

PEOPLES DIFFER
(An Approach To Inculturation
In Evangelisation)

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CONTENTS

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PREFACE	7
INTRODUCTION	13
I: EVANGELISATION	15
Definition	15
Double Concept	16
Triple Pole	16
The Situation	16
The Message	18
The Agent	19
II: INCULTURATION	21
Aim of Inculturation	21
The Role of the Social Scholar	22
Emphasis on Inculturation	22
Reasons for Stress	23
Historical Perspective	25
Progression in the Concept of Inculturation	27
Inculturation	32
Consequences	33
III: CULTURE	38
Double Aspect of the Human Person	38
Consequences	39
Culture	40
Community	42
Characteristics of Culture	45
Cultural Norms	46
Ideal and Actual Culture	47
IV: SCIENCES OF MAN	49
V: SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY	54
Functionalism-Structuralism	56
Structuralism	57

Functionalism	57
Interpretation of Customs	61
VI: SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF AFRICAN SOCIETIES	64
Lines	64
Clans	65
Principles of Lineal Societies	67
Patrilineal Fathers and Matrilineal Fathers	82
VII: CHURCH'S LAW	84
Avoidance of Isolation and Alienation	86
VIII: CONCEPTION OF MAN	90
IX: OUTLINE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION	94
Spirits	94
Equilateral Triangular Representation	95
Supreme Being	96
Tutelary Spirits	99
Ancestors	100
Witches and Sorcerers	101
Magic	103
Diviners	103
Medicine-men	104
Totem	104
Taboos	106
X: LIFE CYCLE	106
Birth	106
Adulthood	107
Death	107
Convergences	108
Child-naming Ceremony	110
Sociological Adulthood	112
XI: WORSHIP	117
XII: CONCLUSION	117
END NOTES	119

PREFACE

This book, the aim of which is to promote inculturation in evangelisation touches on what, in my view, is very central to the church's reason for being, namely, to proclaim Jesus Christ to people taking into consideration their cultural particularities. As the author rightly observes, "you cannot start evangelising without knowing whom you are going to preach to" (p.3).

The proclaimer of the gospel proclaims the word of God to people whose needs, aspirations, weaknesses, strengths, way of life, beliefs, the things that matter or do not matter to them, symbols, language, idiosyncrasies etc; determine their level of receptivity. The proclaimer of the gospel ignores these things to his or her own peril. The author then hits the bull's eye when he states that people's "*situation*... is of vital importance to evangelisation," (p.4).

Indeed the situation dictates not only the content of the message but also the mode of delivering the message.

In my view, chapter one of the book which addresses these issues of *situation* the *message* and the *agent* serves as a key to the whole book. Any serious thought on evangelisation must take into consideration its insparable reference points of *Situation*, *Agent* and *Message*. In Chapter Two, the author addresses the question of inculturation, which term he defines as "the incarnation of the Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a new creation" (p.20). After comparing Inculturation with other key concepts which have approaches

A priest or religious attending a course is trying to deepen his commitment to do just that. It is very important that in evangelisation, you behave like Jesus Christ who was patient, and kind and even suffered, not anything less than death. The message is what one studies when one is in the seminary or is a novitiate. Being formed or continuing one's formation equips one to intensify the message, to deepen the message. The formator's part in the whole process is not to make somebody an agent; the person is an agent already. The Lord has called him. The formator's part is to explain the situation so that one appreciates those with whom one is going to work.

II INCULTURATION

This is what we call **Inculturation**. The two concepts of evangelisation and inculturation are more or less the same. In both you study a situation and bring the Word of Christ to bear on it. You should be able to analyse the situation in which you find yourself, the situation you are likely to operate in, the situation which will be the context of your inculturation.

It is for this reason that I find it a great pity that priests do not take their time to study the rubrics of the Roman Missal. If you do not know what the Roman Missal is saying, how can you inculturate it? A perfect knowledge of what exists is what paves the way for adaptation or adjustment or elimination or replacement.

Aim of Inculturation

The aim of inculturation is to purify the society, to animate the society, to get rid of the obnoxious things in the society so that there is a new creation. Inculturation does not mean the outright condemnation or commendation of anything. It is a slow process that continues.

An example from Jesus Christ clarifies the point further. From all points of view, Jesus was a wonderful man, indeed a perfect man. When He saw people going to stone a woman caught in adultery, He went to the woman's rescue in a very clever way. Obviously, He did not approve of adultery. He too was convinced that adultery was wrong but He was not angry with the woman. He did not approve the hypocrisy of those who were going to stone the woman. He disliked it but He did not show anger against them. He went about the matter in such a way that He could not but impress upon both the woman and her adversaries that they were wrong and had to change their attitude to life. *Let the one among you who is guiltless be the first to*

throw a stone at her... Has no one condemned you?... Neither do I condemn you. ... Go away, and from this moment sin no more. (John 8:7-11).

In the same way, the agent of evangelisation should accept the gravity of the situation but find a way of going about it. The work we are doing is the work of the Lord, so we must commend the person to the Lord when we meet a problematic case.

The Role of the Social Scholar

The role of the social scholar is to analyse the situation and draw conclusions from it. The social scholar says nothing that people did not know before or that was not there before. He does not invent anything; he only draws attention to what is there which people may not have noticed. A social anthropologist or a sociologist does not create the situation; he finds it there. Hence everything that is going to be said hereafter is there already; it is only going to be highlighted and by explanation and examples.

