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INCULTURATION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE IN AFRICA

1) CONTEXT

It is a well-known fact that religious have played an important role in the evangelisation of Africa. Jesuits, Redemptorists, Holy Ghost Fathers, White Fathers, Capuchins and Franciscans, to cite only a few of the male congregations, have made outstanding contributions to the Church in Africa.

Nevertheless, there is little understanding of the religious life among the African people. This is because the work of the missions took precedence over the religious life of the missionary. Religious life was considered in some way an adjunct to missionary work. Religious Sisters and Brothers were, first of all, auxiliaries on the mission. Local congregations, particularly of women, exist in fairly large numbers to-day. They were founded mainly to provide helpers for the clergy in various ways. They did not specialise in any particular field and their numbers grew in proportion to the needs of the young churches. As a result these congregations have difficulty to-day in specifying their charism and spirituality.

It is, therefore, easy to understand why religious life, as such, had not been well presented or offered to Africans as an ideal of the Christian life. In general we can say that, before Vatican II, priority, in Africa, was given to establishing the Church with the help, of course, of religious Brothers and Sisters. Before discussing the inculturation of religious life in Africa these facts have to be pointed out.

2) A COMPLICATED PROCESS

For the past twenty years there has been a lot of talk about africanisation adaptation, indigenisation, localisation, incarnation etc. when discussing inculturation of religious life in Africa. It is a recent preoccupation in the history of the Church in Africa — one might say a post missionary preoccupation.

Whatever feelings one may have about inculturation — enthusiasm, annoyance or reticence — it is not open to doubt. It is a necessity which follows from the logic of the Incarnation. The Faith needs cultural supports so that it may be preached and lived. The credibility and force of the witness given by religious life depend, to a large extent, on the cultural channels through which it is expressed. This is the fundamental principle which justifies inculturation.

Talking about inculturation will not bring it about. Far from it! Talking about it in a naive manner as though it were a simple matter of transposition or substitution, of replacing western cultural supports by African ones is much too simplistic.

In the matter of African customs and traditions, for example, we must face the fact — and get rid of dangerous illusions — that these customs and traditions are no longer to be found in their pristine state and that, consequently, the choice to be made is much more delicate and complex than had been thought.

— *Africa is not a village.* Customs and traditions vary from one region to another, from one country to another. They vary even within the same country from one ethnic group to another.

— These customs and traditions have not all an equal chance of survival, even if they have existed for centuries.

— We must take account of necessary breaks with tradition and the resulting void.

— Inculturation to be authentic must be effected *in the spirit of the Gospel*, that is with complete abandonment of one's own cultural inheritance and an openness to local culture. We must never lose sight of this for in this debate I get the impression that some think it sufficient to "africanise" in order to render the process easy. It is true, for example, that mixed communities create problems and are sometimes an obstacle to inculturation in certain ways. However, it is equally wrong to think that the creation of homogeneous communities will solve the problem.

In short, the process of inculturation is a human process involving human beings. It should be brought about gradually and with care to discern what is good in local customs and traditions in order to retain it.

3) AREAS OF INCULTURATION

Experience, however limited, helps us to discern paths to the principal areas of inculturation.

- We must strive for a *meaningful religious life*. I mean by that that inculturation is not an end in itself but the means to a religious life which speaks to the people.

That implies a great deal. Let us ask ourselves the following questions: In what local terms do we identify ourselves? What is our real name? Up to the present we use approximations or awkward paraphrases to translate "religious", "religious life", "congregation". As for "Brothers" and "Sisters", there are, as far as I know, no appropriate words to express them in our African languages (at least in the most widespread ones). How do you translate "Vow"?

- Inculturation must make an effort to find *adequate ways to incarnate* the charism of each congregation in its own context. That is the essential. If not, inculturation risks becoming a kind of folklore. The great orders were inculturated because they were able to form part of the society of their time and respond to the needs of the age and the problems which beset it. That is the task in the Africa of to-day.

- It is important to relive, in the spirit of the Gospel, *the cultural values* which are recognised as the cardinal values of the great African tradition: solidarity, community, welcome, hospitality etc. which are also in the great tradition of the religious life. Considering solidarity under its family aspect, African religious are led to find new and unprecedented ways to live this family solidarity and integrate it into their religious life without sacrificing the essentials of their vocation. Experiments are taking place which must be encouraged and improved in the light of experience. In community life much remains to be done to combine, with prudence, what is good in African family tradition with the requirements of life in a religious community.

- Inculturation will be brought about by *African religious* and only by them. Religious life, like the Church itself, which is involved in the same necessary inculturation, cannot go on indefinitely wearing a foreign mask.

Many elements will disappear of themselves in the course of time and with the onward march of life. Religious life will become part of African life or it will disappear. I repeat that religious life will be inculturated *by Africans or not at all*. But this will not be accomplished by just any African religious. It will be done by those who have the gift of foresight, who can rediscover the fundamental values of the African soul and who will be able to give to that soul a religious expression because they will have lived, assimilated and made their own what is essential in the religious life. Such people will have something to say. They will be "the fathers of the religious life" in Africa. They will, in a manner of speaking, refound religious life. Inculturation concerns people rather than things.

2) HOW DOES ALL THIS CONCERN THE WESTERN WORLD?

It concerns the Western World in more ways than one.

- First of all because it is the West, through the accidents of history, which brought religious life to Africa. This resulted in the fact that the African Church, in general, knows nothing of Eastern religious values and that is a pity.

Now that the child is passing through the normal process of growing up it is only natural that the father should not be disinterested in nor dissociate himself from his offspring.

- Secondly because we all belong to the Church and in the Church all are brothers. Belonging to the Church demands the willingness to listen, and calls for dialogue, empathy and welcome among its members. Local churches or continental churches which dissociate themselves from or show indifference to other churches do not belong to the Church. In this sense I highly appreciate my membership of an international Institute which opens to me the widest ecclesial horizons.

- Lastly *inculturation is not an exclusively African problem*. In many respects the Western World is also concerned. There's nothing more annoying than to be told at every turn, "You must africanise". "You must adapt"... giving you to understand that on the other side of the Atlantic or the Mediterranean there is nothing more to do. It has already been done. The backward are always on the same side! Inculturation is not the exclusive duty of the young Churches.

5) CONCLUSION

The duty of inculturation is continuous and long term. What one has found is always relative, never definitive.

I think this is implied in "Perfectae Caritatis" (2,1) which urges religious institutes to initiate a renewal combining adaptation to the conditions of existence with a continuing return to the sources of Christian life and to the original inspiration of their Institutes.

"Under the impulse of the Holy Spirit: and the Holy Spirit is still at work".

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