It is our translation.

It is obvious that the third criteria is based on the unity of human kind, which excludes an aprioristic closing in the excellence itself. As Krolikowski states:

“This natural unity of human kind and the cultural variety is the first justification of the mutual openness of cultures, which are man’s fruit from actions, even though he is always the representative of this same human family. Therefore, there is no culture inaccessibility towards other culture from the moment it is created by these same men, and there is no culture which cannot be enriched by the encounter with other cultures, as no man or human group is in itself self-sufficient. Isolation from other cultures and denial of the common meaning are finally revealed, above all, as a poverty cultural choice”⁷².

A person is never worn out by culture; he goes beyond it, and “it is both child and parent of the culture in which they are immersed”⁷³. Before being a member of a culture, he represents the human kind. On the other side, history confirms the fluency of so many cultures which have contributed to other cultures (for example, the Hellenist influence in the Roman culture), they have changed and then have ceased existing. Unfortunately, these “closures” have always been present in history, as for example the XVII century Japanese closure towards external influences. The CELAM has recently report an insidious way of cultural discrimination:

“There is always somebody fighting for another fair cause: respect, esteem, the right to exist and development of native cultures. They do it, however, trying to keep them away from exchanging with other cultures and with the progress of society, encouraging them to reject the richness of Christianity”⁷⁴.

In the antipodal doctrines of *Fides et ratio*, this misunderstanding wish of protecting natives hinders its insertion from the general social flow, and even deprives them from arriving to perfection with Christianity. Moreover, this isolation nowadays is impossible. Sooner or later they will be run

⁷² Ibid., page 197. It is our translation.

⁷³ John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et ratio* (9-14-1998), no. 71.

⁷⁴ CELAM, Towards the 5th Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate Conference. Participation Document, no. 107, CELAM, Bogotá 2005, page 77.

down by “external” society and they will find themselves unable to assimilate the new social changes⁷⁵.

4. The binomial complex Faith-Culture

Once the Church Magisterial on inculturation has been presented in broad outlines, we can deepen the subject of the relation between faith and cultures. Fasoli presents inculturation as “a bi-ambiguous and in a certain way erroneous, therefore ambivalent process”⁷⁶. He is certainly right, given the amount of existing misunderstandings. Shorter, a well-known studioso on the matter, states with a pedagogic sense the relations between African religious values and Christianity:

“The danger (...) with questions of this kind consists in seeing Christianity and African Culture as two competing quantities that flourish at each other’s expense. The more one has a meaning, the less has the other. It is like two rugby teams trying to gain field in front of the other. Reality is certainly different. The result of inculturation should be a synthesis in which, as stated by Pope John Paul II: ‘faith becomes culture’”⁷⁷.

Shorter asserts that one should avoid understanding the dialectic faith-culture as if it was a fight between two rivals. There is no such thing as “winners or losers”. He adds:

“Inculturation means the presentation and re-expression of the Gospel in convenient ways and terms to a culture. This process results in the interpretation of both, without being unfaithful to none of them. Something less is not inculturation. In other words, there must be a syncretism and not a juxtaposition-synthesis of two non-communicated meanings”⁷⁸.

A serious misunderstanding is precisely shown in one of these two last affirmations; which in our judgment hide in inculturation: the presentation of faith and culture as two elements of the same nature; which is a mistake, and it turns against faith as well as against culture. The Gospel

⁷⁵ Hypothetically, we indicate that in the famous Jesuit, Franciscan or Capuchin “reductions”, an analogue danger was hidden: the resolute defense of the natives and their maintenance in the reductions made them remain in a continuous state of “under age”. When by external matters the reductions were disassembled, the native population was in a state of abandonment, accustomed to learn and receive everything from the missionaries.

⁷⁶ M. Grazia Fasoli, L'icona di Maria, riserva simbolica dell'autorappresentazione femminile, in www.mariology.it/notizie2.htm (2-6-2006). It is our translation.