Emphasis on Inculturation

Nowadays there is a lot of talk about Inculturation. But Inculturation is not something new. It started with the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. Whereas He was God, as explained by St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians Chapter 2, He did not cling to His Godhead. He could have done so but He humbled Himself, emptied Himself of His Godhead and became a human being.² That is the *Incarnation*. Incarnation means the Son of God becoming a human being, living like you and me in all things except sin. With Incarnation, the process of Inculturation began. Jesus came to live among us and used the elements proper to His culture to proclaim and explain His message. His examples, parables, way of life, language, food, experiences, were all based on the society in which He found Himself, although He had come to save the whole world. His message was meant for all cultures but every culture had to make it its own.

We have a perfect example in humanity. The Chinese, Japanese, Maori, Kikuyu, Asante are all human beings but the Chinese is not a Kikuyu and the Kikuyu is

not a Maori and the Japanese is not an Asante. We have all adapted humanity to our different cultural conditions. When the Lord asked His disciples to go and preach to all nations,³ He meant just that. They were to preach to all peoples in the concrete situation of life they found themselves in. That is Inculturation. So, Inculturation takes its inspiration from the Incarnation.

Reasons for Stress

Inculturation has become a household word within the last 40 or so years. If we wonder why inculturation has become so much talked about and is taken so seriously that it was the first of the sub-titles of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994, it is for several excellent reasons, two of which are the following:

1. We have now become more aware than ever before of the missionary nature of the Church. The Church has always been missionary but its missionary character has come to the fore in our thinking only relatively recently.

The Church being missionary, means that the Church is sent on a mission to *all* nations. If the Church is sent to all nations, then that challenges us. It means then that the Church must take the character, the way of life, of all nations into contention. One cannot go from England to, say, Liberia and not take into account the fact that Liberians are different from English people. So the essential missionary nature of the Church, of which we have become more and more aware now, challenges us to be aware of the differences in our outlook on life, cultures, and understanding of phenomena, etc. Probably the most important canon in social anthropology is that *peoples differ*. At one level all human beings are the same; at another level we are totally different.

2. Our awareness of the essentially missionary character of the Church has awakened in us an equally important awareness of the culturally pluralistic nature of our world. We are in a multi-cultural situation, in a

multi-cultural world. We have become more and more aware that there is not one culture in this world. We have become more and more aware that peoples differ, we are not the same. There is no mono-culture; ours is a world with many different cultures. We have to take that into account and know that different people understand things differently. What is even more important, we have become aware that there is no lie as blatant and as patent and as dangerous as the assumption, implicit or explicit, that there is a super-culture somewhere in the world. All cultures are of equal importance. Every culture is as significant to those who have it as any other culture is to those involved in it.

Where you come from, where you live, your environment, all have a lot to do with who you are. Even your religious ideas, your language, your imageries, proverbs, idioms, the way you live, all these are conditioned by your environment. For example, if you come from land-locked Burkina Faso, you cannot have a god of the sea; it is impossible. If you are a Tuareg in the Sahara desert, I do not think that forest monsters can be part of your religious vocabulary. If there is a god of the sea, then it must be for people who live along the sea. In the same way, it is reasonable to suppose that people who live in mountainous areas have ideas about mountains that may be religious in character. People who live in a certain environment will manage to have a language, which reflects that environment. If they are living in the forest, their proverbs will be about trees, animals in the forest, etc. So the environment is very important in the determination of our ways of life and what we consider to be important, and what not so important.

Indeed the environment may indicate that we be careful even in the use of Scriptural texts and parables. Whereas biblical examples have a general application in their symbolic interpretation, they may produce contradictory sentiments in some cases.

There is an interesting example of a group of people on an island in the Pacific Ocean called Trobrianders. They live a kind of symbiotic life with pigs, as some people in Africa have with cows. For these people, the prodigal son,⁴ who squandered all his money on drinks and women and ended up eating with pigs

was indeed very lucky. There could be nothing more honourable than eating with pigs!!

All this goes to reinforce the absolute need for the full appreciation of the context of evangelisation or inculturation. If one does not study the situation, one is going to insult people, or condemn them unjustly. For the Trobrianders, pigs are the most important elements in life.

Historical Perspective

Before we deal with inculturation as such, it would be good to give the discussion a brief historical flavour.

In 1659, some missionaries were going to China and they were given these instructions by the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, formerly called Propaganda Fide. *Do not waste your zeal or your powers of persuasion in getting these people to change their rites unless these be very obviously opposed to faith and morals. For what could be more ridiculous than to import France, Spain, Italy or any other part of Europe into China? What you carry with you is not a national culture but a message which does not object to or offend the sound tradition of any country but rather fosters it.*⁵

What this means should be clear to all. The customs that are found in Uganda, Cameroon, Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, if they are not obviously opposed to morals and faith, the Church would like to keep and foster. Jesus Christ came and lived among us. He brought a message. He did not come to change our customs. The missionaries were to respect these customs and not destroy them and replace them with customs from their own countries. That would be religious domination.

In the 17th century, there was a hot controversy among missionaries in China and India. Matteo Ricci and Di Nobili were Jesuit missionaries who went from Europe to the East. Matteo Ricci went to China. He realised that it would be easy for him to convert the Chinese if he adopted their way of life. He did. He studied their literature. He plunged himself into the situation of the Chinese and if he had been allowed to continue like that, he would have converted a good lot of the Chinese.

But then the Dominicans were opposed to his method of evangelisation and reported him to Rome, accusing him of having become a pagan and not preaching Christianity. Rome wrote to ask him to stop the experiment. He went to Rome and explained to the authorities exactly what he was doing. Rome then allowed him to continue. He went back to China and the Dominicans again reported him to Rome. And so the controversy continued. Matteo Ricci died in 1610. After his death, his followers continued to go to Rome to explain their position any time they were accused of heresy. In 1740, Pope Benedict XIV sided with the opponents of Matteo Ricci and abolished everything Matteo Ricci had done. The Emperor of China was very furious, imprisoned the missionaries and drove them away from his land. China, which was gradually being won over to Christ, became lost to the Saviour.

