

(Versio anglica)

On Inculturation

TO THE WHOLE SOCIETY

DEAR BROTHERS IN CHRIST:

The Thirty-second General Congregation in its decree on Inculturation entrusted Father General with the task of *further development and promotion of this work throughout the Society*¹.

I accepted this mandate of the Congregation with all the greater interest because my experience both before and after my election as General has profoundly convinced me of the importance of this problem.

Taking *culture* in the same sense in which it is understood by the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (53), and subsequently by the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (20), and by the recent Synod of 1977 in its final message (n. 5), the problem of inculturation presents itself on such a large scale, in situations of such wide diversity and with such profound and varied implications, that it is not at all easy to settle on concrete lines of approach that are universally valid.

For this reason, I have decided to limit myself in this letter to a few considerations that may serve as a stimulus for you not only to promote this process of inculturation but to be actively involved in it. I want to tell you how I see this problem as it touches the Society.

In a separate document, attached to this letter, some reflections are offered, and various issues raised; questions are formulated that are intended to focus our efforts to find solutions. For, in spite of the progress we have made, this is a subject that still requires much study, consultation, and discernment.

The notion of inculturation and its universal relevance today

Inculturation can be looked at from many viewpoints and seen at different levels, which must be distinguished but cannot be

¹ Decr. 5, n. 2.

separated. Yet, amid the multiple formulations of the problem which we have to reckon with, the fundamental and constantly valid principle is that inculturation is the incarnation of christian life and of the christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation), but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about « a new creation ».

In every case, this christian experience is that of the People of God, that lives in a definite cultural space and has assimilated the traditional values of its own culture, but is open to other cultures. In other words, it is the experience of a local Church which, accepting the past with discernment, constructs the future with its present resources.

I believe that we are much more conscious nowadays than we were before of the urgent importance and the deep implications of this process.

It is clear that the need for inculturation is universal. Until a few years ago one might have thought that it was a concern only of countries or continents that were different from those in which the Gospel was assumed to have been inculturated for centuries. But the galloping pace of change in these latter areas—and change has already become a permanent situation—persuades us that today there is need of a new and continuous inculturation of the faith everywhere if we want the gospel message to reach modern man and the new *sub-cultural* groups. It would be a dangerous error to deny that these areas need a re-inculturation of the faith.

So you should not think that this document which I am sending you has reference only to what have been called *Mission Countries* until now. It finds application everywhere, perhaps all the more so where people think they do not have this need. The concepts, *Missions, Third World, East/West*, etc., are relative and we should get beyond them, considering the whole world as one single family, whose members are beset by the same varied problems.

The christian experience in a given culture has an influence that transforms and renews and, perhaps after a crisis of confrontation, leads to a fresh wholeness in that culture. Further, christian experience helps a culture to assimilate universal values which no one culture can exhaustively realize. Christian experience invites us to enter into a new and profound communion with other cultures, inasmuch as all the nations are called to form, with mutual enrichment and complementarity, the *role of many colours* of the

cultural reality of the one pilgrim People of God. In today's world, a large contact between cultures is inevitable, and this provides a providential opportunity for inculturation. The problem lies in a wise channeling of this intercultural influence. It is here that christianity can play a most important role: its mission is that of searching the depths of the past with lucid discernment, whilst it opens a culture both to values that are universal and common to all human beings, and to the particular values of other cultures; it must ease tensions and conflicts, and create genuine communion.

Surely this is one of the great contributions that we should be making.

Inculturation and the Society of Jesus

As Jesuits we should feel especially challenged by this problem. It is one we have confronted throughout the history of the Society; and unless we solve it, great obstacles to our work of evangelization will block our path.

Ignatian spirituality, with its unifying vision of Salvation History, and its ideal of service to the whole human race², was a stroke of genius which, according to some experts, channelled the sensibilities and the cultural characteristics of the 16th century into the steady stream of christian spirituality; nevertheless, it did not confine itself to its own age, but in the course of history has been able to promote both the dynamism of the Spirit and human creativity, in a never ending process of adaptation to all peoples and times.

Quite obviously, St. Ignatius never used the word « inculturation ». But the theological content of this term is present in his writings, including the Constitutions.

The *Presupposition* of the Exercises demands a basic disposition at the outset of the retreat which is of immense value in inculturation: to be ready to *save the proposition of the neighbour* (22). This is where authentic dialogue begins.

The Exercises ask us to reflect on the one beginning and end for all human beings (23), their solidarity in sin (51, 71), the call of the King addressed to the whole world (102). Furthermore, they recall that everything come to us as a token of God's love, as gifts that descend from above (234, 235, 257).

The personal experience of Christ and his message which we live in the Exercises, the interior knowledge of the Lord (104), helps

² « With such diversity ... of dress and behaviour; ... some white, others black ... » *Sp. Ex.*, 106.

us to discern correctly what is inalienable in christian faith and what might be merely its cultural wrappings.