⁷⁷ Aylward Shorter, Inculturation of African Traditional Religious Values in Christianity – How far?, in www.afrikaworld.net/afrel/shorter.htm (2-6-2006). It is our translation. We offer the first phrase in original version: “The danger with questions of this kind consists in seeing Christianity and African Culture as two competing quantities that flourish at each other’s expense”.

⁷⁸ Aylward Shorter, *ibidem*.

and the catholic faith are supernatural, they have a divine origin and their essence cannot be changed. Through history they suffer many changes in their non-essential structures, in their way of preaching the same Gospel, in some juridical determinations of their permanent essence, etc., but it is always the People of God the Father, the Mystical Body of Christ animated by the Holy Spirit. On the contrary, culture is by its own essence subject to permanent evolution, as the collectivity itself changes, suffers from crisis, and even disappears. A great benefit occurs when the Gospel encounters a culture. “While cultures are subject to change and decay, the primacy of Christ is an unquenchable source of life (cf Col 1:8-12, Eph 1:8) and of communion”⁷⁹.

The non-Christian cultures yearn for the Revelation of Christ because they yearn for truth, goodness and beauty which are only found in Christ’s plenitude, regardless of the mistakes that we Christians may have committed. In this regard, one must keep in mind the classical academic principle - *gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit* – grace does not destroy nature, it perfects it⁸⁰. When faith encounters a culture it does not destroy it, it perfects it, as beautifully stated in the Vatican Council II:

“Missionary activity brings about the presence of Christ, the author of salvation. He frees from all taint of evil and restores to Christ its maker whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God who overthrows the devil’s domain and wards off the manifold malice of vice. (...) And so, whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites of culture peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted and perfected for the glory of God, the shame of the demon and the bliss of men”⁸¹.

The seeds of the Verb “whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nations, as a sort of secret presence of God” should be taken into the light but should before be purified of all evil presence. Faith and culture are not two homogenous elements. It is strongly stated in a document of the Pontifical Council for Culture:

“In tune with the objective demands of faith and evangelizing mission, the Church takes into consideration this essential fact: the encounter between faith and cultures operates between two realities which are not from the same order. Therefore, inculturation of faith and evangelization of cultures

⁷⁹ Pontifical Council for Culture, For a Pastoral of Culture (5-23-1999), no. 4.

⁸⁰ Saint Thomas of Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, I-I, q. 8, ad. 2.

⁸¹ Vatican Council II, Decree Ad gentes, no. 9.

*constitute a binomial which excludes all forms of syncretism*⁸². Thus illumine the authentic meaning of inculturation. In the face of all the different and at times contrasting cultures present in the various parts of the world, inculturation seeks to obey Christ's command to preach the Gospel to all nations, even unto the ends of the earth. Such obedience does not signify either syncretism or a simple adaption of the announcement of the Gospel, but rather the fact that the Gospel penetrates the very life of cultures, becomes incarnate in them, overcoming those cultural elements that are incompatible with the faith and Christian living, and raising their values to the mystery of salvation which comes from Christ"^{83,84}.

Somehow we find ourselves in the antithesis of Shorter's affirmations. The problem is not to have a "winner or a loser", but that of faith which by nature comes from a superior order from that of cultures. Syncretism should not in any case be presented as objective of the inculturation process, but as a new synthesis between faith and the new culture, respecting both principles of compatibility with faith and communion with the universal Church. Let us see it in detail.

5. Inculturation and syncretism

As stated in *Pastores dabo vobis*, it is true that "in a number of regions of the world, Christian religion is considered as something foreign to cultures – be they ancient or modern"⁸⁵; the answer to this difficulty, however, cannot be a simple external adaptation nor be syncretism; the only possible way is inculturation.

If a local culture and Christianity remain as two homogenous elements, the inference towards syncretism is almost inevitable. Let us consider this delicate matter by briefly studying the position of two authors. In first place, Louis Luzbetak offers the following interpretation. He starts with the syncretism definition from an anthropological and a religious-missionological point of view:

"From an anthropological point of view, syncretism is any synthesis of one or more creeds or cultural customs, particularly of religious nature. As far as it is a synthesis, syncretism is a terminal process (...) In missionology, however, the term "syncretism" involves Christian theology and can

⁸² Cfr. Indifference and syncretism. Challenges and proposals for the New Evangelization of Latin America. Symposium, San José de Costa Rica, January 19-23, 1992, CELAM, Bogotá, 1992. Original quote.

