

SOME CATHOLIC PRINCIPLES OF INCULTURATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE NIGERIAN CHURCH*

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1 Introduction

At a recent meeting of the Nigerian Episcopal Conference, the Nigerian Bishops declared the last decade of the twentieth century a decade on inculturation. Similarly, the AECWA (Association of Episcopal Conferences of Anglophone West Africa) Conference in Kumasi, Ghana, August 20th–27th, 1989 gave a prominent place to inculturation in their discussion on evangelisation. Inculturation is one of the most commonly discussed issues in various theological academic conferences in Nigeria and other West African countries in the last few years. It is, therefore, pertinent to consider inculturation from the point of view of some Catholic principles and guidelines. Both the vastness of the material needed for this paper and the content itself require a concise presentation since a detailed one would require several books! What follows, therefore, is highly encapsulated.

The title of this study is "Some Catholic Principles of Inculturation with Special Reference to the Nigerian Church". What is culture? There are several definitions.¹ With Fr. E. E. Uzukwu, one could say that culture is

*that complex way of living-in-the-world which is man's production, but as a response to various challenges faced in interacting with the environment; it is a result of searching for and being awake to (i.e. discovery) the depth of meaning undergirding existence, and, belonging to a group, it makes every member feel at home; it does become for the group and individuals a key for dealing with living-in-the-world, because as an embodiment of the past, it transforms living into an art of dealing with the known and the unknown.*²

For the purpose of this paper, the word "culture" will be taken in the sense Vatican II used it in its document on the Church in the Modern World.³ In that context culture is described as that necessary characteristic of the human person which enables the person to develop and "come to an authentic and full humanity through the cultivation of natural goods and values. Whenever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected."⁴ Man is, therefore, a cultural animal. Without culture, man cannot be fully human. Note that this description of culture is sociological; it is different from the aristocratic definition of culture which limits culture to the nobles and the well-educated as in royal families. Vatican II clearly rejects the idea of "uncivilized nations."⁵

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The word "inculturation" is to be understood in this paper in the context of "culture" viewed as being intimately connected with human nature. In that sense, *inculturation* is linked with humanisation, or that process which enables the human person to become more human.⁶ In a more strict sense, one could say with Bishop E. S. Obot that inculturation is

*the honest and serious attempt to make Christ and His message of salvation ever more understood by peoples of every culture, locality and time.*⁷

In more concrete words, one could add that inculturation is "Africanisation" or the making of the Gospel message more relevant and more at home in Africa; it is the incarnation of the message of Christ into the culture and life of a people so that just as Christ became man so also his message may become truly African among African peoples, and in turn make Africans really part of the body of Christ. As Bishop Sarpong of Ghana says,

*We are now able to lament that at its inception, "Christianity" did not realise that the African ground had long been carefully prepared by God for the reception of the Christian seed; and that seed had in the course of the centuries inevitably put on the cultural garments of different civilizations—Jewish, Greek, Roman, etc. It is never the unadulterated Good News to any peoples. For most Africans, that message has been tinged [and] mutilated by the culture of the West. By forcing both the good tidings and its cultural envelope on the Africans, the universality of the message is greatly jeopardized if not categorically rejected.*⁸

For the Gospel Message to put on the African garb as it did the Greek, the Roman and the Jewish, it must be indigenised, that is, it must be born on African soil, it must be native to Africa to avoid its present "foreign" status. In that sense, inculturation is indigenisation."

In the context of the Nigerian Church, inculturation is making the Christian message at home in Nigeria and salutary to Nigerians in such a way that they become more authentically Christian, Nigerian, and human. As Pope Paul VI would say to African Bishops, "It is your job to make alive and efficacious the meeting between Christian realities and African traditions."⁹

2. Some Catholic Principles of Inculturation from a Nigerian Perspective

The following subject matter is highly encapsulated. A detailed presentation would require several more papers. We shall examine briefly some of the reasons for inculturation in Nigeria. Then we shall touch some of the theological, and anthropological principles regarding inculturation. As can be seen from the inundation of material and discussions on the subject, only a sampling of data is possible within the available time.

