

## Enriched by Diversity: Inculturation & Catechesis

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Inculturation—the process whereby the Gospel message engages the culture—is a central concern of catechesis. Catechesis by its very nature is concerned with how Christian faith is received and appropriated by its hearers. It is important, then, not only to understand how faith is configured in the communication which is catechesis, but also the cultural dynamics which it must engage if the message is to be communicated effectively. Moreover, there must be a larger understanding of how faith itself relates to culture, since that forms the framework by which we are able to judge whether the cultural communication of faith has been legitimate—both in respect to the nature and content of faith, and to the dynamics of culture.

It is interesting to note that the word “inculturation” - a concept that is at the center of the discussion of faith and culture - first appears in a papal document discussing catechesis. It is in the apostolic exhortation on catechesis, *Catechesi tradendae*. It is worth quoting here what Pope John Paul II said in that 1979 text:

“The terms ‘acculturation’ or ‘inculturation’ may be a neologism, but it expresses well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation. We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. For this purpose, catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will be able to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian celebration, life and thought.”  
(no. 53)

We will return below to look at the various elements which Pope John Paul II touches upon here. Before doing that, however, we need to begin by examining just what is meant by culture.

### WHAT IS CULTURE?

There is no agreed upon definition of culture among anthropologists. An attempt to come to a common agreement on the concept among anthropologists some fifty years ago only resulted in yet one more, unagreed upon, definition of culture! Most everyone, however, would say that, in general, culture deals with three general areas:

- *Ideas and values.* Culture is certainly about ideas and values which a given group of people hold as important. These ideas and values—and the behavior which flows from them—are often what set a group off as being distinctive.
- *Practices.* Things which people do—events, modes of celebration, roles, ways of bringing up children, ways of marking the life cycle—also mark the distinctiveness of the culture. Practices are among the most distinctive elements we encounter as difference when we enter another culture.
- *Material dimensions.* What people eat, what they wear, how they build their houses, the art they create—these all go together to make the texture of what we see in a people’s culture.

These three dimensions are emphasized or weighted in different fashions by different observers, but they do come up in most every definition of culture. To understand, however, how culture is talked about in common parlance, one must approach culture in another way, having to do with how the concept has developed over time.

Many theorists of culture speak today of premodern, modern, and postmodern concepts of culture, corresponding in a rough way to how these three terms are used to characterize changes in society in the West since the 17th century.

The *pre-modern* period corresponds with the time leading up to the European Enlightenment, which began in the 17th century. In the premodern period, tradition set the tone for society; it was the measuring stick by which all the value of all things was considered. This tradition-centered way of looking at the world placed emphasis on the collective in society: the “we” was more important



than the “I.” The family or the society was more important than the individual.

The definition of culture in the premodern period was a normative one. Culture represented the ideals of a society and the highest expression of them. It was associated with the ruling classes and their artistic expressions—art, literature, and music. “CuLture” in this sense was always used in the singular, since culture embodied a single, normative sense of refinement and achievement. In this sense, it was clear that some people had culture (i.e., those who were educated and held positions of honor and power in society), and that some did not (those who lacked education). Similarly, those peoples from outside this society who did things in different ways had no culture or were considered “uncultured” and “uncivilized.”

The refined art, literature, and music of a people were seen to be grounded in the society’s tradition, which in turn gained its legitimacy from its antiquity. This form of legitimacy made culture “classic,” that is, a standard which was beyond reproach or substantial emendation, and valid in all times and places.

The modern period corresponds to the changes in Western society which began with the Enlightenment in the 17th, century. In the modern period, the individual came to have priority over the collective. With that, the individual’s development and rights began to hold sway. Freedom of individual choice, freedom of conscience, the centrality of the self and the self’s experience came into the center of consideration. Reason—a property which belonged equally to each individual— came to replace tradition as the means of organizing society. Indeed, tradition was seen by many to be the source not only of oppression of the individual, but the source of division in society. Subscribing to reason would bring about a new, universal harmony.

Partially in reaction to the universalism of reason, there grew up a new idea of culture. This began in the 1760’s, especially in Germany. There culture was seen as the distinctive quality of a given group of people. In this definition of culture, which became the modern definition of culture (one which persists down to the present time), culture represented the unity of three distinctive characteristics of a group of people: their language, their customs,

and their territory. These three elements combined to give a people their distinctive identity. People had always recognized that ways of living varied from place to place; this definition of culture gave a way of defining those differences.