⁸³ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* (3-25-1992) no. 55. Original quote.

⁸⁴ Pontifical Council for Culture, *For a Pastoral of Culture* (5-23-1999) no. 5.

⁸⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* (3-25-1992), no. 55.

*therefore be defined in a more limited way as a theological inadmissible mixture*⁸⁶.

From the anthropological or sociological position, syncretism is seen as a synthesis between two religions or two cultural customs. For a religion historian, it is a present-day phenomenon. The problem resides, according to the Catholic Church, if that “synthesis” between Christianity and another religion is acceptable. Evidently, the answer is “no”, as a new religious entity has been created which is neither Catholicism nor the other religion. From a point of view, and going back to the XVI Century, it is about idolatry, so persecuted by Spanish missionaries in America which alerted the already quoted Bernardino de Sahagún: “The sins of idolatry and idolatry rites and auguries, and superstitions and idolatry ceremonies, are not completely lost yet”⁸⁷.

It cannot be admitted that Christian and pagan rites coexist. Therefore, if an evangelization process reaches at the end syncretism, the evangelization itself has not achieved its objective. Luzbetak emphasizes: syncretism should not be conceived as a final result. According to him, there are three fundamental problems in reference to the “theological inadmissible mixture”:

1. From the point of view of contents, they are inadmissible because they are forms of crypto-paganism.
2. As a process, they are mainly inevitable and unconscious as they express psychological “laws” associated to all cultural changes.
3. Often times they express important values and sometimes central ones from a society, deserving, therefore, respect. Its existence creates an enormous theological dilemma⁸⁸.

The consequence of syncretism in the pastoral agent must not only be rejection but also reflection. It should learn to listen behind these “mixtures”, “demands” from the human group, which should be attended with imagination and respect to the integrity of the Tradition of the Church, offering attractive proposals to the incompatible answers with faith.

Let us see now the position of the well-known investigator Manuel Marzal (1931-2005), professor at the Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú,

⁸⁶ Louis J. Luzbetak, *Chiesa e cultura*, cit., pages 425-428. It is our translation.

⁸⁷ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Florentine Codex*, ed. cit., Prologue, f. 1r.

⁸⁸ Louis J. Luzbetak, *Chiesa e cultura*, cit., page 428. It is our translation.

studious of the syncretism matter in Latin America from a mainly anthropological, non theological point of view⁸⁹. According to this author:

“When two religions with their respective beliefs, rites, subjective experiences, organization structures and ethical norms have a lengthy contact, three things may happen: blending into a new one creating a synthesis; retaining their identities and superpose creating a juxtaposition, or integrating into a new one, where the origin of each element can be identified, creating a syncretism”⁹⁰.

For Marzal, the usual product would be syncretism. Synthesis is almost impossible as the equivalence between religions is rarely given; juxtaposition is exceptional if the two religions cohabit for a long period. The Hispano-Peruvian professor gives an historic interpretation:

“The lengthy Iberian Catholicism contact with Andean, Mayan and African religions unchained a complex process of persistence, loses, synthesis and re-interpretation of elements of the religions in contact (...) which culminated with the arising of three syncretic religions”⁹¹.

Based on the results of his own investigations and “in situ” works⁹², Marzal exposes the definition of the syncretism process:

“The forming from two religious systems, from a new one, whose beliefs, rites, organization structures and ethical norms are the product of dialectic interaction from the two systems in contact. The result from this dialectic interaction in the different levels of the new religious system will be either the persistence of determined elements with its own form and meaning, or its total loss, as the synthesis from the other elements with its similarities to the other religion; and finally, the re-interpretation of other elements”⁹³.

