

# THEOLOGICAL CRITERIA FOR GOSPEL INCULTURATION AND THE *VIA PULCHRITUDINIS*

## Criterios teológicos para la inculturación del evangelio y la *Via Pulchritudinis*

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### Abstract

In His infinite wisdom, God desired that there would be an unfathomable accidental inequality among human beings, expressed in the most varied psychologies, aptitudes, ways of being, gifts, tastes, lifestyles and so on, thus enabling them to more perfectly reflect His infinite attributes.

This great diversity of qualities naturally tends to be realized and expressed through the emergence of a marked diversification of cultures. This cultural diversity — when imbued with the spirit and light of the Gospel — constitutes an extraordinary and precious reflection of the beauties and perfections of the Creator.

The evangelization of peoples and civilizations must never lose sight of this important fact by seeking to impose on them a single, uniform and globalized culture. On the contrary, it should seek out — in the pre-existing culture of each people — the elements which constitute its specific “*semina Verbi*”, namely its unique qualities, assimilating them to the degree that they are in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel, promoting their complete unfolding and development, and enriching and ennobling them in the light of Christ. Concomitantly, they should be purified of everything which constitutes the marks of original sin, since cultures, being the fruit of human action, are also subject to the laws that govern them.

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Therefore, the inculturation of the Gospel in specific people is not merely another element in its process of evangelization, but is, rather, the primary goal of this process, because a faith that is not transformed into culture is a faith that is not fully lived out. Furthermore, the expressions of beauty, in their myriad forms, become a rich and most efficacious means by which this people can contemplate and experience the splendors of Uncreated Beauty.

**Key words:** Inculturation, Gospel and culture, Inculturation and beauty, Evangelization and cultural diversity, *Pulchrum* and evangelization.

## Resumen

Quiso Dios, en su infinita sabiduría, que existiera una vasta desigualdad accidental entre los seres humanos, la cual se manifiesta en las más variadas psicologías, aptitudes, modos de ser, dones, estilos de vida, etc., de manera que reflejen más perfectamente sus atributos. A su vez, esta multiplicidad de predicados tiende a realizarse y manifestarse en las más variadas culturas. Esta diversidad, siempre que esté imbuida del espíritu y de la luz del Evangelio, constituye un reflejo extraordinario y muy valioso de las bellezas y perfecciones del Creador.

La evangelización de los diferentes pueblos y civilizaciones no puede abstraerse de esta importante realidad, imponiéndoles una cultura única, uniforme y globalizada. Al contrario, la evangelización debe buscar en la cultura ya existente en cada pueblo los elementos que constituyen sus específicas “*semina Verbi*”, o sea, sus peculiaridades propias. Debe asimilar de ellas todo lo que sea según el espíritu del Evangelio, como también promover su desarrollo y florecimiento plenos, enriqueciendo y ennobleciéndolas a la luz de Cristo. A su vez, las culturas necesitan ser purificadas de las huellas del pecado original, pues como frutos que son del obrar humano, también ellas están sujetas a las leyes que lo rigen.

La inculturación del Evangelio en un pueblo determinado no constituye apenas un nuevo elemento en el proceso de su evangelización, sino una meta prioritaria de este proceso, pues una fe que no ha sido transformada en cultura es una fe que no ha sido plenamente vivida. Y las manifestaciones de la belleza en sus más diversas formas se convierten en camino privilegiado y muy eficaz para que este pueblo contemple y experimente los esplendores de la Belleza Increada.

**Palabras clave:** Inculturación, Evangelio y cultura, Inculturación y belleza, Evangelización y diversidad cultural, *Pulchrum* y evangelización.

## INTRODUCTION

Recent facts in the twentieth century have profoundly marked the existence of mankind, both in the secular and spiritual spheres. In the secular world, apart from a remarkable scientific and technological progress, unprecedented in the history of mankind, an astute observer may perceive symptoms of a grave uneasiness — a form of spiritual restlessness caused by a materialistic and hedonistic view of life and the world, and a human existence devoid of transcendent values; in a word, an ever growing absence of God in the life of man can be noted.

In addition to this, the quest for an improved standard of living on one hand, and on the other, the growing atmosphere of violence and, at times, cruelty, characterized by both world and local wars and multiple conflicts — resulting from guerilla warfare, drug trafficking, political controversies, religious or ethnical unrest, which place countless people under a constant state of insecurity and apprehension — have created instability in many countries, and sparked numerous migratory movements the world over.

Furthermore, taking into account that the man is a religious being by essence, being created by God and for God (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997, § 356), and only in God can he find rest (Augustine, año), this materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle has consequently caused a void in his soul, a hunger and thirst for his Creator which, left unrequited, threatens to collapse into self-annihilation. With keen insight and penetrating analysis, Pope John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, succinctly describes the plight of our contemporary and paradoxical world:

Our times are both momentous and fascinating. While on the one hand people seem to be pursuing material prosperity and to be sinking ever deeper into consumerism and materialism, on the other hand we are witnessing a desperate search for meaning, the need for an inner life, and a desire to learn new forms and methods of meditation and prayer. Not only in cultures with strong religious elements, but also in secularized societies, the spiritual dimension of life is being sought after as an antidote to dehumanization.