It was only in 1939, when Pius XII was Pope, that he ruled that, after all, what Matteo Ricci was doing was correct. He only wanted Christ to be part of the Chinese culture. But it was too late. The same thing happened in India with Di Nobili. He too tried to live the life of Brahmans, the highest caste in India, to study their literature and their way of life, in order to be able to influence them and the Indian people as a whole. He met with stiff opposition not in India but, ironically, from Rome which listened to those who reported him, Di Nobili, and his confreres. The result was that the mission there too collapsed.⁶

As we have seen, if you are a real missionary, you should study the situation. You must be like Jesus Christ. He took on human nature; He became one of us. He suffered like us. Rome should have allowed the missionaries to do that. She did not. Now less than 3% of the people of India is Catholic. If they had been allowed to go on, as the document of 1659 stipulated, there is no doubt that Catholicism in India and in China would have taken on a totally different turn from what we have now.

At the end of the day, the controversy changed in character. It was no longer Jesuits versus Dominicans. There were Jesuits who turned against the methods of Matteo Ricci and there were Dominicans who joined his ranks. This was

because it took on the character of nationalism. Both Dominicans and Jesuits from one country would take one stand against Dominicans and Jesuits from another country. Jealousy, which is a very dangerous thing, was another cause of the controversy. Hence the root causes of the confusion were misunderstanding, jealousy, prejudice and excessive particularism, the very vices that Inculturation seeks to eradicate.

Progression in the Concept of Inculturation

We are talking about Inculturation, the concept of which has undergone several changes. As has been repeatedly said, Inculturation began with the Incarnation. Jesus is the Father, the Source, the Cause and the Inspiration of Inculturation which means nothing more or less than accepting Christ in your own way and passing Him on to others.

How has Inculturation progressed over the years? In the beginning, it was done in a *pedagogical* manner. All began with the Fathers of the Church who *taught* the Christian religion in accordance with the religious and philosophical thinking of their age. They have left us a wonderful legacy of their teaching in their writings. Missionaries too taught the message of Christ. Later on, when missionaries began to go all over the world, the concept of *Pedagogy* gave way to that of **Imposition**. *Imposition* means thrusting something on somebody else, asking somebody to do something because it is good, whether he understands it or not. *Imposition* here refers to the missionary methodology whereby we were told how to do things - how you pray, how you say *I am sorry*, etc. You are instructed.

As should be obvious, the word *imposition* in this context is not being used in a perjorative sense. It is not being used as a synonym of compulsion or coercion. What is meant is that we in the mission world were told what to do. For example, among the Asante of Ghana and, I suppose, many other ethnic groups, the bodily symbol for *I am sorry* is to place the back of your right hand in the palm of your left hand. To strike your chest is a symbol for defiance, admitting having committed an action without being sorry for it. It is something like saying: *I did it and so what?* Yet Asante Catholics were taught to strike their chest during the recitation of the Confiteor. In other

words, one was asked to use a sign which meant *I am not at all sorry* to say *I am sorry*. Even if, as time went on, we came to accept that sign of striking the chest as meaning 'I am sorry', the implication was that we were using that sign in Church to mean *I am sorry* and outside the Church to mean *I am defiant*. In this way, we were alienated from the society. You would not see anybody outside the Church striking his chest and saying *I am sorry*.

We were supposed to understand that striking the chest meant *I am sorry* because somebody from Europe had come to tell us so. What can be more absurd and ridiculous than this imposition of European culture on the Asante?

We have taken so many things for granted. Think about the way we show respect to an elderly person in our societies. Kneeling down means *I am sorry*. Yet when we enter the Church, we kneel down before the Blessed Sacrament and what we want to indicate is that we adore Christ and not that we are sorry. If we wanted to say we are sorry, we would put the back of our right hand in the palm of our left hand. For the Asante man, the bodily expression of the sentiment of adoration would be bearing the right shoulder, taking your right foot off your sandals and bending the body deeply.

We have been told that when we are going to read the Gospel, we should stand up. Why do we stand up? What the Church wants to tell us is *be respectful to the Word of God*. But is standing up the way we show respect to an older person's word? The sign of respect for the word of the chief is not standing. In Europe, yes. In Asante, no. If the King of Asante is speaking and you stand up, you will be told to *sit down and listen*. To stand up during the reading of the Gospel, therefore, is meaningless, even disrespectful, in our cultural set-up; it is an imposition. Those who brought us the faith should simply have told us that at this stage, we should express profound respect for the Word of the Lord. The rest then should have been left to us. We should have been allowed to look for the symbol of respect and use it.

One clear imposition is the use of the Latin at Mass which prevailed until recently. Nobody understood the language in which we were supposed to be addressing God, our Father, in an affectionate and intimate way. All this showed a sort of mono-culturalism that has been observed to be more harmful to the Church than pluralism.

The Gospel is to be preached to a definite people as they are. If you find yourself among the Aba people of Nigeria, for example, it is up to you to find out and respect the symbols of Aba. To ask the Aba people to use a symbol in worship which is the direct opposite of what they want to tell God is wrong. You cannot say because Aba is a market town and many people go to Aba to trade, therefore we must find a certain common language which is understood by all people. You would be looking for *uniformity* which has nothing to do with *unity* and may, in fact, vitiate unity.

The Church may want all Christians - Chinese, Igbo, Xhosa, Bemba, Navaho, etc. - to express joy at a given occasion. That is unity. How that joy is expressed is left to the people concerned. If I were to express joy linguistically, I would say *anigwee*, the Xhosa would say *ngilabul*. What is important is that we express joy. The how is irrelevant, the understanding is all important. It is in the understanding that the unity is expressed, not in the mode of expression.