This definition of culture was picked up especially as a way of describing, on the one hand, peoples whom Europeans were encountering in their travels beyond Europe and, on the other hand, rural peoples within Europe still largely untouched by the emerging urban societies.

In the 20th century, this concept of culture as a unity of language, custom, and territory became a way of describing difference between peoples. It was taken up by the Church at Vatican II. It is to be found especially in paragraphs 53-62 of *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, to describe a fundamental, constitutive part of what it means to be human. Every human being develops within a culture, and the (linguistic, customary, and territorial) elements of that culture help define the framework for becoming fully human. *Gaudium et spes* laid the groundwork for, on the one hand, describing the variety and difference within the human family and, on the other hand, a common set of characteristics which made it possible to talk about the unity of humankind in the midst of those differences.

In the latter part of the 20th century, a *post-modern* way of talking about the world began to set in. The post-modern condition was seen to be something which had developed as a result of teaching the limit of the modern project. On the one hand, it was a reaction against the universalistic claims of the modern. For example, did the triumph of reason really bring about progress beyond human misery and strife? If reason—modeled most perfectly in science and technology—brought about such universal human progress, why had there been more destructive wars in the 20th century than ever before? If globalization represented the greatest advance in economics, why were some people becoming even poorer under globalization than before? In some sectors, therefore, there began to be severe doubts about reason and progress as unconditional qualities of the betterment of human life.



Second, the unity of language, custom, and territory was being shattered by both globalization and urbanization of the planet. Fewer and fewer people lived in places where culture in the modern sense could be seen and experienced. Migration (or exile) of people meant that they lost having their own territory. Peoples thrown together in the megalopolis (by 2000, there were on this planet more than four hundred cities with a population of more than a million people) and the globalization of the social media meant that many people no longer could claim a single language which characterized their lives. With the loss of territory and language, especially in the cities, there was a corresponding lack of control over custom. Given all of these realities, what was to become of the modern concept of culture?

Under these circumstances, in this post-modern setting, culture came to be defined as a kind of force-field (a concept borrowed from physics) in which many different elements come together to create an identity. This post-modern understanding of culture is most evident among youth, who borrow elements from an international network of music, clothing, and food to create their own identities, often quite distinct from that of their parents. They may use a great deal of English (or variants of English from popular music), adopt clothing fashions, and form ways of interrelating very different from their parents. This post-modern culture is ever shifting, as individuals seek ways of incorporating the diverse—and often conflicting—elements present in their environment. Indeed, many students of post-modernity emphasize the fragmentary character of post-modern culture. It does not have the cohesion of either the pre-modern or the modern forms.

It must be emphasized also that these three understandings of culture—pre-modern, modern, and post-modern—can all be found coexisting together. The modern understanding of culture may be predominant in the minds of most people, but pre-modern elements still are present. The post-modern, for example, will sometimes reach back to the pre-modern period, and select elements to create an imagined whole which counteracts some of the excesses of modernity. One finds this kind of post-modernity among conservative groups trying to resuscitate a past as a shield against or a haven in the midst of the individualism of modernity. At the same time, even though post-modern-

nity may be in evidence in urban centers, other places in a country may be more or less successfully holding on to the unity of language, custom, and territory as a source for identity. Indeed, most of the discussion of the inculturation of catechesis in the Church presupposes a modern concept of culture, based upon *Gaudium et spes*, since this corresponds to a Christian vision of human identity as rooted in a fundamental unity.

## FORMS OF CATECHESIS IN DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF CULTURE

It might be useful to take a moment to reflect upon how these different understandings of culture might influence catechesis. The categories of pre-modern, modern, and post-modern are, of course, generalities. Any person or group of people is likely to display all three in some measure. But the categories can be useful to help sort out approaches which, on the surface at least, may seem incompatible.