Up to this point we can make some reflections. As Marzal himself states, it is only about a “theory about nature and formation of the syncretic systems”⁹⁴, from his studies of the communities of Cuzco, Chiapas and Bahía, even though his investigations embrace other groups as well. On

⁸⁹ The book Ibero-American Syncretism stands out on this matter. Peruvian Pontifical Catholic University, Lima 1985. We have followed his most recent piece, Enchanted Land. Treaty on the Latin American Religious Anthropology, Peruvian Pontifical Catholic University, Editorial Trotta, Madrid 2002.

⁹⁰ Manuel M. Marzal, Enchanted Land, cit., page 198.

⁹¹ Ibidem.

⁹² In his book Ibero-American Syncretism, Marzal has studied three cases: Quechuas from Cuzco, Mayas from Chiapas and Africans from Bahía.

⁹³ Manuel M. Marzal, Enchanted Land, cit., pages 198-199.

⁹⁴ Ibid., page 198.

the other side, this author always considers the case of two religions contacts, not the Gospel and native cultures, even though it is clear that traditional cultures cannot be separated from its religious nucleus.

In our judgment, the most important fact is that his perspective is, so far, anthropological-sociological, and not theological. When he refers to the “arising of three syncretic religions” as a result from the arrival of the “Iberian Catholicism”, one should also take into consideration the general historical data of the so called “colonial-vice-royal-Hispanic period of America. There are no objections if in some more or less isolated regions Catholicism did not take roots in native communities, but in the syncretic association with elements of the traditional religion; but this phenomenon cannot be established as a general example as the historical data points that the natives of the inhabited regions, received Christianity and that as generations passed, they assimilated it.

It is possible that still in the 16th Century; at least some natives would have sincerely accepted a “mixed religion”: Christianity and their traditional religion⁹⁵. But this is not the case in the following centuries, at least for the majority of natives. Authors, anthropologists and historians seem to debate between two extremes: the natives never accepted the external imposition of Christian religion, and a naive “triumphal” which maintains that conversion barely presented problems. In our opinion, the historical data that we possess clearly excludes both extremes. The question is very complex as several scientific methodologies should be related (anthropology, theology, history, archeology, etc.)

Following, Marzal makes an “incursion” in the theological field and relates “syncretism and the theology of inculturation”. In our judgment, it is in this part that his focus presents clear elements for criticism. The he asserts that “syncretism is like the other face of inculturation”⁹⁶. It is not the “contrary”, nor the “failure” but “another way of calling inculturation”. Referring again to American natives from the colonial period, he asserts:

“Doubtless, syncretism is a way of cultural resistance, but it is also a form of cultural intelligence; in fact, out of loyalty, the natives resisted not only to their pantheon gods in which they still believed, but also to the way of thinking, feeling and praying of their culture; in other words, they resisted to

⁹⁵ Cfr. Pedro Borges Morán, Mission Methods in the American Christianization, 16th Century, CSIC. Spanish Missionology Department, Madrid 1960, pages 521-525. Concerning the matter of “mixed religion” in the Mexican area, cfr. Robert Ricard, The spiritual conquest of Mexico: Essay about the apostolate and the missionary methods of the mendicant orders in New Spain from 1523-1524 to 1572. (1st. edition 1947), Fondo de Cultura Económica México, México, D.F. 1986, pp. 387-407; Christian Duverger, The Conversion of New Spain Natives. With the text of the “dialogues of the twelve” from Bernardino de Sahagún (1st. edition 1987), Fondo de Cultura Económica México, 1993.

⁹⁶ Manuel M. Marzal, Enchanted Land, cit., p. 200.

*keep their old religion and to make the new Catholic religion they were accepting more of their own. This second resistance often times produces inculturation of faith*⁹⁷.

Marzal agrees with the exhortation *Redemptoris missio* no. 54, where it is written that inculturation should be made by the evangelization receivers and not by the missionaries.

Marzal agrees with the exhortation *Redemptoris missio* no. 54, where it is written that inculturation should be made by the evangelization receivers and not by the missionaries. The problem is that inculturation and syncretism coincide: appealing to syncretism, «many natives and colored people kept together the new Catholic ways which they were increasingly accepting, together with their own, and often created a true inculturation, against or on the sidelines of missionaries»⁹⁸.