When the Igbo use the word *nwa*, the Akan *akwadaa* and the English *child*, they are saying exactly the same thing. If because I, an Asante, want to be one with the Igbo I say *nwa* to him, I am not referring to *child* at all; I am referring to *snail!!*. Uniformity can destroy unity.

A time came then when *Imposition* gave way to *Translation* which means rendering a concept from one language into another, putting into one's language what somebody else has expressed in his language. Nothing comes from me; I just look at the words of somebody's language and translate them. I render them in my own tongue. In this way, we had prayers, hymns, catechisms, Scripture readings, etc. rendered from the English or Latin languages into the Asante language. Nothing came from within ourselves. There was no doubt that we

had to move from this situation to another in which we could take some initiative.

From *Translation*, then we came to *Adaptation*. *Adaptation* is the word you would find in most ecclesiastical documents, for example, Vatican Council II and Papal documents, etc. It has been found out that *Adaptation* is worse than *Imposition*. *Adaptation* implies conforming yourself to somebody else's idea and making it your own. Why would you conform yourself to somebody else's thinking if not because you believe that that person's idea is better than yours? *Adaptation*, in the end, is condemnatory, if only imperceptibly.

Let us illustrate this by an example. Take, for example, the study of Theology. We are told to conform ourselves to Thomistic Theology. The way Africans think is totally different from the way Europeans think and the way St. Thomas Aquinas thought. St. Thomas Aquinas came to the scene long after St. Augustine. St. Augustine wrote many books. St. Thomas Aquinas came and used the philosophy of Aristotle to explain the faith and in many instances relied on what St. Augustine, basing himself on the philosophy of Socrates, had profusely written.

During our seminary days, we were told to use the philosophy of St. Thomas in our theological studies; we must adapt our thinking to the philosophical system of somebody who lived in the 16th century. Whether that thinking was intelligible to our people or not, whether our people understood it or not, we had to study the concepts of St. Thomas in order to study about God to be able to preach to our people. But our people have their own lofty ideas about God. They do not have to know the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas to know about the existence of God. God had been part and parcel of their life all the time.

So in those days, we were to adapt ourselves to the system of St. Thomas Aquinas and, as it were, forget about our own. But pertinent questions arise: Why should I not examine the proverbs of my people to see what truths

they carry for Christianity? Why should I not go through the myths, the rituals and history of my people to find sublime ideas about God? The Old Testament is talking about God but it is not talking about God in the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas. I have nothing against the philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas or, for that matter, of any other great thinker or theologian. Indeed these philosophical systems are wonderful but the point at stake is that those philosophical systems were suitable for particular peoples at particular places in particular eras.

St. Thomas applied his philosophical concepts to the way Jesus becomes present in the Eucharist. We all believe that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. We Africans have no problem with this. St. Thomas Aquinas tries to explain what he called trans-substantiation; in other words, how bread becomes the Body of Christ and how wine becomes the Blood of Christ. His insight is that: *The substance of bread becomes the substance of the Body of Christ.*⁷ That is what we call *Transubstantiation*. But the question arises: what is substance? St. Thomas would answer: *Substance is what makes something what it is.*⁸ The substance of a table is not its colour or size or shape or weight or cost or beauty. All these are accidents; but it is what makes a table a table. The explanation of such a sublime truth is therefore based on a philosophical concept which not many people would accept since it is not clear. What if, as a scholar, I do not accept that there is anything called a substance? Would that mean that the Eucharist is not the Body and Blood of Christ? The African would consider such an exercise to explain how bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ fruitless. For the African, Jesus is present there. What appears to be bread and wine is His Body and Blood and that is sufficient, acceptable and satisfying. Jesus said it: *This is my Body and this is the cup of my Blood.*⁹ That is sufficient because Jesus is the Truth. There is no need for me to find out how it happens. With the difficulties posed by the concept of *adaptation*, it was no wonder that a new concept replaced it.

The concept of *Indigenisation* attempts to solve the problems posed by other concepts. When we say something is indigenous, it means that it comes

from the people. It is proper to them; it originates from them. We have indigenous ways of prayer, indigenous ways of preaching, indigenous ways of explaining the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, etc. These are ways that are not taken from some other people's ideas and practices.

However, the word *Indigenisation* should be used with caution since it gives the impression that culture is not changing, that culture is static; whereas culture is changing all the time; it is a dynamic phenomenon. There is no culture which is not continuously borrowing and there is no culture all of whose traits are from within itself or some of whose traits do not disappear. Substituting indigenisation with *Africanisation* did not help much either because the term *Africanisation* has racial overtones. Moreover, Africa exhibits such complex, exciting and bewildering variety of cultures and modes of life that to talk in terms of Africa globally is a bit presumptuous. Hence we had to adopt a new concept and the lot fell on *Contextualisation*.

Contextualisation is what I was talking about at the beginning. It means looking at things from their context, the situation. We are bringing the message of Christ to bear on a situation. The context is of vital importance. Whom am I dealing with? Deal with people as you find them. However, *Contextualisation* also has a little bit of a problem with it, in the sense that the context always has a historical background. There is nothing happening now which does not have some background in the past. We cannot forget about the past. The past is very important to the understanding of the present. Therefore, at least a little delving into the past is unavoidable. In view of all this, there is no doubt that the best word to describe the process of making the faith our own is *Inculturation*.

Inculturation

From all that we have said, how do we define inculturation? There are many definitions of inculturation but we will settle for one that is simple enough.

Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds

*expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and re-making it so as to bring about a new creation.*¹⁰

At the end of the day, Inculturation takes its source and originates from the Incarnation of Christ the Lord. *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn. 1:14). Incarnation here means *insertion*, planting, bringing into being, of something. A few questions arising from the description above need to be answered:

1. What are we trying to insert, to plant? The Christian message and the Christian life are what we are trying to implant, to insert, to introduce in a given culture.
2. Where are we planting or inserting them? Where are we introducing them? The answer is: in a particular cultural context, not in the whole world but among a particular people somewhere in the world, no matter how few they are.
3. How? By using elements proper to that culture.
4. And for what purpose? In such a way that this experience becomes a principle that animates, unifies, transforms, guards, purifies that culture. You want to transform that culture; you want to re-make that culture, to produce a new being so that there is a new creation, not the old thing anymore. The Christian message must transform lives, it must change, it must purify, it must animate, it must re-make the culture so that there is a new creation.
5. What is the end of inculturation? For some, the aim of inculturation is to be a means to this end. For others, there has been no inculturation if this end has not been achieved.

Consequences

Many conclusions flow from this explanation of Inculturation. Inculturation deals with the totality of the Christian life. It is very important to

remember this. When we talk about inculturation, we are always thinking about dancing and singing and drumming. That is liturgical inculturation. It is important but not the end of the affair. Inculturation has to deal with the entire Christian experience; it has to deal with the Christian message as a whole. As Cardinal Lourdusamy once said: *Every aspect of the life and activity of the Church should be inculturated or indigenous: indigenous life-style, indigenous arts, liturgy, spirituality, indigenous forms of religious life, indigenous organizations and institutions.* (Peter Schineller, S.J., *A Handbook on Inculturation*, pp. 23-24). Inculturation has to deal with **Faith, Morality and Worship.**

These are the three main elements that make religion. You cannot have a religion without faith, without morality and without worship. In all religions, you must believe in somebody, in something; you must believe in a reality that you think is higher than yourself, a reality that you think you can depend upon, a reality that you think can help you. There are some movements that are not real religions but ways of life because they lack one or other of these three elements.

St. Thomas Aquinas was a perfect example of somebody who inculturated at the level of the faith and morality, not at the level of the liturgy. In every religion, apart from belief in a Supreme Being, because you believe in such a being, you mould your character after what you think are His wishes. For example, you believe that that being does not want you to steal, so you do not steal; you think that the being wants you to love your enemies so you love your enemies; you do not tell lies because the being does not want you to tell lies; that being wants you to be kind to strangers so you are kind to strangers, etc. That is the area of morality; it is very important.

It is after faith and morals that you come to **worship**. From time to time, those who believe in the same Lord come together and, as social beings, exhibit their faith in and love for this overlord. In this regard, religion is not a private affair. It has a social dimension. To believe in a being higher than yourself and rely on him for yourself would not constitute a religion.

Here we have Liturgical Inculturation. This must come third, not first. All of these areas fall under the scope of inculturation - the way you explain the faith, the way to go back to the past to find out why people were so good in those days and things have changed so drastically that now armed robbery, devil worship, bribery and corruption, rape, prostitution, abortion and what have you are becoming bread and butter in Africa. The pandemic of AIDS is staring at us in the face and yet we do not apply the only solution to it - good moral life.

Why? What do we do now? How do we utilise the immense wealth of wisdom of the past to bring back sanity to our society? Answers to such questions are part of inculturation. Everything we do, we are inculturating. Examples are many. For example, among the Dagaaba of Ghana, there is a belief that a person killed by lightning is cursed by God and should not be touched. The Ewe have this cult called the *Trokosi*. These are negative elements in the society which must be eliminated. Therefore, when we talk about elements proper to a culture, we distinguish between *good* elements, *evil* elements and *indifferent* elements. Ideas about God, morality and good life are good. These are wonderful elements which we must use. We do not have to go and ask the European to tell us that God exists. In our own societies, we have a wonderful God, Creator, Eternal, Mighty, etc. We do not have to be convinced of this. An Asante proverb says: *One need not show God to a child.*

In the past when you did something horribly wrong, people would ask you, *Don't you fear God?; How can you steal from a blind person?; How can you laugh at a leper?;* etc. That is morality. These are some elements that are excellent. Our moral code was dynamic. It related to persons here on earth before being elevated to God.

But there are elements that are evil which we cannot countenance. The operations of some secret societies are terrible everywhere in Africa. Devil worship is coming into some societies in Africa. It is entering the universities as well.

In 1977, when the Bishops of Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Liberia and Ghana inaugurated the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa (AECAWA) in Ibadan, we invited the then Head of State of Nigeria, Col. Olusegun Obasanjo, to address us. He could not come himself. Instead, he sent a representative who read his Welcome Address on his behalf. In the Address, the Head of State pleaded with us to do something about the evils of secret societies in Nigeria. Some priests had been murdered because they had preached against secret societies and satanic practices.

There was a time when, in some societies in Nigeria, twins were considered to be an abomination. Among some people, there was a time when on the death of a king, many heads were chopped off to accompany him. There is a society in the Western Region of Ghana which abhors 10th born children. Look at the treatment of women, especially in patrilineal societies. These are all bad elements in our cultural situations that have either to be corrected or abolished.

Some elements are also indifferent; they can be good and they can be bad. Dancing, in itself, is not evil or good. Some dances can be obscene and some can be edifying.

Some people are of the erroneous view that inculturation is going back to antiquarianism. This is totally wrong. Inculturation is not saying that we should not look forward. Inculturation does not mean that we should adopt customs at all costs. The spirit of inculturation is that there are certain elements in the culture that are good and that are lasting and which must be kept. When you go to a funeral, you should not look at what people are doing. You should ask questions. Why is it that when that person died his people did not throw his body away like a dog? Why is it that among the Igbo a person is buried in the compound? Why is it that among some people, a person is buried in the bedroom?