Why Inculturation in Nigeria? Several reasons are responsible for the timeliness of the topic some of which the author has enunciated elsewhere.¹⁰

It is true that Africans are human beings equal in dignity to Europeans, Americans and other humans on our planet. Inculturation is a human right. It belongs to Nigerians as well, since all human persons were made in the image of God. As the author says elsewhere,

The Pastoral Constitution enucleates the principle of the autonomy and equality of all truly human cultures [G.S. arts. 44, 53ff, 60, 62, etc.]. In some way, God Himself is present in all human cultures because man is imago Dei. [G.S. arts. 29 (by implication), 34, 36, 59, etc.]

Similarly, the same Constitution concedes the dependence of the Church on different cultures [G.S. art. 58ff]. The Church does not evangelize by civilizing but civilizes by evangelizing [G.S. art. 58]. The primary work of the Church is to evangelize and not to civilize. Another principle that derives from this is that the Church incarnates her message into any given culture (that is truly human). [G.S. 44] Hence, the objective of the Church is not to protect any one given culture but to enable and assimilate all cultures to herself as apt tools for an effective carrying out of her mission, of teaching, sanctifying and the ministry of service. Christianity is not an ideology. Christ died to save all peoples.¹¹

Therefore, for the Church to be properly rooted in Nigeria there is need for inculturation. When properly inculturated, the Christian message will no longer look foreign, imported or a colonial imposition. Through proper incarnation of the Christian message in Africa, Africans themselves will no longer be alienated from their culture. In that way, they can be good Christians and good Africans at the same time.

Another reason for incarnating the Christian message into Nigerian way of life is that the main need of the Church in Nigeria is not so much "Liberation Theology" (as it may be in some other countries such as Kenya and South Africa) but inculturation or incarnation theology.

Both the missionaries and the colonial masters who came to West Africa in general and Nigeria in particular could not settle down and occupy the land as was the case in Kenya and South Africa where the weather and other conditions were most conducive to European or to the white man's needs. The mosquito and hot weather in West Africa made many of the early missionaries and colonial masters die. Their main aim was either to trade or settle down temporarily. Hence the rapport or general relationship between West Africans and Europeans in general was quite friendly because the latter did not dispossess Africans of their valuable lands as was the case in the countries mentioned above. There is no need to include Brazil and other Latin American nations where most of the arable lands is owned by a few land owners who were once rich slave owners and who number less than ten per cent of their populations. In such places there is need for liberation theology to fight for the poor and helpless peasants. In Nigeria the case is

somewhat different. What we need is inculturation at the present time. A lack of proper development of Africans as Africans may in fact be responsible for many of the problems that confront Africa today.¹²

Inculturation is needed in the Nigerian Church today more than ever before because, as Pope Paul VI affirms,

The Catholic Church has great respect for the moral and religious values of African tradition. Not only do they have deep significance in themselves, but they also seem to provide a valuable foundation for the preaching of the Gospel and for the erection of a new society in Christ. . . .

The teaching and redemption of Jesus Christ complement, revitalize and perfect all that is good in human traditions. So the African who becomes a Christian does not have to disown himself; instead, he takes up the age-old values of his people "in spirit and in truth."¹³

However, there was a planned negative attitude towards African culture on the part of some of those visitors—be they traders, missionaries or colonial imperialists. The missionaries especially might have been conditioned by their outlook and the mentality of their day. As Pope Paul VI affirms,

It is sometimes said that in the past missionaries did not properly appreciate the sound and authentic value of African traditions and customs. And although their motives and their labours were most unselfish and exemplary, it is true that their outlook was conditioned to some extent by the mentality of their day; they did not grasp the full significance of the customs and unwritten traditions of the peoples to whom they brought the Gospel message.

