

CONSULTATION ON “EVANGELIZATION AND INCULTURATION”

The FABC Office of Evangelization organized a Consultation on “Evangelization and Inculturation” in collaboration with the National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC), Bangalore, India from 1-4 March 2000. There were thirty-two participants representing seven Episcopal Conferences of Asia, including seven experts in Missiology, Anthropology, Sociology and Theology and seven Bishops. The Secretary General of the FABC, Bishop Oswald Gomis of Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka was the Chief Guest and took active part in the Consultation.

The sharing about success stories as well as the difficulties faced by the representatives of the seven Episcopal Conferences helped the group to understand the present situation of inculturation in these countries. This paved the way for the experts to present their Papers, which examined the issue of inculturation under various angles so that the participants could have a comprehensive view of the demands of inculturation. The Workshops helped to deepen further that understanding and to work out a plan of action, which is summarized in the “Suggestions”, made by the group. They expressed happiness and satisfaction for having had this unique opportunity. They recommended that the Statement of the group, their Suggestions and the Papers produced by the experts be published in a book form after being reviewed by their Authors in the light of discussions and observations made during the Consultation, with a view to sharing their reflections with the many pastoral workers responsible for animation in the cause of Evangelization.

Suggestions

Since the Church in Asia is a community on mission, evangelization is its central task. It enters into every aspect of human life. Inculturation is an inseparable element of evangelization. Therefore the following suggestions are proposed:

1. The FABC-OE should form a *consultative team of experts* to assist in the planning of its activities. From among them a core group be formed to prepare a *seminar kit on inculturation*, to be made use of by the local Churches for their animation work.
2. The existing *Asian Liturgical Forum*, originally initiated by the FABC be activated and made to function under the auspices of FABC-OE.
3. *Bishops’ Institute for Inculturation* be conducted to promote leadership in the matter of inculturation. The FABC-OE Desk on Mission to be responsible to take initiative in this matter.
4. Since evangelization is the central task of the Asian Churches and therefore of all the Offices of the FABC, we recommend that *the dimension of inculturation be present in the activities of all other Offices of the FABC*. The Office of Evangelization is asked to take responsibility on this matter.
5. In order to intensify our efforts towards inculturation the core group supra could make its services available to the Conferences of Bishops or the FABC Zones in Asia to undertake a serious *study of “Ecclesia in Asia”* with special emphasis on Inculturation
6. *Formation in seminaries and religious institutes* needs to be geared towards more effective inculturation.
7. The Churches in Asia *need to network* with Christian and other faith traditions that are concerned with the promotion of local cultures and values.

8. The *media apostolate* of the Church should join with other secular forces to resist the erosion on indigenous cultures and cultural values; at the same time make judicious use of the mass media for the promotion of peoples' cultures.
9. The FABC-OE should set up a *documentation section on Inculturation* to disseminate information and resource materials on the efforts at Inculturation in the Churches and religions in Asia, e.g. Buddhism. And must *promote studies on inculturation* through diffusion of documents on Asian cultural values and known missionary methods.
10. In order to stimulate and animate the spirit of inculturation among local Churches in the Asian Continent, such *Consultation (or Seminar) on inculturation be held every 2 or 3 years.*

STATEMENT OF THE CONSULTATION ON EVANGELIZATION AND INCULTURATION

We, representatives from the Bishops' Conferences of Bangla Desh, India, Korea, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand gathered together at NBCLC, Bangalore, India from 1- 4 March 2000 in order to reflect on Evangelization and Inculturation and share our experiences, struggles and hopes. We have searched together the path of Evangelization with a view to intensifying our efforts especially in the area of inculturation. We have summed up our reflections in the following statement with a view to sharing them with the many pastoral workers responsible for animation in the cause of Evangelization.

Introduction

As we stand at the threshold of the Third Millennium "the Holy Spirit who leads us into the whole truth makes possible a fruitful dialogue with the cultural and the religious values of different peoples (in Asia) among whom he is present..." (EA 21).

We are aware that it is this dialogue initiated and guided by the Spirit that shapes our identity – our being and our mission. The Asian Bishops have interpreted this as a triple dialogue with the poor, the cultures and the religions of Asia. A dialogue like this requires inculturation of which the Holy Spirit is the prime agent (cf EA 21).

The Church in Asia is a community on mission. The call of Pope John Paul II to evangelize Asia in the Third Millennium should be understood in the context of a paradigm shift which consists primarily in the discovery that all believers form a community, with one common origin, one common destiny and one common mission to transform the world. It is within this vision that we discover our specific mission as disciples of Jesus Christ. "The question now facing the Church in Asia is *how* to share with our Asian brothers and sisters what we treasure as the gift containing all gifts, namely, the Good News of Jesus Christ" (EA 19).

In this context we place on record some luminous examples of inculturation that have taken place in the Churches of Asia. We recall the insightful contributions of the great missionaries like Matteo Ricci in China, Roberto de Nobili in India and Jacome Gonsalves and Joseph Vaz in Sri Lanka. The traditions and rites of the Catholic Eastern Church of Asia have partly been successfully inculturated through centuries of interaction

with the surrounding cultures; the great wealth of their tradition and experience can benefit the whole Church (cf EA 22, 27). The pre-sixteenth history of the St. Thomas Christian Community in India is a case in point.