To summarize, we are confronted here with two problems: one of historical character that up to which point some of these anthropological analysis made by some groups can be generalized to natives, and the second and more serious one of theological character affecting the present situation of native communities. If syncretism is understood as the blending of two religions giving birth to a third one, this could never be compared with inculturation, which is the incarnation of the Gospel in a cultural context and the incorporation of that culture to the universal Church. The individuals who take part in a culture whose religiosity does not allow the relation with God that He desires, must say “no” to their previous religion and embrace Christianity, saying at the same time “yes” to the authentic human elements that are mixed in their religion which will somehow enrich Christianity⁹⁹. But the Gospel never disappears to become another thing. Let us see a present example: the Peruvian-Amazon Chayahuita ethnia, evangelized since the last years of the XVII century. Their religiosity is described in a form of “hybrid religion”:

“The contact with the Catholic Church for more than three hundred and fifty years has not meant the loss of the Chayahuita religious tradition. Both traditions are lived in parallel. On one side, a rich mythology persists, beliefs

⁹⁷ Ibid., page 201.

⁹⁸ Ibidem. We find a very similar position in the Zapoteca catholic priest Eléazar López Hernández. Cfr. Eléazar López Hernández, Thorns, flowers and fruit of native theology, in Ezequiel Castillo – Carlos Mendoza – Francisco Merlos Arroyo, (eds.), *Secularity and contemporary culture: Challenges for Theology. Memorial of the second theology dialogues* (Cochabamba, October 6-10, 1997), México 1998.

⁹⁹ On the matter of «yes» and «no» to non-Christian religions, cfr. Joseph Ratzinger, *Fede Verità Tolleranza*, cit., pages 19-23.

and rites of native origin; on the other side, Christianity is fully lived by evangelization, the sacraments and popular Catholicism”¹⁰⁰.

The phrase presents Marzal’s problematic: is the described situation a proof of inculturation by the Chayahuitas or is it the failure of evangelization? From the answer to this question one can shape antithetic pastoral plans. In our opinion, the Church Magisterium has clearly decided to consider syncretism as a serious problem that by all means should be avoided. If it is given, it is good to individualized it to keep working inculturation, to make the receivers hundred percent holders of their culture and hundred percent Catholics. At a cultural level, inculturation is the final objective of the process. Theologically, syncretism is pathology.

Presenting syncretism as a common way to accept the Gospel of Christ, opposes the two thousand year-history of the Church: since Pentecost to the present day, millions of men and women who had a previous creed have converted to catholic faith. The first ones were Jewish, and for a time they shared the Mosaic practices; but after the Jerusalem Council it was set clear that between the Church and Moses’ Law there is not only continuity but discontinuity. There were also problems when meeting oriental or roman religions, but people started to join the Church abandoning their previous religion, not in a way of juxtaposition-religion. Above the historical and anthropological research about what happened with evangelization in America, in our judgment it is not possible to assert that syncretism is a valid and laudable system to incorporate to Christianity, much less match it with inculturation. This would almost be the affirmation that man is not capable of authentically receiving the Gospel, which would drain the contents of the Church’s mission.

A very important route to overcome the syncretism-inculturation conflict is to attend the “expedient of truth”. As we have already commented, “all the truth, who ever says it, comes from the Holy Spirit”. If we find elements of truth in pre-Christian religions, they should be assumed in Christianity, the religion of Christ, “Way, Truth and Life” (John 14,6)

Referring again to the evangelizers of the XVI century, one can see that they knew how to distinguish between those elements of truth and the whole religion. If we concentrate in the person of Jerónimo de Mendieta (1525-1604), who was a missionary in the New Spain, we can see that he does not doubt in referring to native rites as «diverse foolishness, fables

¹⁰⁰ Jaime Regan, SJ, Religion between the catholic Chayahuitas in the Peruvian Amazon, in Manuel Marzal, SJ – Catalina Romero – José Sánchez (editors), Religion in Peru at the dawn of the Millenium, Peruvian Pontifical Catholic University, Lima 2002, page 387.

and fictions which they believe as the truth»¹⁰¹, which reflect «how vile is the understanding and how much it perverts the natural light for lack of faith and grace, as they believe and have for certain the foolishness and nonsense in which these unfaithful natives believed»¹⁰².