Yet, for all that, many of them helped the native population to take its first steps on certain roads: in education, in medical care, in contacts with other members of the human race, in defense of human rights, in the establishment and development of those learned disciplines which are the common possession of civilized people today.¹⁴

While the missionaries preached Christ to the people, they however "kept thinking and operating within the cultural framework of their homeland." Such an attitude could hardly have been avoided. But the missionaries also uprooted and sometimes destroyed African customs and traditions which had deep religious and moral significance. In place of the African culture (uprooted), Western culture was transplanted.¹⁵

There was, therefore, a resulting alienation of Africans from their way of life as Africans, a resulting loss of identity which is still manifested today, an emasculation of their own proper cultures, and an imposed feeling of inferiority on the part of Africans. The result was alienation of the African from himself, from his nation and from his continent.¹⁶ This cultural aliena-

tion has robbed Africans of their dignity as independent human beings. To really solve the African crisis, inculturation in every aspect of African life is necessary. What we are saying of the Church or the gospel message needs to be applied to our educational systems at all levels as well.

Another reason for inculturation of the gospel in Nigeria is the need for the Church in Africa to be truly Christian and truly African.¹⁷ The aim of the Church is not endorse one culture in preference to others. Vatican II says

*Her purpose has been to adapt the gospel to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned, insofar as such was appropriate. Indeed, this accommodated preaching of the revealed Word ought to remain the law of all evangelization. For this each nation develops the ability to express Christ's message in its own way. At the same time, a living exchange is fostered between the Church and the diverse cultures of people. (G.S. art. 44).*¹⁸

These and similar reasons compel us to embrace inculturation.

In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul fought against the Judaizers attempt to impose Jewish ways of life on Gentile converts.¹⁹ In the same spirit, St. Peter did not impose Jewish ways on the Roman centurion — Cornelius and his household.²⁰

The Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is a universal message of salvation for all humanity. It must be preached to all humankind. Hence, to communicate that message of the Good News, the language, the ways of life, etc. of those people to whom that message is to be proclaimed must be used. Hence the need for inculturation.

The nature of the Church which is universal embodies inculturation. She is not tied to any one culture. For the Church to be firmly established in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, we need inculturation or the incarnation of the gospel message into the African, and the Nigerian way of life.

From the point of view of God who respects all human cultures and wants all human beings to be saved, inculturation of God's salvific message is necessary because God speaks to man in concrete historical conditions which involve the persons' language, religion, traditions, other ways of life and circumstances. God himself addresses man through inculturation. He talks to man in a language understandable to the very human person. He dialogues with all human beings as His own image. Hence, there is a need for the inculturation of the gospel message so that everybody can grasp it in his or her own culture.

Several other reasons can be adduced for the need for inculturation today in the Nigerian Church.²¹

It enough to add what the author has said in his book, *Vatican II:*

Image of God in Man:

It must, therefore be emphasized that Africanising the Church in Africa is not an act of benevolence for which Africans must be

*grateful. It is a right deriving from the creation of man as Imago Dei, and from the salvific will of God who became incarnate in His Son Jesus Christ so that He could make Himself available as saviour of all men. Indigenisation of the Church in Africa must not be regarded as a paternalistic gesture on the part of Rome or the brave and gallant European missionaries to Africa. It is a basic inalienable right deriving from the nature of man as Imago Dei, from the communication of the Good News which must be done in concrete cultural and historic situations; from the nature of God who communicates Himself to man in their concrete historical and cultural situations; and from the nature of the Church, which being truly human, must use the appropriately human (culture, language, etc.) to communicate and effect her divine charge. Africanisation of the Church in Africa is necessary because the good and the future of Christianity may depend on it.*²²

For the Church to survive the onslaught of contemporary secular humanisms many of which are atheistic and materialistic, the Church needs the wealth of African religiosity and traditions.