Isn't it all because it is believed that the person cannot die? Immortality of the soul is symbolised or even expressed by the way we cry, the way we dress the

dead person, and the way we treat him or her. What can be more Christian than that?

Another fact of inculturation which should flow from what we have said is that we should look for significations. What does the Church want to express at this particular moment? Does the Church want to express joy, sorrow, repentance, mercy, adoration? Whatever it is, that is the value, the sentiment, the abiding principle that never disappears. Then one has to look for a symbol in one's society that stands for what the Church wants one to express. This is what inculturation is all about. Inculturation is not a glorification of the past, as if nothing in the past was wrong. Nor is it a blanket condemnation of the past, as if nothing in the past was right or good. Inculturation steers between isolationism and alienation. We must be Catholic and at the same time Igbo or Ewe or Ga or Dagao. Stressing one at the expense of the other throws inculturation out of gear. Hence inculturation cannot go against the stream of Catholic teaching. Some people believe that inculturation allows Africans to be polygamous. Nothing could be farther than the truth. If African Catholics were allowed to be poly-gamous, they would isolate themselves from Catholic teaching.

It is my belief that inculturation should allow us to change significations. The Church may want us to express a sentiment which does not impress the faithful. Inculturation would demand that another sentiment be substituted for it. For example, the Feast of Corpus Christi indicates adoration and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. But in a given situation, it may be a better idea to stress the kingship of Jesus even on the Feast of Corpus Christi. This should not cause much problem as, after all, there cannot be a fine demarcation line between Christ the Adorable and Christ the King.

wants to be hated. As human beings, all of us can be sick, we will all one day die. Our carnal urges are the same. That is at the level of the species. As social beings, however, we are *not* the same. I am not an Igbo, an Igbo is not a Yoruba. So, at one level we are the same and at another level we are not the same. Our social nature is essential to us. Anywhere in the world, if you have not seen a friend for a long time and one day the friend walks into your house, you will be happy; you will be joyful. That, again, is at the level of the species. The sentiment of joy is the same. The Chinese will be happy, just as the Igbo. But the way we express that joy differs from one society to another. If you are an Asante, you may shake hands vigorously with the friend; if you are an Igbo, you will express your joy by embracing him; if you are a Frenchman, you will kiss the person on both cheeks, twice on the left cheek and twice on the right cheek. The Andamanese in the Pacific Ocean would weep copiously; the Maori of New Zealand would rub noses with the friend. Shaking hands, embracing or hugging, kissing on the cheeks, weeping copiously and rubbing noses could not be more different from one another; but they are all cultural ways of expressing exactly the same sentiment of joy.

This is what a human being, as a social being, is formed to do. If you are an Igbo, for example, you grow up embracing people without knowing that there are other ways of showing you are happy. Each one of the modes of expression is strange to somebody else from a different cultural background.

Consequences

So, in dealing with people, you must know their culture. Failing this, serious mistakes can be made by the stranger. It is this sort of ignorance that made Europeans describe Africans in very negative terms: disrespectful, immoral, untruthful, etc. What is the justification in saying that Africans are immoral, simply because their women go about bare-breasted or because they dance in a manner that you are not used to? Africans can also say that Europeans are very immoral because they kiss in public, even passionately. In Ghana, to kiss a woman, even your own wife, in the street would be an immoral, repre-

III

CULTURE

Double Aspect of the Human Person

Let us now say something about culture. The word *inculturation* contains the key word "culture". But what is culture? Culture is the context in which we operate. You cannot talk about a human person without considering him from two very important angles - as an **individual species** and as a **social being**.

In this world, we have different groups of beings: we have cows, pigs, chimpanzees, birds, trees, stones, ropes. Some of these resemble human beings in their structure. Cows, pigs, chimpanzees, etc. have physiology and anatomy that resemble those of human beings. We call human beings *homo sapiens* (*thinking beings*). It is said that there were once little particles which developed over millions of years into the type of beings that we are. These particles, to put it in a simplistic way, became worms; from worms they became something else until they developed into four-footed animals. Then they became chimpanzees or gorillas - animals with 4 legs but which can walk on two legs. Finally they assumed the *bipedal* posture - human beings.¹¹ This is what we mean by the process of evolution.

However, even though we resemble some other animals in these respects, we are different, in the sense that we walk erect, unlike, for example, the gorilla which can walk on two legs but is not thereby erect. *Sapiens* means "wise"; *homo* means a "human being". So we form a species of being called "human and "wise". As a species, all of us are the same, whether we are Indians or Ugandans or Cameroonians or Ghanaians or South Africans. Whatever we are, we are the same. We can all think; we have intelligence; we have free will; we can be angry, we can be hungry, we have the same moods; we can love, we can be loved, etc. As human beings, all of us want to be loved, nobody

hensible act. And what about ballroom dancing where a man is in physical contact with a woman who is married to another man? How is that better than the solo dances that we have in Africa? Hence, understanding of the meaning and impact of culture would help towards a better understanding among human beings and in religious communities. It would help to generate mutual respect among human beings.

Culture

Let us now attempt a rudimentary description of culture. There are almost as many definitions of culture, as there are people trying to define it, but for our purposes, we shall take the definition of culture by a certain man called Edward Tylor who described it, more than 120 years ago, thus: *Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.*¹² Culture, then, comprises everything that you have as a social being - the way a particular people farm, the way they marry, the way they settle cases, relationships between men and their wives, the way of hunting, the type of food that is eaten and how to prepare it, one's language, ideas about life and death, the role of leaders in the society, the way buildings are put up - in short, everything that one acquires as a member of society. All these combine to create the culture of the people.