These phrases that show a clear “no” to pre-Hispanic religions do not hinder the missionary from finding many authentic values in the Aztec religion and culture. In this line we find his consideration for the *huehuehlahtolli* or speeches of the ancient word, which broadcasted messages of high moral content, which Mendieta does not doubt in relating with the Aristotle-ethics, translating three of these speeches¹⁰³. Another “yes” of Mendieta to religious beliefs is that of relating some of them with one revelation of the genuine and true God:

“And this (the sun) is who the Mexicans called ipalnemohuani, which means «from whom everybody has life or lives». And they also called him Moyucuyatzin ayac oquiyocux, ayac oquipic, which means «he who nobody created nor formed, but by his own authority and will makes everything happen». But we believe that this way of talking was left from their ancient forefathers who had a natural and particular knowledge of the true God, having the belief that he created the world, governed it and was his Lord. And this was before the captain enemy of men and usurper of the reverence to the true one, corrupted the human hearts, there is no doubt that the ancestors, from whom this people had their dependency, heard the news of a true God”¹⁰⁴.

As a conclusion to this quotation, we can assert that there is not only a “no” to religions, but a “yes” to its true elements, genuinely human. But these elements do not juxtapose to the Gospel, but once purified they blend in it referring in this case to the argument of a remote natural revelation.

6. Inculturation and evangelization

When the writings about inculturation are reviewed, a tendency to “exaggerate” the role of this process within the activity of the Church is noted. The already quoted Hervé Carrier, for example, asserts: “the final intention of the new evangelization is to Christianize culture, which is the

¹⁰¹ Jerónimo de Mendieta, Native ecclesiastical history, Book II, Chap. I, ed. Atlas (BAE 260), Madrid 1973, page 49.

¹⁰² Ibid., Book II, Prologue to the Christian reader, page 47.

¹⁰³ Cfr. Ibid., Book II, Chaps. XX-XXII, pages 68-73. About the admiration and use of the Franciscans of Aztec huehuehlahtolli, cfr. Luis Martínez Ferrer, L'inculturazione al servizio della persona umana, cit., pages 206-226.

¹⁰⁴ Jerónimo de Mendieta, Native ecclesiastical history, Book II, chap. VIII, ed. cit. page 55.

propagation in all societies of a mentality which refers to Jesus Christ which absorbs the evangelic values”¹⁰⁵. Further on, talking about the conciliation decree *Ad gentes*, he adds: “From the very first lines of the document *Ad gentes*, the necessity to inculturalize without cease the Good News in the whole world, is indicated as the essential mission of the Church”¹⁰⁶.

On this subject, we can point out a text from John Paul II, who places himself in the same direction as the above mentioned author. While addressing the International Council for Catechesis 1992, he said: “To remember the principal missionary nature of the Church means to essentially testify the work of inculturation as an integral diffusion of the Gospel, and of its consequent adaptation to the way of thinking and to life itself; it continues today and constitutes the heart, the media and the objective of the “new evangelization”¹⁰⁷. This means that inculturation is not a secondary aspect of evangelization, but its most intimate nucleus.

All in all, we consider useful to indicate that if we look at things with a more global perspective, one must try to avoid the identification *tout court* of evangelization with inculturation. In the Magisterium there are very clear texts about this mistake. Let us see some of them. The encyclical *Centesimus Annus* from John Paul II teaches us that the social doctrine of the Church “*is itself a valid instrument of evangelization. As such, it proclaims God and his mystery of salvation in Christ to every human being, and for that very reason reveals man to himself. In this light, and only in this light, does it concern itself with everything else: the human rights of the individual, and in particular of the «working class», the family and education, the duties of the State, the ordering of national and international society, economic life, culture, war and peace, and respect for life from the moment of conception until death*”¹⁰⁸. This means that the objective of the Church is a concrete man or a woman. And from there it takes care of all the rest, including culture. The former Pope stressed with much strength in his first encyclical that:

“Accordingly, what is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing with the «abstract» man, but the real, «concrete», «historical man». We are dealing with «each» man, for each one is

¹⁰⁵ Hervé Carrier, *Guide pour l’inculturation de l’Evangile*, Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana (Studia Socialia, Nouvelle Série, 5), Rome 1997, page 19. It is our translation. On this important piece, cfr. my review in «*Annales Theologici*» 13/2 (Rome 1999) 556-560.