3. Some Principles regarding Proper and Right Inculturation

Perhaps, the most fundamental principle guarding all inculturation in Africa is that enunciated by Pope Paul VI in various documents he provided for the subject especially in his address to Ugandan Bishops in Kampala, 1969 and that enucleated in his message to Africa, *Africae Terrarum*.²³ The Pope affirmed that the Christian Church in Africa must be *Catholic* and must be African. He emphasised:

*A burning and much discussed question arises concerning your evangelizing work, and it is that of the adaptation of the Gospel and of the Church to African culture. Must the church be European, Latin, Oriental . . . or must she be African? This seems a difficult problem, and in practice may be so, indeed, But the solution is rapid, with two replies, First your Church must be first of all Catholic. That is, it must be entirely founded upon the identical, essential, constitutional patrimony of the self-same teaching of Christ, as professed by the authentic and authoritative tradition of the one true Church. This condition is fundamental and indisputable.*²⁴

This means that while carrying out inculturation, the Church in Africa as well as in other places must remain faithful to the original message of Christ as had been handed down by the Apostles and their successors. That is, inculturation must follow the authentic and orthodox tradition of the Church because, "We are not the inventors of our Faith; we are its custodians. Not every religious feeling is good; but only that religious sentiment which interprets the thought of God, according to the apostolic teaching authority established by the sole Master, Jesus Christ."²⁵ Genuine inculturation must

follow principles laid down on the subject by the different organs of the official teaching authority of the Church. Oftentimes, such documents relate to pastorals, rituals, didactic and spiritual activities, etc., and are issued as directives from the Holy See or from local episcopal conferences. An example of such would be the documents of Vatican II, encyclicals, various follow-up documents of ecumenical councils, etc. Africanisation or inculturation should not isolate the African Christians. Their morals, their worship, their other religious activities must be Catholic and in accordance with the universal Christian heritage. The Church in Africa must be Christian.

A second most fundamental principle of inculturation with special reference to the Nigerian Church is that the Christian Church in Africa must be truly and authentically African. Pope Paul VI explains:

The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith, may be manifold; hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture, of one who professes this one Faith. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate, but desirable, ... is even favoured by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity. Indeed, you possess human values and characteristic forms of culture which can rise up to perfection such as to find in Christianity, and for Christianity, a superior fullness, and prove to be capable of a richness of expression all its own, and genuinely African²⁶

This means that inculturation that is genuinely African should include among other things, African religious traditions and customs that embody the Church's doctrine substantially,²⁷ it should pay due regard to the African personality and his religious way of looking at everything in life, his worldview, etc. As Paul VI said,

It will require that your African soul become imbued with the secret charisms of Christianity, so that these charisms may then overflow freely, in beauty and wisdom, in the true African manner. It will require from your culture that it should not refuse, but rather eagerly desire, to draw, from the patrimony of the patristic, exegetical, and theological tradition of the Catholic Church, those treasures of wisdom which can be most easily assimilated by the African mind. ... It will require an incubation of the Christian "mystery" in the genius of your people in order that its native voice, more clearly and frankly, may then be raised harmoniously in chorus of the other voices in the universal Church.²⁸

For the genuine Africanness of inculturation to be achieved, the principal architects of such inculturation would have to be first and foremost genuine and true Africans. To genuine Africanness would be aided proper formation

in the Christian Faith, Christian disciplines suited for inculturation, centres of contemplation and religious life, and centres for pastoral training. Pope Paul VI emphasised the need for monasteries and centres of contemplation in Africa to bring about proper inculturation of the Good News. Because monasteries are free from the usual distractions of urban life, they allow the monks to reflect and theologise in peace. Monasteries, centres of religious studies, etc., would guard the Christian religion in Africa from the possible dangers of religious pluralism or schism. Such centres of Christian learning water the faith of the African Christians and conserve its roots with the rest of the Christian faith: Furthermore, they would enable the Church in Africa to avoid all forms of ghetto mentality and racism. The Church can be African and Christian without any tinge of tribalism or racism. Paul VI adds:

then you will be able to remain sincerely African even in your own interpretation of the Christian life: you will be able to formulate Catholicism in terms congenial to your own culture; you will be capable of bringing to the Catholic Church the precious and original contribution of "negritude", which she needs particularly in this historic hour of striving for national independence.²⁹