Pre-modern catechesis, like pre-modern concepts of culture, will emphasize a single normative way of articulating what is most important. The catechisms which were first developed by both Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation were, in large measure, pre-modern forms. These catechisms assumed norms which could be articulated clearly. Their purpose was to convey a tradition within which a community was to live. Hence, they presented what the tradition said; they did not try to explain why the tradition was true. The question-and-answer form conveyed this approach to the religious “culture” which was transmitted. One either had the right answer or one did not. To be able to give the right answer meant that one was part of the community, the collective called the Church. While the question-and-answer approach was often justified pedagogically as a way of transmitting the contents of faith (and there are many good reasons for doing it in this manner) it also conveyed a conception of culture as a normative pattern to which one conformed and of which one was a part.

Modern catechesis, much in evidence by the middle of the 20th century, carried with it modern assumptions about culture, especially about the individual over against the collective. The individual’s development of self-expression was seen as constitutive of becoming a full member of a community. Matters of faith were still of utmost



importance, but the appropriation of them was not to be done by rote, question-and-answer, learning. For individuals to be full, participative citizens in a culture (or in the Church), they had to appropriate consciously elements in a faith in ways which made sense to them, and so were integrated into their worldview. Consequently, emphasis was placed on methods which would allow for this full and conscious appropriation, and elements of faith which were difficult to grasp or seemed contrary to a modern outlook on things had to be reformulated or perhaps be passed over altogether.

Modern approaches led to a proliferation of approaches, whereas in the pre-modern period there had been but a single approach. These various approaches held out the possibility of a more articulate appropriation of faith. They also ran the risk of an emphasis on method which could overshadow the transmission of content. Indeed, the latter became a critique of at least some modern approaches in catechesis.

Post-modern approaches to catechesis, like post-modernity itself, show a variety of approaches. At least three can be discerned, each of which sees a different relationship between modern culture and the current situation.

One view sees the modern approach to catechesis as a failure to transmit Christian faith. It advocates a return to pre-modern forms of catechesis. Some of the uses made of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* fall into this category. While *The Catechism* is intended to be a guide for national catechetical directories, it becomes used as a collection of authoritative statements of facts about faith which are to be appropriated in the form given. Others call for a return to the catechisms of the Pre-Vatican II period.

Much of the discussion of the relation of catechesis to culture today assumes a second alternative, based on a modern approach to the concept of culture. One will see this reflected in some of the other articles in this series on Inculturation and Catechesis. This is built upon the teaching about culture found in Church documents. It assumes one can identify distinctive cultures which, in their salient qualities, call for the formulation of Christian beliefs in ways understandable within those cultures. This is another way of talking about inculturation. It represents some of the best thinking coming out of Church circles

today. Within a post-modern setting, this approach assumes that some of the perceived shortcomings of modernity are not the result of too much modernity, but not enough. Put another way, the modern promise of greater human freedom and fulfillment has not been reached because it is a false goal (a conclusion drawn by the previous point of view), but because it has not had an opportunity yet to be realized fully.

A third kind of post-modern view—over against a rejection of the modern or a working to complete the modern agenda—says that collections of fragments are all that are possible in human life today. This fragmentary approach may describe what some Christians in fact do (e.g., the so-called “cafeteria Catholic,” who picks and chooses what to believe and how to act), but it is considered neither an ideal nor ultimately an authentic way of being Christian. This relativizing of the imperatives of Christian faith would be considered unacceptable because, if for no other reason, the relativizing of all commitments not only goes against the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament, but also is questionable whether it leads to a full human life. Consequently, fragmentation in human life may have to be acknowledged as the situation in which we live, but Christian faith urges us to seek a wholeness even in the midst of that fragmentation. Jesus Christ came that we might have fullness of life, not simply a collection of incompatible parts. Post-modern catechesis, on this reading, helps us seek unity even in the midst of that fragmentation. Seeking unity in the midst of fragmentation might be a way of speaking of inculturation in a post-modern world.

## **INCULTURATION AND CATECHESIS IN A POST-MODERN WORLD**

What does inculturation and catechesis mean in such a post-modern setting, a setting that would describe the world in which many Catholics in the United States live? To understand this, one must begin with inculturation as it has been defined thus far in Catholic thinking.