¹⁰⁶ Hervé Carrier, *Guide pour l’inculturation de l’Evangile*, cit., page 118. It is our translation.

¹⁰⁷ John Paul II, *Speech to the International Catechism Council (9-27-1992)*, no. 2.

¹⁰⁸ John Paul II, *Encyclical Centesimus annus (5-1-1991)*, no. 54.

*included in the mystery of the Redemption and with each one Christ has united himself for ever through this mystery*¹⁰⁹.

Another clarifying text from John Paul II is the exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*:

*“Evangelization must reach individual human being and society in every aspect of their existence. It is therefore expressed in various activities, and particularly in those which the Synod examined: proclamation, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace and the means of social communication”*¹¹⁰.

Inculturation is seen as *one of the elements* of evangelization. In this sense, the last quote has more value if one takes into consideration that it is about an African context where inculturation is particularly important. If we consider the exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, there are references about inculturation (nos. 70-71), but it is not, by far, the main theme of the exhortation. Therefore, inculturation must always be considered as a partial *aspect* of evangelization, and not as the most important one. Once more, it must be re-confirmed that man (the evangelization objective) has the priority concerning culture (the inculturation objective).

7. Are there reasons for hope?

After having examined some of the main concepts and problems about the Gospel inculturation, one question must be asked: Is it possible to make an inculturation meritorious of people and meritorious of the Church? The apostolic exhortation *Redemptoris missio* does not hesitate in presenting the difficulties: inculturation “*is a lengthy one*”, and besides, “*it is a difficult process, for it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of Christian faith*”¹¹¹. Nobody can make up illusions. Historical teachings warn us about the danger of “mixed religions”, syncretic, that for some represent the model to follow today. For others, the only time that the Church has truly made integral inculturation has been during the first centuries¹¹². García Añoveros, an erudite of the Guatemalan-native context, asks himself and reflects:

¹⁰⁹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor hominis* (3-4-1979), no. 13.

¹¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* (9-14-1995), no. 57.

¹¹¹ John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (12-7-90), no. 52.

¹¹² Of this opinion: Antônio do Carmo Cheuiche, *Inculturation in the Church History*, in Josep-Ignasi Saranyana – Enrique de la Lama – Miguel Lluç-Baixaui (dirs.) *What is Church History?*. Acts from the 16th Theology International Symposium of the University of Navarra, Ediciones Universidad de Navarra, S.A., Pamplona 1996, pages 246-247; Jesús María García Añoveros, *Church and Nativism*, in «Hispania Sacra», 54 (Madrid 2002) 466.

“Who or by whom will the process of inculturation be carried out? The evangelizer who comes from other cultural world, the natives themselves, or both at the same time? If natives, who in principle are the most competent to do it are the ones, have they the preparation and capability to do it today? It does not seem so. How then will we get to it? It is the concern of the Catholic Church to find the adequate solution to these complicated and complex matters since it is openly involved in this”¹¹³.

The challenges are delicate, and there is no clear path to solve them. However, we should not stop hoping. At the end of the day, it is Christ who wishes for the salvation of people, the evangelization of cultures. We simply wish to offer in our anthology the words of the Magisterium, of the Latin American bishops and of the various entities of the Roman curia. We are induced by the conviction that the solution to the inculturation challenges must necessarily be carefully heard remaining loyal to the Church Magisterium. To pay no heed or even worse, to reject the Magisterium, is also a lack of obedience towards Christ and a futureless attitude. Only attending the Magisterium as an indispensable source to outline the pastoral problems, we can be sure regardless of everything, of taking the correct path. Only then we can have reasons for hope.