Concern for the concrete situation is a constant in the thought of St. Ignatius and in his government. It appears in more than 20 passages of the Constitutions. He keeps insisting that attention be paid to the circumstances of country, place, language, different mentalities, and personal temperaments³.

Along the same line are the words of advice he gives in various instructions: *They should make themselves approachable by humility and love, becoming all things for the sake of all*⁴; *let them clearly adopt, as far as the Institute of the Society allows, the customs of those peoples*⁵. He orders that penances be given to those who do not learn the local language⁶.

The tradition of the Society has always been faithful to this principle of adaptation. This is the way our great missionaries acted—Xavier, Ricci de Nobili and so many others, each according to the mentality of his time—when they launched bravely and creatively on an effort at pastoral adjustment to a given situation.

The task of evangelization of cultures, which is one aspect of the total problem, cannot be ignored in our days, and it calls for Jesuits who make a similar creative effort. Paul VI invites us to take up this responsibility, so much in keeping with the tradition of the Society, when he encourages messengers of the Gospel to make every effort and give serious attention to the evangelization of cultures⁷.

This is surely one of those difficult and yet very important areas mentioned by the Pope, in which there has been or now is a tension between pressing human needs and the christian message, and where Jesuits have always been ready to work⁸.

The ignatian spirit was once summed up in this sentence: « Non cohiberi a maximo, contineri tamen a minimo, divinum est. » In our context, this maxim challenges us to hold on to the concrete and the particular, even to the last cultural detail, but without renouncing the breadth and universality of those human values which no culture, nor the totality of them all, can assimilate and incarnate in a perfect and exhaustive way.

³ Cfr. *Constitutions*, 301, 508, 581, 747, 395, 458, 462, 671, 64, 66, 71, 136, 211, 238, 449, etc.

⁴ I Cor 9,22.

⁵ To the Fathers and Brothers sent on ministries: Rome, 24 September, 1549; MI Epp XII, 239-242.

⁶ To the Superiors of the Society: Rome, 1 January, 1556.

⁷ Cfr. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20.

⁸ Cfr. Allocution to the members of CG 32, 3.xii.74.

Necessary attitudes

Many factors contribute to achieve a successful inculturation, and they demand from whoever is involved in the process a fine sensibility and some definite attitudes.

Beyond the fundamental attitude already mentioned, that is, of the *unifying vision* of Salvation History, one needs in the first place *docility to the Spirit*, who is the real *causa agens* of all new inculturation of the faith. This docility demands a continuous and attentive listening in prayer, so that the action of the Spirit is effective in the midst of all our studies and projects. This docility guards against preconceived conclusions. Putting it in ignatian language, it presupposes *indifference*, adopting a stance that is open both to receive and to give.

Genuine inculturation also supposes an attitude of ignatian *discernment*, which is ruled by evangelical principles that give to human values a transcendental dimension, so that we neither overestimate the elements of our own culture nor underestimate elements that can be found in other cultures. Discernment leads to readiness to learn from others and makes one cautious in the face of misleading appearances or superficial judgments; otherwise one might accept indiscriminately values of secondary importance while sacrificing fundamentals—for example, one might overstress technical development at the cost of destroying basic values of the person such as freedom and justice. This kind of *discretion* is vital today when all around us we see a tendency towards extremes.

Objective authenticity, which is fostered by this discretion, leads to an *interior humility* which makes us recognize our own errors and helps us to be understanding towards those of others. The countries with a long christian tradition have certainly made mistakes in their work of evangelization, but today these are openly admitted and should be forgiven and forgotten. Likewise, the new nations who have received the Gospel from others, have made mistakes which they recognize; and these too should be forgiven and forgotten. Thus the way is open for a collaboration in which there is mutual acceptance in the creation of a present and a future, without prejudice or reservations, without limits set on the power of the Spirit.

Inculturation also requires a *persevering patience*, which is indispensable for studies in depth (psychological, anthropological, sociological, etc.) and for the unhurried experimental projects which will surely have to be undertaken. We must also steer clear of sterile polemics and, still more, of easy bargains with error.

On the contrary, it is necessary patiently to search for the « semina Verbi », those « pierres d'attente » predestined by Providence for the building up of truth.

Caritas discreta is another requirement for inculturation, so that prophetic boldness and the fearlessness of apostolic zeal are blended with the prudence of the Spirit. Thus we can avoid extreme positions and counterproductive imprudence without restricting the impulses of a sound prophetic sense that can inspire us to take calculated risks.

Above all, we need the ignatian *sensus Ecclesiae*. In a process that is so important and full of implications, one cannot remain on the fringe of the Church—and we understand the Church as does Vatican II, that is, in its twofold aspect of People of God and of Hierarchy. Neither of these elements can be overlooked. It is evident that final responsibility rests with the Hierarchy. But we have to avoid two extremes: the excess *non secundum scientiam*⁹ which would have us proceed regardless of the Hierarchy, and the small-mindedness which would keep us timid and passive, inhibited in our creativity. As in all else, so too in this process of inculturation, the love which we profess for the *Spouse of Christ* must lead us to think *with the Church* and *in the Church*, submitting our activities and experiments in this delicate matter to the Church's direction.

