

CONSECRATED LIFE AS A WAY TO INCULTURATION

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It is an impossible task to present this topic, consecrated life as a way to inculturation, in minutes. It is generally accepted nowadays that the Christian message is accessible to all cultures. It is not tied to any one culture or people in particular (RM 52). In theory as well as in practice, this challenge is so complex that I must in this presentation content myself to asking a few questions and proposing a tentative response.

1 Is consecrated life truly a way to inculturation?

We answer in the affirmative, but the process is not automatic. Over many centuries, consecrated life has promoted missionary activity with exemplary zeal. It would, however, be historically untrue that it took into consideration cultural values, positive and negative, in its presentation of the Gospel. Often the missionaries did not succeed in involving themselves in culture of the people among whom they were working. They often remained alien to it. Even today, it is not uncommon to meet among consecrated people some, who without openly decrying the idea of inculturation, consider it to be unrealistic and a waste of time and energy.

Will it ever be possible to separate the Lord and his message from its original Jewish base? Is it possible to inculturate the spiritual heritage of a religious institute outside the cultural milieu in which our founders received their mission? It would be unrealistic to believe in a natural affinity between consecrated life and inculturation. Religious institutes must work at convincing themselves that evangelisation supposes inculturation. It must strive to discover the transcendental values of all cultures and learn to perceive them as signs of the Holy Spirit present in creation. It is really only since Vatican II that consecrated life has accepted inculturation as a necessity.

2 Is consecrated life open to inculturation?

For centuries, the answer has been clearly affirmative. The eschatological vocation, expressed concretely in consecrated life, invites it to reject the idea that one culture can be the permanent and exclusive context for living it. The contemplative dimension helps to find God's Spirit already present and at work in all cultures. It affirms the belief that the Spirit works at the fulfilment of the people of any culture. To help them, the Spirit uses consecrated life, understood as the following of Christ, and invites it not to live for itself, but to leave family, people and culture to witness, through renunciation and in the Paschal hope, that the Lord Christ can be served, in chastity, poverty and obedience, equally in all cultures. Yes, consecrated life favours inculturation.

3 What has consecrated life learnt from so many years' experience in trying to achieve inculturation?

It has learnt that we cannot evangelize cultures. Rather the Lord moves us to evangelize men and women within their cultures. This is an excruciatingly slow process, simply because cultural changes happen slowly. We have learnt that faith

does not exist in a pure disembodied state, that it is always and necessarily integrated in a culture. On the other hand, culture is not static; it is constantly subject to the dynamic influence of globalisation. For all these reasons, inculturation is less an interaction between faith and culture than an encounter between a culture that bears the Gospel message and a culture that, implicitly or explicitly, is disposed to receiving Christ. Thus inculturation is a living dialogue between the Gospel integrated in a culture and a people of another culture. Such an encounter is veritably the occasion for an exchange of gifts. Not a unilateral situation of giving on one part and of receiving on the other, but an interaction through which one culture is at once at the service of the other and receiving the enlightenment to live itself fully but differently the whole Gospel. Correspondingly, the receiving culture purifies and enriches the Gospel it is welcoming. For inculturation to be a true exchange in the Spirit, we must not only avoid the imposition of our own personal cultural structures, but we must also express our belief in the creative power of the Spirit by adopting a listening attitude to what the Spirit is saying when men and women affirm that the Gospel means nothing to them. We need to pursue a constant discernment to grasp the cultural sensitivity that lies behind incomprehension and misunderstanding. In these few statements, I have tried to show how different perspectives enrich the dynamic of inculturation.

4 Who can take on the task of inculturation?

It seems evident that only a person in possession of his own culture can inculturate and integrate the Gospel. Anyone who belongs to one culture must admit that he cannot enter fully into another culture. Yet he can indicate the direction inculturation should take, he can will the process and render it possible. Within consecrated life, without imposing the style of another culture, the following of Christ must be allowed to mature in the mutual and fraternal respect of the differences so as to project together a true witness of the living Christ, according to the common charism granted by the Spirit. It would be an offense to another culture to soften and reduce the demands of consecrated life, as if certain cultures only could fully live it.

5 In conclusion, how to go about inculturation?

Since interculturalisation is accomplished in encounter, effective programmes and methods applicable to all situations cannot be worked out behind a desk. It will come about through a flexible spirituality allowing a process of discernment lived in situations of tension of all sorts. There must be the will to maintain a creative fidelity to the charism and the desire to see this charism lived in many ways in other cultures. There must be the willingness to live union of spirit and heart among members of an institute in a disconcerting and threatening cultural diversity. There must be the recognition that openness to all cultures is always faced with resistance to the proclamation of a chaste, poor and obedient Lord. By submission to these realities, consecrated life promotes inculturation through an attitude marked by acceptance, and maintained in prayerful discernment and with the frustrating patience that evangelization always supposes and requires.

It is a source of consolation to observe how, through hospitality and solidarity, by participative sharing in common life and a continuing dialogue with God, consecrated life carries the gift of the living Christ to the men and women of all cultures in the building of the holy city where the wealth of the nations is gathered so that God will be

all in all. Interculturation is an eschatological promise, not unrealistic but yet not of this world. We plant, we water, but only the Lord gives fulness of life.

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