

PERPETUAL VOWS AND INCULTURATION

Introduction

This article does not attempt to present a theoretical study on inculturation; it will merely limit itself to recounting some related facts which have been experienced in different periods of history. It deals with the perpetual profession ceremonies of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. If the deep significance of the vows has remained unchanged, for they continue to be a total consecration of one's self to the Lord, the rite or the manner of pronouncing these vows has changed enormously, especially in the course of the last ten years, during which much has been said about inculturation. Thus, during one of his African visits, Pope John Paul II himself said: "Africanization encompasses a wide and deep domain which as yet has not been sufficiently explored, when it comes to the language in which to present the Christian language in a way which will touch the spirit and heart of the Africans, and when it comes to the catechesis, the theological thought, and the expression best adapted to the liturgy or sacred art, and the communitarian modes of Christian life".

What follows here is precisely a presentation of a Malagasy experience of this "more adapted expression" of the ceremony of vows.

1 — Concerning a clannish ceremony where everything is a mystery to the uninitiated

I should like to recount here a personal experience. In 1958, I pronounced my perpetual vows in the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools in the course of a ceremony in the private chapel of a community of Religious Sisters. During the course of the ceremony, I was well surrounded by my Brothers in religion, both local Brothers and foreign missionary Brothers. They were both happy and proud to accept me as another member who would definitely commit himself to the Society for better or for worse.

As regards my parents, whom I discreetly invited on my own, they occupied the last pew in the chapel. They were like silent and mute spectators during this ceremony which interested them so deeply but whose significance escaped them; either because they were so far behind the human curtain formed by my religious Brothers or because it was a ceremony which was carried out in a language foreign to them. They were the uninitiated and so they could not understand the language of our "clan". Furthermore, is the religious life not conceived as an abandonment and a forgetting of one's own and a world apart which rises above all cultures? It did not have any other points of reference except tradition (the classical view of the religious life). One can be inculturated only within the patrimony of the clan.

2 — Towards a more ecclesial celebration

Now we are in 1978, that is, twenty years later; Brother So-and-so is also pronouncing his definitive commitment to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. But, the rite has taken on a different appearance. The ceremony takes place in the original parish which prepared for this happy event for some entire weeks, with a catechesis concerning the vows of religion and the meaning of consecration.

Now it is not only the parents who have been invited, but the entire family and even the entire parish, with privileged guests being the young people and the students. The celebration will be intensely spiritual, but as is said here, there cannot be any kind of a celebration without "*vary be menaka*" (rice and a lot of other food) with each one bringing a little something for the meal of all those present. For the religious celebration, it is the bishop himself who presides at the Eucharist; an imposing number of men and women religious are present; but above all the large parish church is packed to the doors with the ordinary faithful who make up the ecclesial community.

Invited by the Brother Visitor to approach the altar to pronounce his consecration, the young Brother rises and after bowing respectfully towards his parents, asks them for their blessing.

The voice of an old man, the oldest person in the family, arises like an enchanting hymn calling the grace of God down upon "their child and their Brother", asking also for the protection of ancestors and for the benevolent love of all the living. The extraordinary silence which pervades the immense assembly during this moment speaks eloquently of the weight and value which the Malagasy people attach to the paternal blessing. For many this is not only the most moving moment of the ceremony but also its summit and culminating point. However, the rest of the ceremony is followed with enthusiasm and sustained interest by this Church which sings with full voice and praises God in dance.

Doubtlessly, there are certain things which would have to be clarified, but the fact remains that it was the entire people of God who took part in this act of consecration of the Brother. This event was not the private act of a closed religious community acting alone, but it was rather one of an entire ecclesial community which made this consecration of vows an authentically public act expressed within the Church.

3 — The vow celebration embraces the Lasallian family

If inculturation is a rather recent movement in the Church, the notion as a reality is even more so in the Institute. Yet, more and more young people and adults feel themselves attracted to the mission and spirituality of De La Salle;

they experience a wish to draw a bit more closely to the Brothers; they desire to share a bit of their life and participate in their mission. The parents of the Brothers themselves willingly subscribe to become members of this Lasallian family, following the lay teachers, former students, the youth, and other sympathizers.