This requires also that Africans be "Missionaries" to themselves. Africans themselves must now continue the work the missionaries already implanted in the African continent by way of evangelisation. In this regard, we must work together with Christ to build the Church through proper inculturation. We must also work with the hierarchy. In that way, the continuity of the Church in Africa with the universal Church will be guaranteed. The Holy Spirit breathes throughout the whole Church. He must be allowed to direct the work of inculturation in Nigeria as well as in other countries. Through the Holy Spirit and in solidarity with the hierarchy, Pope Paul VI called on the young African Church to "offer itself to a culture responsible to the Gospel, such as is your African Church."³⁰

For proper inculturation to be successful, Missionaries and all other persons involved in the evangelization of the Christian message in Africa must co-operate. This principle is articulated in various documents of Vatican II,³¹ and other directives of the Holy See.³² Paul VI again insisted on the co-operation of Africans and missionaries for the successful carrying out of the work of evangelisation, and from our point of view, inculturation. He clarifies:

Present-day conditions in Africa demand the harmonious co-operation of all. Individual efforts must be coordinated. Thus the coordination of missionary efforts which has already done much for the spreading of the Gospel in Africa, must be regarded as the soundest approach. To be sure, procedures and methods may have to be revised to meet changes in the structure of the hierarchy and in the cultural level of what were once mission countries.³³

In Nigeria today, we need to harness the efforts of the indigenous clergy with

those of missionaries from other countries, and with the contributions of the religious as a whole and of the laity in the different areas of inculturation. Most especially, the co-operation of foreign missionaries is necessary to right some of the wrongs done to the African personality through a failure to appreciate "the sound and authentic value of African traditions and customs."³⁴ It is now time for missionaries to correct the errors of their predecessors by disposing themselves to appreciate the positive values of African religious traditions and customs. This will be possible only through a change of the outlook and the mentality of the earlier missionaries who failed to dialogue with African culture and traditions.

... the missionaries came to Africa for only one reason: to share with Africans the message of peace and redemption which the Lord entrusted to His Church. For love of Him, they left their family and homeland; for love of Him, many of them gave their lives in the service of Africa.³⁵

That missionary vision must constantly be translated into reality. There is no better way of doing that than by inculturation which springs from the heart in spirit and in truth. To be Christians and Africans, the African must be "capable of bringing to the Catholic Church the precious and original contribution of 'negritude'".³⁶ This is a task which the African himself must undertake at any cost so as to share with the rest of the world the message of peace and redemption which the Lord entrusted to His Church. Like the missionaries, the African should be able to give his life in the service of Africa. He could do this most readily if he is truly Christian and truly African. As custodians of the Faith, Africans must be true and authentic to themselves as Africans.

Another vital principle of inculturation which would enable one to recognise which African customs or traditions to assimilate into the faith and practice of the Church in Africa is that which Vatican II used in *Gaudium et Spes* to dialogue with contemporary secular humanisms. The Council explained the principle that what is religious is humanising and that what is humanising is religious. In that way, man's temporal or earthly activities are not opposed to man's Spiritual or religious activities because man is the image of God endowed with body and soul at the same time. Because of the unity of the human person, that is, man is body and soul at the same time (not first body and then soul but, the two at the same time,) man's bodily good agrees with his spiritual good and vice-versa.³⁷