These dispositions should awaken in the members of the Society that *universal charity* which urges them to outstanding efforts as creators of communion, not only at the level of the local Church, but with concern for the communion of the entire pilgrim People of God.

Internal consequences

The effect this process would have on the inner life of the Society should be obvious. The changes which have taken place and which will keep on taking place in the future, as we try to adapt ourselves to contemporary cultural changes, have their origin in the criteria of Vatican II and in the priorities and directives of the Thirty-first and Thirty-second General Congregations. But these changes will have no practical effect if we do not allow the transforming power of the Spirit to modify our personal life from within. We might call this *the personal interior inculturation*, which must necessarily precede, or at least accompany, the external task of inculturation. All changes arising from Vatican II and from our

⁹ Rom 10,2.

last two General Congregations have precisely this objective: to make us effective agents of a genuine inculturation of the Gospel.

In order to understand our charism in contemporary terms and to discern in apostolic spirit our service to the Church today, we have to rethink our way of applying ignatian criteria to the concrete situations that face us. This is a kind of inculturation which is personal and *intra Societatem* and it is not easy. Although we admit in theory the necessity of inculturation, when it comes to practice and touches us personally, demanding of us profound changes in our attitudes and scale of values, often there is insensibility and resistance. This shows up our lack of inner disposition for *personal inculturation*.

If we want to let ourselves be caught up in the process of inculturation, theory and study are not enough. We need the *shock* of a deep personal experience. For those called to live in another culture, it will mean being integrated in a new country, a new language, a whole new life. For those who remain in their own country, it will mean experiencing the new styles of our changing contemporary world—not the mere theoretical knowledge of the new mentalities, but the experiential assimilation of the way of life of the groups with which we must work, the outcasts, Chicanos, slum dwellers, intellectuals, students, artists, etc.

Take, for example, the wide world of the young people whom we serve in our schools, parishes, Christian Life Communities, Centers of Spirituality, etc. They belong to a culture that is quite different from that of many Jesuits, with mental structures, scales of value and language (especially religious language) not always easily intelligible. Communication is difficult. In a certain sense, we are *foreigners* in their world. I think that many Jesuits, especially in the developed countries, have no idea of the abyss which separates faith and culture; and for that very reason they are less well equipped servants of the Word.

The experience of what is called insertion into another culture should free us from so much that keeps us shackled: class prejudice and narrow loyalties, cultural and racial discrimination, etc.

The total inculturation required of a Jesuit should never turn him into a hidebound nationalist or regionalist. Our universalism, the sense of belonging to the *universal body* of the Society, must be kept inviolate, *lest diversity damage the bond of charity*, as St. Ignatius notes in the Constitutions (672). So too, we have to maintain in full vigor the disposition of availability, a fundamental attitude of every Jesuit, which makes him ready to go wherever

there is hope of greater service of the Church, if he is sent on mission by obedience.

It is in keeping alive this availability that we feel more personally and intimately the tension between the particular and the universal, between the sense of being identified with the culture of a particular people and, at the same time, keeping ourselves free and ready to be sent to any part of the world where our apostolic service is required.

Authentic inculturation, with the above-mentioned characteristics of particularity and universality, has an obvious importance in the *formation of our young men*. They are called to become agents of inculturation and must, therefore, be formed in its spirit and in its concrete expression.

In line with the desire of the Thirty-second General Congregation that we *continue with even greater intensity today* the work of inculturation, I would like that a persevering effort in this area become the object of *ever growing concern on the part of the Society*¹⁰. I want us to be vitally aware of the capital importance of inculturation for our mission of defense and propagation of the faith, conscious that we belong at one and the same time to the local Church and to the Universal Church.

But this will not come about without personal and profound convictions—so whoever does not have these should strive for them—and without the well-ordered collaboration of all, in study, in reflection and in concrete experiences. Only in that way will we discover those living channels of communication and expression that will enable the christian message to reach the individuals and the peoples with whom we work, opening them up at the same time to the riches of other cultures.

A delicate task this, to be sure; but indispensable. It is one of the best services which the Society of today can render in the cause of evangelization. All of us, sons of the Society, should be conscious of being sent as heralds and agents of a communion that not only gathers together people of our own countries, but brings to unity, whilst respecting distinct identity, *all God's children scattered far and wide*¹¹.

I am sending you this letter on the Solemnity of Pentecost, and I invoke upon all of you the light and grace of God's Spirit.

Feast of Pentecost,
Rome, 14 May, 1978

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*Superior General
of the Society of Jesus*

¹⁰ Decree 5, n. 1.

¹¹ John 11,52.