Inculturation is, first of all, about how faith interacts with culture. It tries to describe the process by which faith enters cultural reality (culture understood here as a unity of language, custom, and territory, which is the forum in which we come to the full expression of our humanity). Faith takes on distinctive cultural forms in order to be able



to enter more deeply into culture. Thus, there is a certain (but not infinite) range of expression or articulations of belief which takes place. But faith is not simply a malleable element within the field of faith. Faith represents values which, paradoxically, only find expression within concrete cultures, yet transcend every culture. As such, faith carries within it the capacity to be highly interactive with a culture. It affirms what is good and life-giving within culture, even brings the positive aspects of culture to perfection. But it also points to what is sinful, unjust, and death-dealing in culture as something which needs to be fundamentally changed.

Faith is able to do this because it springs from God's definitive revelation in Jesus Christ. The Incarnation itself represents the paradigm for inculturation: the Eternal Word takes on limited form in a specific culture in a specific time and place. Yet that very encounter between the Word and culture is capable of revealing eternal values. Christian faith believes that every culture is capable of manifesting God's glory in this way. There is no culture which is inherently or utterly sinful in a way that renders it incapable of the presence of the Word. At the same time, no culture can completely encompass the fullness of the Word. Seen from another angle, one might say that we will only be able to witness the fullness of the meaning of God's word for humanity when it has had an opportunity to be inculturated in every human culture. This might be considered another way of stating what Pope John Paul II presents so succinctly in the quotation cited above.

It should be noted in passing that the word "inculturation" has caused confusion in some quarters because of its similarity to the terms "acculturation" and "enculturation." "Inculturation" is a neologism, as Pope John Paul II points out in the quote above. "Acculturation" means becoming acquainted with another culture as though one had always been part of that culture. "Cultural adaptation"—say, of someone from England to Mexico—is an example of acculturation. "Enculturation" is the process whereby an infant becomes part of the culture of its birth. We have all been enculturated in this fashion. "Inculturation" refers to this interaction of faith and culture in every instance of faith meeting culture, whether one experiences it in one's first culture or at a later stage of life.

But given what is often experienced as the fragmentation of culture in the postmodern sensibility, is there such a thing as inculturation today? There is. First of all, few people live in situations of utter fragmentation of culture. They may speak several languages, but each of the languages still has some fundamental integrity. There is usually an identification more with one way of life than another. Even where there is a situation of acute conflict between elements of culture, as is the case for the children of immigrants caught between the parents' home culture and the culture in which they now live, people will try to construct a coherence out of the elements they experience.

Even in the midst of this fragmentation, there is still an assumption that faith does not hover above the various ways of being human; it must have the opportunity of encounter with the ideas and practices, as well as the material aspects of life which make up culture. Inculturation in this sense remains important even in the midst of what appears to be the fragmentation of culture. Indeed, faith can become a tool for the critique of some of this fragmentation.

Second, attention to culture in the inculturation process helps critique certain cultural patterns from dominating others. This is important for multicultural settings like the United States. A white, Anglo-Saxon-based culture may come to be seen as superior to other cultural forms, so much so that to identify with another culture within this territory may be seen as a diminishment. But other cultures within the United States, such as African-American culture or one of the cultures of Latin America, may offer a profound critique of the dominant white culture that is prophetic and thoroughly evangelical. Being African-American or Vietnamese-American can be an authentic way of being human, and may be in some instances far more in accordance with the Gospel than adopting ideas and practices of the dominant white culture. Thus it is important to speak of inculturation in the instances of these cultures as well. Powerful as the white Anglo-Saxon culture may be, it must—even by modern standards—be reckoned as one culture among the others in terms of its ultimate value.

## **INCULTURATION AND CATECHESIS IN A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY**

As societies become increasingly multicultural—that is, no society is coextensive with a single culture in the



modern sense of that term—the question of inculturation becomes more imperative rather than less. The different ways of being human that peoples bring to the mix of neighborhoods and cities in the United States can contribute to a greater sense of human well-being. They each carry within themselves potential insights into the meaning of the Gospel. But they also each carry seeds of destruction. Attention to the inculturation process in catechesis permits us to attend to how those values shape our articulation of Christian faith, and also to what elements in those values need evangelical critique. As you read the reflections on catechesis in this series, these twin elements of affirmation and critique need to be kept in mind. For in a multicultural setting such as the United States, the possibility of creating a deeper sense of the catholic dimension of our faith stands before us, as the contribution of each of the many cultures is recognized and valued for giving expression to God’s Word for our time.

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