There are two concepts that are of vital importance here. It is obvious that culture must have a bit of *permanence* about it. If something becomes the order of the day for a few years and disappears, you cannot call it cultural. For something to be called cultural, it must remain, it must gradually become part and parcel of the people; it must have a certain degree of stability for the people.

Secondly, culture is *acquired*. It is learnt, it is not the result of instincts or reflexes. It is learned. One learns culture non-formally. You are born into a culture of which you become a member willy-nilly. There are lots and lots of things around us which we learn imperceptibly. Nobody teaches you your language, how to prepare food, how to dance. You learn these

things through participation in actual events, imitation, observation, trial and error, asking questions, etc.

Informally too, we learn a lot about our culture. Somebody observes you dancing and he comes to you and says *you should have taken the first step with your right leg*. You are going for a funeral and you wear a cloth with bright colours. Somebody meets you and says, *this cloth is too bright for the occasion; the chief will be angry if he sees you in it*. A visitor comes to your house and you do not give him water to drink. A friend or relative can tell you to give this person water before asking him why he has come to you. You are learning all the time but informally.

We also acquire culture through formal education. Formal education is arranging a setting to teach something to somebody; for example, bringing some people together in order to instruct them. Your father or mother can sit you down and teach you how to marry, how to farm, how to cook. A new chief is taught how to dance, speak in public, receive visitors. He is taught the history of his people. All this is formal education. Learning culture formally, however, happens less frequently than learning it non-formally and informally except in the case of people who hold special offices.

The main features of culture are the following:

1. Culture is a human thing; no other creature on our planet has any culture.
2. All societies have their own cultures. It is arrogant to suggest that there is a society that has no culture.
3. All cultures are of equal importance; there is no super-culture anywhere nor is there any refined culture.
4. Culture is what makes me what I am. I am not a Dagao or an Ewe, I am an Asante because of my culture.

5. Therefore, I must know my culture and respect it.
6. Just as culture is what makes me what I am, the other person's culture is what makes him what he is. Therefore, I must respect that culture also, if I must respect that person.
7. When I find myself working as a priest or religious or lay missionary in a culture other than my own, I must try to know as much about that culture as possible.
8. Whatever happens, I must respect that culture even when certain elements in it appear to be "funny" or "strange" to me.

It is not being suggested here that we must accept whatever another culture gives us even if it is wrong. What is being suggested here is that we must try to understand that whatever it is that we object to, it means something for those concerned with it. We must, therefore, not condemn it outright but do our best to explain to the people we are working with and for, why such an element must gradually be eliminated and, preferably, substituted for. This brings us to the idea of religious community life.

Community

Community life is a life of love, a life of charity. Yes, religious have to obey, but so must all Christians. Religious must have a spirit of poverty and practise chastity. This is not their prerogative. Every Christian must have a spirit of poverty and must be chaste, like Jesus Christ. What makes the life of the religious different from other people's life is that they form one special family in Christ. For those who are working in cultures other than their own, there is an obligation on their part to try to know that culture; they must love and respect it. For example, if I am an Asante and I go to work in Lagos, I must, in the first place, try to get acquainted with the Yoruba culture, although I can never know it as a Yoruba does. Then I must love and respect it. I cannot go and work among people whose cultures have formed them and disdain

their culture, look down upon it or, worse, be completely ignorant of it. In all this, our exemplar is the Lord Jesus Christ. Imagine Jesus Christ becoming a human being. He knew our culture, He loved our culture and respected our culture. He corrected the bad elements of our culture. He told the Jews, that *He came to fulfil and not to destroy*. It is of vital importance that when you work with other people, you do not impose your culture on them. Never say, *at home this is what we do*. The people you are working with are at home. You do not expect a Cameroonian to behave like a Ghanaian because you, the Ghanaian, are working in Cameroon. If I am a Ghanaian working in Cameroon, I am not bringing Ghana to Cameroon but the faith which spurns no culture.

Naturally if you notice that there is something being done there and you have a better way of doing it, you can say so. This is not disrespecting another culture. After all, there is no culture that does not learn from other cultures. What you have to do in this instance is to try to explain to your co-workers what you want to do and the rationale behind it. We learn from each other. When I say do not impose your culture, it does not mean that when you know something good from your culture, you cannot introduce it. On the contrary, such exchange of good elements in different cultures is absolutely necessary for the health and growth of the Church as the Family of God. *The Family of God* is an image of the Church which, as you know, was formulated by the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994.

Let me give an example. When you go to Igboland or Eweland, immediately the people see you coming to their house, they welcome you to the house. If you come to Ashanti and you expect me to welcome you before you greet me, you are making a mistake. In Ashanti, you have to introduce yourself first before I welcome you. There is a very interesting cultural way of thinking behind the two seemingly different ways of behaviour. The Ewe or the Igbo wants the stranger to feel at home, even before he introduces himself. The Asante, on the other hand, prefers that the stranger

introduces himself and assures him that he has no bad intentions for coming to him; in other words, that he is a friend. Both models have practical advantages and disadvantages.

If the Igbo or Ewe goes to work in Ashanti and he or she is not welcomed by the host first, he or she should take his or her time to find out why and then learn what is the proper thing to do. I was once teaching some newly arrived missionary Sisters and there was this proud Sister among them. As I have told you, things differ from place to place. In some societies when you appear in a big gathering, you shake hands with the big man or woman before you greet the rest. We Akan do not do that; we start with the person sitting nearest to us on our right and shake hands from him to the end, going anti-clockwise, even when the king or any big man is sitting among the crowd. If it is your intention to greet the big man alone, then you go straight to him and do not shake hands with anybody else.