Now we are in 1985; God continues to send vocations in the District of Tananarive; and thus it is that five young Brothers are going to pronounce their perpetual vows. They are prepared for this by a month of spiritual reflection and prayer. It is interesting to note that some years before, this spiritual month, or thirty days' retreat, was directed by a preacher who was competent in his own right, but who said nothing or almost nothing about Lasallian spirituality. By contrast, the spiritual month we are referring to here was a preparation for perpetual profession largely animated by the Brothers or by other spiritual guides who were open to our family spirituality of the Founder.

And now comes the day of profession. The parents also have been advised some days earlier so that they also can prepare for this grand event of definitively offering one of their children to the Lord. Time truly, the parents did something more than to bring us into the world. Were they not the first ones who initiated their children into the Christian faith? Had not their example influenced our choice of a vocation? Are they not interested in our religious process? Why then should they not be involved a bit more in this definitive decision which perpetual profession truly is?

It is in this perspective that the five Malagasy Brothers who are making their final profession have conceived of a ritual where the parents, the Institute, and themselves enter into a dialogue which includes and concerns everybody in this final profession.

It is not possible for us to relate here everything that was said on that occasion. We shall merely transcribe a summary of what was said in such deep and captivating Malagasy that we cannot give a translation which would do justice to the original.

The parents addressed the Institute and then the Brother Visitor in words suitable for the occasion, and then a bit later, they pronounced the following words:

"Here in our presence, Brother So-and so and Brother So-and-so are ready for their wedding; it is not a question of taking a wife, as required by our ancestral traditions; but it is one of binding themselves forever to Jesus Christ in the Congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. This congregation and our sons have known, studied and mutually appreciated one another for the past seven or eight years. The time for reciprocal probing has come to an end; now comes the decisive day when they will bind themselves to the Institute until death, for better or for worse. We wish to make it quite clear that they are making this commitment without any constraint or force upon the part of anyone. This commitment is being made because of the love which binds them to the Lasallian Congregation, by the love of God, love for children, and by love for their Brothers in religion...".

Acceptance by the Institute

The Brother Visitor, in the name of Institute, then speaks up and expresses himself in the following way: "The Congregation of the Brothers of the Christian Schools expresses its gratitude to you, dear parents, who have succeeded in your educative mission and have come here today to offer back again to the Lord, the sons he had confided to you to rear. It is neither gold nor silver, nor any other material things which you are offering today; you are offering your own children for the extension of the Kingdom of God, through the education of children especially poor children. The Lord Himself will surely reward you a hundred-fold for the sacrifice which you have offered to Him".

Then addressing himself to the young men themselves, Brother Visitor continues: "I address you, young Brothers. The people of God is here assembled because of you. Your parents have expressed their intention to offer you to Christ, to espouse you to the Brothers of the Christian Schools. But we want you yourselves to tell us of your deep intentions. The people of God here present await a clarification from you, to which they will be the witnesses. Tell them of the profound meaning of the commitment you are about to undertake; they await that testimony for their own edification and to motivate the intentions of the prayers which they will address to God for your behalf".

Declaration of future profession

"It is willingly and with full knowledge that I commit myself definitively to the Institute. I sufficiently understand its history, its way of life, its apostolate, and its spirituality. I have gotten to know the Brothers well enough, having lived with them in community and having together with them worked for the Christian education of youth. These experiences seem to me to be sufficient and conclusive. Hence, I herewith decide to bind myself forever to them as a witness in the world today of a truly evangelical brotherhood for the service of youth".

Combined blessing by the Family and by the Institute

After these declarations of intentions, the Brother Visitor as well as the fathers and mothers of those about to pronounce their perpetual vows, bless one after the other, the young Brothers seated in front of the altar, facing the people. This blessing is spontaneous and charismatic. Placing their hand, moistened with holy water, upon the head of each candidate for profession, each pronounces a formula, expressed in the words which spring from their maternal and paternal heart under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, fortified by this blessing as well as by the prayers of the congregation who took part in this ceremony, the candidates for perpetual profession join in the eucharistic celebration, during which they will pronounce their perpetual vows according to the traditional formula of the Institute.

This experience is unique in its kind, so there is no general conclusion to be drawn from it. What is proposed is to become aware that the ceremony of perpetual profession, which is highly ecclesial in nature, should be something truly significant for those participating in it.

Now it is up to each one to devise a procedure in conformity with his own culture to arrive at this desirable objective.