And in several occasions the Magisterium has referred to Our Lady of Guadalupe as a light for inculturation:

“Latin America, in Our Lady of Guadalupe, offers a great example of perfectly inculturalized evangelization. In fact, in the character of Mary -from the beginning of Christianization in the New World and on the light of the Gospel of Jesus- several authentic native cultural values were incarnated. The great principle of inculturation is reflected in the mestizo face of Our Lady of Tepeyac: the intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values through the integration in Christianity and the establishment of Christianity in the various cultures (cf. Redemptoris mission, 52)”¹¹⁴.

It is true that to scientifically study the principal testimonies of the apparitions on December 9-12, 1531 –the miraculous weave in the Mexican cloak and the story of the *Nican mopohua*–, a less polemic environment (specially in Mexico) and even more scientific works are necessary: a critical edition of the *Nican mopohua* and a combine and exhausting physical-chemical study of the Mexican cloak. Maybe the times are not yet ripen. The produced bibliography, the popular manifestations

¹¹³ Jesús María García Añoveros, *Church and Nativism*, cit., pages 465-466.

¹¹⁴ John Paul II, Opening Speech to the 4th Latin American General Episcopate Conference, Santo Domingo, 10-12-92, no. 24. Cfr. also 3rd Latin American General Episcopate Conference (Puebla de los Angeles 1979), *Latin American Evangelization in the present and future*, no. 446; John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in America* (1-22-99), no. 70.

and the ecclesiastic documents on the matter are enormous¹¹⁵. Deepening on the documents we have about the incultural message of our Lady of Guadalupe, can be a fantastic way to guide the pastoral praxis.

One of the first sung-examples of faith expression by the naturals for our Lady of Guadalupe is the “Pregón de atabal” (atabal Declaration), written by the lord of Azcapotzalco, Francisco Plácido, and sung on December 26, 1531 (for some 1533). Matching the teponaztli (a little drum), it was sung while moving the image of Our Lady from the Mexican cathedral to the Tepeyac hermitage. Its first verses in the Castilian version are a beautiful example of Christian faith established in the local values:

*“I rejoiced in the group of many-colored and varied flowers tonacaxochitl,
which raised overwhelmed and miraculous,
opening their corollas in your presence.
Oh, our Holy Mother Mary!
By the water was singing (Holy Mary):*

*«I am the precious plant of hidden blooms;
I am the making of the One, of the perfect God, I am the best of creatures».
Your soul is as alive in the painting.*

*We sing to her by the big book and we dance to her with perfection.
And you, Bishop, our father¹¹⁶, preach there, by the bank of the water.
God created you, Oh Holy Mary! Among plenty flowers;*

*And made you be re-born;
By painting you in the episcopate.
Artistically he painted you.*

*Oh, in the venerably canvas your soul was hidden.
Everything there is perfect and artistic.
Oh, here I want to live permanently!”¹¹⁷*

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¹¹⁵ Just as an introduction to the matter, we point: José Luis Guerrero Rosado, Nican mopohua. An explanation attempt. Pontifical university of Mexico (Mexican Library, 7), Mexico 1998, vol. 2; Ernesto de la Torre – Ramiro Navarro de Anda, Historical Guadalupan testimonies, Fondo de Cultura Económica México, México 1999; Fidel González Fernández – Eduardo Chávez Sánchez – José Luis Guerrero Rosado, The encounter of Our Lady of Guadalupe with Juan Diego, Porrúa, México 1999; II Workshop of Bishops about native pastoral, inculturation and native theology. The Guadalupan incident, model of evangelization perfectly inculturalized, Puebla, October 23-26 2000, Puebla 2000; Miguel León-Portilla, Tonantzin Guadalupe: nahuatl thought and christian message in “Nican mopohua”, The National School – Found of Economical Culture México D.F. 2001, Javier García González, Tonantzin Guadalupe and Juan Diego, in the dawn of México, Diana, México 2002.

¹¹⁶ Friar Juan de Zumárraga (1468-1548).

¹¹⁷ Francisco Plácido, Pregón de Atabal, in Ernesto de la Torre – Ramiro Navarra de Anda, Historical Guadalupan Testimonies, cit., page 23.