If one were to ask why we go from right to left, we would have no tangible answer except that it has been observed that in many societies in the world, the right hand has predominance over the left hand. In all societies, there seems to be a preference for the right hand. The right hand has superiority over the left. In all cultures, right is associated with good. We say someone is a **righteous** person; that is, the person is holy and good. We use the word "dexterous", which derives from the Latin word for "right" (*dexter*), to describe something that is clever. In Christianity, we are told that Jesus Christ is sitting at the *right* hand of God, the Father. On the last day, he would separate the sheep from the goats and the sheep would be placed on his *right* hand. On the other hand, we use a word like "sinister" which is a Latin word for "left" to mean "not quite right", "of dubious nature".

Now, to go back to our story. Three weeks after I had explained this to the class, the Sister and others came to my house where I was sitting with other people. She looked round and exclaimed: *Asante custom or no Asante custom, I am going to greet the Bishop first*. I felt like kicking her away. The implication of what she said was that the custom of greeting the Bishop

first in Ireland was superior to our custom of shaking hands from right to left until you reach the Bishop. She thought she was honouring me; in reality she was only insulting me and my people.

There have been many such very unfortunate instances. I will give you another example. Until 1948, almost all secondary schools in Ghana were in Cape Coast and Accra. There is a Monsignor who had a sister in a Catholic Girls' Secondary School in Cape Coast. When he was a deacon, he went to the school one day to visit the sister. We Akan have a way of naming children. You do not take the name of your father automatically. When you are born, your father gives you a name of his own choice, so sons and daughters of a family have different names. My father gave birth to 14 children. All of us have different names. The Akan nomenclature is exactly like that of the Old Testament. The sons of Adam are not called Adam but Cain, Abel, Enoch, etc. The sons of Abraham are called Ishmael and Isaac. The sons of Isaac are Jacob and Esau. When John the Baptist was born, his father was asked for his name and the dumb man wrote on a tablet: *His name will be John*.¹³ For us, a name is not a tag; it is not just telling us who your father is; it identifies you. I am the only *Sapɔn* in my family, my father being *Maafɔ*, my mother *Adoma*, and one of my sisters *Sáawaa*, etc.

So this deacon went to see the Sister in charge of the school and told her that he wanted to see his sister. The Sister asked for her name and the deacon mentioned it. The Sister then flared up, shouting, *You call yourself a deacon and you come and tell me lies. How can you and your sister have different names?* She literally drove the poor man away. The Sister had been in Ghana for many years but had not taken the trouble to study the culture of the people among whom she was working. So, for her, the poor deacon was a liar because he gave as the name of his sister one that was not exactly like his own!!

Characteristics of Culture

Culture has certain characteristics. We have already mentioned that culture is **dynamic**; it is changing all the time. There are new things introduced

into the culture and certain things disappear from the culture. Electricity, football, etc. are all things that have become part of the Ghanaian culture. Hence, culture is not static.

Culture is **universal**, which means it affects everybody born or brought up in it; it does not discriminate.

Culture is **objective**. It is a given fact that it is there when the individual is born and it will be there when the individual is dead and gone.

Culture is **compulsory, obligatory**. One has no choice in which culture he wants or to reject. Once you are brought up in a given culture, the culture influences you. Even before you know there are other cultures, you have become identified with that culture.

Culture is **impersonal**. It belongs to everybody and it belongs to nobody. While I can say that the Asante culture is my culture, I cannot claim it as my property.

To sum up the characteristics of culture by way of an example, if an Asante couple were to hand over their one-year old baby to a Chinese couple living in Beijing, this child would grow up to be in every respect a Chinese. He would be identified with the Chinese culture; he would speak the Chinese language, not the Asante language; he would eat rice with chopsticks and not fufu with his hands and so on. The influence of the society on the individual, therefore, is incalculable. It was Durkheim, the French sociologist, who once said something to the effect that *Premature man attains maturity in the incubator of society*.¹⁴

Here again, we come back to the importance of community and community life. If this baby, at the age of one month, were placed among rats and if it were possible for this child to survive and grow among these rats, this child would not be a human being; he would in effect be a rat; he would have no culture. There would be no cultural norm for him to conform to.

Cultural Norms

A norm is a regulation, a rule, a kind of law. When you say something is cultural, what do you mean? Are you saying that everybody has to do what you say is cultural, or are you saying that some people have to do it and not everybody?

There are cultural norms that are called **universals**. These are cultural regulations that everybody in the society is expected to keep. For example, there is a procedure for marrying which everybody who wants to marry has to go through.

There are cultural norms that are **specialities**. These are cultural practices that a few in the society are expected to keep or even know about. Such practices concern special people like chiefs, priests, leaders, etc. For example, a chief who does not pour libation every 42 days on the ancestral stools has broken a cultural norm which nobody else is bound to keep.

There are cultural norms that are **alternatives**. These are cultural regulations that give options or different possibilities. For example, in bereavement we have to wear mourning cloths but the colour of the mourning cloth can be black, red or dark. One has a choice of colour here.

Ideal and Actual Culture

At this juncture, we should make a distinction between the **ideal culture** and the **actual culture**. Because of the dynamic nature of culture, it is not always what should happen that happens. What should happen or be the case is the ideal culture. In most cases what should happen is not what is happening. What is happening would then become the actual culture. There is still a distinction even within the two. In the ideal culture, there is a difference between what should happen and what people *think* should happen and in the actual culture, there is a similar difference between what is happening and what people *think* is happening.

The evangeliser must know these differences. Often we may have to go to the ideal culture because it has been vitiated by the actual culture. For example, many people would argue that polygamy is cultural. But they are