Challenges

It is in the context of this “how” that we reflect on the relationship between Evangelization and Inculturation, for “the effort to share the gift of faith in Jesus as the only Saviour is fraught with philosophical, cultural and theological difficulties, especially in the light of the beliefs of Asia’s great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific world views” (EA 20). This difficulty is compounded by the fact that the Church is often perceived as foreign to Asia.

Our journey on this path of mission has not been without difficulties. At times our efforts towards inculturation have remained too theoretical and failed to resonate with the people at the grass-roots level, sometimes these efforts have become one-sided (e.g. overstress on Sanskritization in India) or have ignored or discarded the traditions (Art, Music, Dance, Festivals, etc.) of the marginalized (Dalit, Tribal, Women, etc). One-sidedness has shown itself not only in the neglect of the body and the world-body but also of holistic approaches to health and holiness. Inadequate catechesis, lack of effective national and regional bodies for animation, long-standing conservative attitudes within the Church have obstructed the progress of inculturation. Furthermore not only has the integrated and contextualized formation of priests and Religious not got the attention it deserves but also the training of laymen and women in theology and their participation in the sacramental life of the Church remains a distant dream. The local hierarchy too has not taken much initiative to make use of the freedom they enjoy. Overexposure to modern mass media, which threaten to strike at the heart of Asian culture and religiosity, is another serious obstacle in the path of mission.

The phenomenon of globalization, the rapid development of the electronic media and the indiscriminate dependency on science and technology alone pose serious threats as they tend to uproot people from their community and culture.

Opportunities

As Asia comes out of the colonial period, its people have become more aware of their national identity. There is renewed sense of pride in their religious and cultural values (cf EA 6). “Moreover, despite the influence of modernization and secularization, Asian religions are showing signs of great vitality and a capacity for renewal, as seen in reform movements within the various religious groups. Many people, especially the young experience a deep thirst for spiritual values, as the rise of new religious movements clearly demonstrates” (EA 6).

Reviewing the life of the Church in Asia since Vatican II, we find that the Churches in Asia recognize the indispensable necessity of inculturation as a path of mission. This has been constantly reiterated by the official documents of FABC and the National Episcopal Conferences. Many efforts have been made in the past decades to implement this vision in varying degrees. The emergence of indigenous theology, spirituality, religious life, creativity in liturgical celebrations, etc. are clear evidence of the commitment the

Churches have made to achieve this goal. All this has shown its fruitfulness in a growing commitment to interreligious dialogue and liberative praxis on behalf of the poor of Asia. We also notice an increasing appreciation on the part of the Christian communities of Asia of their respective cultural heritages.

“Thanks to the impetus provided by the Council (Vatican II) a new understanding of mission dawned and with it a new hope” (EA 9). This consists in openness to all religions and cultures and the consciousness of the Churches as local communities on mission. The growing collaboration between the different religious and cultural groups augurs well for a meaningful dialogue of life and action. But the recent religious and cultural revivalism in some quarters as well as fundamentalism have posed serious challenges to the Church’s evangelizing presence and perhaps to the lack of the spirit of self-emptying.

Evangelization and Inculturation

Evangelization is the realization of God’s design for a new humanity and a new heaven and a new earth. (cf Rev 21). This however cannot be fully realized unless we open ourselves up to the presence of the same plan operating in all religious and cultural traditions. That is why the Church strives to understand the religions and cultures of our neighbours (cf EA 21). For it is only through sharing life in all its dimensions that we can become authentic instruments for the realization of God’s plan for the whole human family and the entire cosmos.

Culture, in the Divine Plan, has a significant role. At the same time culture can deviate from the Divine Plan. The phenomenon of intercultural, that is, the awareness of the interaction and influence of cultures on each other draws attention to the enriching as well as dehumanizing factors that are operative in the values and meaning-systems of all cultures. In this intercultural process of enrichment and critique the inculturating community discerns the chaff of false hopes and false values from the wheat of genuine growth. Accordingly, inculturation is not a project that is planned and executed by humans but a process wherein the community allows itself to be led by the Spirit. In such a case inculturation just happens in much the same way that the first Christians became Jewish Christians and the gentiles became Gentile Christians. (cf Gal 2 & 3; Acts 10, 11 & 15).

Finally the locus of inculturation is the local community which is on mission to make the reign of God present in its “locality” through liberative and interreligious engagement for the welfare of all creation. It is at this juncture that worship both authenticates the process of inculturation and also validates the proclamation of the Good News.

An inculturated Christian community, fully integrated in the life of the local human community will give rise to a new way of being Church in Asia. It will be a community in relationship with people of other faiths; it will be a community that is fully evangelized so that it acts as leaven in society; it will be a community that identifies itself with the poor and the marginalized; it will be a community in communion with the rest of the ecclesial community, offering its original contribution to the universal salvific mission of Christ. This ideal image of the community will perhaps be best realized in the Small Christian Communities that live in constant communion and sharing of life with their brothers and sisters in the neighbourhood.

May Mary, our Mother, accompany us in our search for the Asian face of Jesus! May she guide us in introducing her Son in a way that promotes healing and harmony in Asia!

For further information see:

*Saturnino Dias (Editor) Evangelization and Inculturation
Mumbai (Pauline Publications) 2001 pp 256*