African traditions and customs that are humanising can be shown to be religious and the ones that are truly religious might be shown to be humanising. That means that African customs and traditions that recognise God and uphold human dignity can be found worthy of assimilation into the Church's faith, practice and evangelisation methods. What fails to meet that test would most likely have to be dropped, That is, if any African tradition or custom or

belief violates faith in God (or Divine revelation), or goes against the dignity of the human person, then such an African tradition or custom or belief would fail the test of assimilation or inculturation into the Church's missionary activities (evangelisation, *Kerygma*, and worship). This last principle is complex and cannot be developed fully here in the context of this article. Perhaps the reader will find what we have written elsewhere useful for an indepth discussion of the principle,³⁸ (and its application with regard to African Traditional Religion).³⁹ By applying the principle of "what is religious is humanising and what is humanising is religious", one would be able to avoid the catastrophe of "head or tail I win" which has helped missionaries to exclude African traditions and customs from the given of the Church's faith and practice in Africa. As image of God, Africans possess in their culture those elements which have made other cultures to be readily assimilated into the Church's way of life and practice.

In conclusion, for the Church to be firmly established in Nigeria, inculturation is a must. This inculturation would have to preserve the *Catholicity* of the Christian Church in Nigeria. Secondly, it would have to recognise the dignity of the African or Nigerian as a human being made in the image of God; it requires the identity of a truly African and Christian Church. This is not easy but is possible. Unless the Christian Church in Africa is truly African and truly Catholic, we stand the risk of ever being alienated from our culture as Africans. *This would* result in perpetuating the problems resulting from cultural alienation such as the disintegration of the African personality, denial of African human dignity, inability to act as autonomous individuals capable of making and taking decisions as Africans, etc. Furthermore, failure to make the Gospel inserted into African way of life, affects many Africans, especially the youth, who would continue to regard Christianity as an imported religion, as a neo-form of colonialism something to be rejected as foreign. But Christianity is in no way colonialism or imperialism. It is the universal message of salvation for all peoples. Hence, in the words of Paul VI, "And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity."⁴⁰

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4. *ibid.*

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8. Erhueh, *Op. Cit.* P. 285.
9. Paul VI, "*Africae Terrarum*", Message to Africa, art. 23. cf. *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 13, no. 1 (1968): 14.
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11. cf. Erhueh, *Op. Cit.*, p. 286.
12. idem, "The Contribution of Christianity to Politics in Nigeria: A Historico-Theological Overview", in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Apr. 1989):87
13. Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, art. 14, art. cit., p. 10.
14. *ibid.*, art. 24. p. 15f.
15. See Herve Carrier, S. J., "Inculturation a Modern Approach to Evangelisation", in Catholic Secretaria, ed., *Op. Cit.*, p. 5.
16. For more on this *alienation*, see Luke N. Mbefo *Op. Cit.*, p. 23 et passim; Erhueh, *op. cit.*, p. 281ff, et passim.
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19. Acts 15:5-35.
20. Acts 10:34-11:1-18.
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22. Erhueh, *Op. Cit.*, p. 287.
23. Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, Passim.
24. Address to Ugandan Bishops, *AAS*. 61 (1969): 576.
25. *ibid.* p. 576f.
26. *ibid.* p. 577.
27. See Erhueh, *op. cit.*, p. 292.
28. Paul VI, Add. to Ugandan Bishops, art. cit., p. 577.
29. *ibid.*, P. 577f.
30. *ibid.*, p. 575.
31. Vatican II, Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church *Ad Gentes*; *Priestly Formation*, *Optatum Totius*; and *The Church in the Modern World*, *Gaudium et Spes*;
32. For instance, *Africae Terrarum*, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, etc.
33. Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, art. 27; cf. *The Pope Speaks*, vol. 13, no. 1, (1968): 17.
34. *ibid.*, p. 15; art. 24.
35. *ibid.*, p. 16.
36. Paul VI, Add. to Ugandan Bishops, art. cit., p. 578.
37. See Erhueh, *op. cit.* for an in-depth exposition of this principle, passim, especially

pp. 232-237.

38. idem, *op. cit.*, passim.
39. idem, *op. cit.*, p. 256-303.
40. Paul VI, art. cit. *Africae Terrarum*, art. 2; cf. *AAS* 61 (1969): 577.

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