However, in the religious sphere, this “desperate search for meaning, the need for an inner life”, has inspired a new impulse in the missionary work of the Catholic Church, which has been increasingly broadening its boundaries since the mid-nineteenth century, evangelizing new peoples and coming into contact with new cultural realities.

New religious orders and movements of conversion have since sprung up, among them the great religious revival known as the Oxford Movement, in England, under the guidance of John Henry Newman; Catholic Action, set in motion by Pope Pius XI and rapidly disseminated throughout many countries;

the New Evangelization, inspired by Pope John Paul II, which is still unfolding and yielding many fruits; and the White Fathers, the Consolata, Combonians and other Missionary Orders in Africa and Asia.

Within the Catholic sphere, we cannot neglect to mention some movements aimed at the rekindling of faith among Catholics themselves, such as *Le Mouvement Ultramontain*, in France, with offshoots in other European countries; and the Liturgical Movement, mainly focused in Europe, but with branches in other countries of the Americas, just to name two.

Nevertheless, as Saint Paul stated, conversion is “to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22-24). Notwithstanding the fact that the ultimate goal of any work of evangelization is the complete metamorphosis of man in Christ, it may be assumed that not everyone involved in these great missionary efforts is deeply convinced of this truth, which weakens their commitment and renders them incapable of leading others to the complete transformation of which the Apostle speaks.

Indeed, there is another very important missing element that must be added to this picture to attain the fullness of man’s conversion in Jesus Christ, for man to be an integral being. Paul VI, in *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi (EN)*, No. 19, addressed precisely this matter as follows:

For the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind’s criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation.

### **Inculturation: path to man’s metamorphosis in Christ**

As Paul Bourget (1914) makes so evident in his celebrated work *Le Démon du Midi*, “One must live as one thinks, under pain of sooner or later ending up thinking as one has lived” ( p. 375)<sup>1</sup>. As a consequence, the Word of Life must penetrate the human being in its totality, and pervade all his faculties, so that his way of living may be consistent with his way of thinking.

1 “Il faut vivre comme on pense, sinon, tôt ou tard, on finit par penser comme on a vécu”. (Personal translation).

How can this crucial goal be achieved? Is there a way that evangelizers may help the Word of God permeate the human soul so thoroughly, in all of its complexities and potentialities, that man is led to a comprehensive coherence between his faith in Jesus Christ and all of his external attitudes, his way of thinking and his lifestyle? In other words, what concrete path should be taken in evangelization in order to eventually obtain that fullness of being clothed “with the new self, created according to the likeness of God”, to which the Apostle refers?

Vatican II, perspicaciously treating of this subject, has brilliantly provoked a re-awakening of the Church’s need to evangelize not only individuals, but also the settings in which they live and move about, their lifestyles, the way they socialize with each other, their workplaces, their perception of life and of the universe; in sum, their cultures. This is needed so that the Gospel might set deep roots into contemporary society and sacralize it from within; there is, in short, a need for what Pope Pius XII (1957) had previously called the *Consecratio Mundi*.

The Conciliar Fathers expressed this concept in an innovative way in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: “Man comes to a true and full humanity only through culture, that is through the cultivation of the goods and values of nature. Wherever human life is involved, therefore, nature and culture are quite intimately connected one with the other” (No. 53, § 1).

If man comes to a “true and full humanity” through culture, the evangelization of culture becomes a priority and a fundamental element in the evangelization of peoples. If this is not achieved, we experience what Pope Paul VI lamented in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: “The split between the Gospel and culture is without a doubt the drama of our time, just as it was of other times” (No. 20).

Following the same path of Vatican II in order to avoid this detrimental divorce between faith and culture, Pope John Paul II has gone even further: “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a requirement of culture but also of faith [...] a faith which does not become culture is a faith that is not fully accepted, deeply considered and faithfully lived out”<sup>2</sup>. In another document, he would later add to this statement in saying: “All human activity takes place within a culture and interacts with culture” (No. 51).

In any case, whether dealing with peoples in their own traditional cultural environments or with populations displaced from their original habitats due

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2 “La synthèse entre culture et foi n’est pas seulement une exigence de la culture mais aussi de la foi... une foi qui ne devient pas culture est une foi qui n’est pas pleinement accueillie, entièrement pensée et fidèlement vécue” (Personal translation).

to violence or any other cause, the evangelization of cultures is of paramount importance for the Catholic Church in order to fulfill Christ's mandate, for "the Church, sent to all peoples of every time and place, is not bound exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, any particular way of life or any customary way of life recent or ancient. Faithful to her own tradition and at the same time conscious of her universal mission, she can enter into communion with the various civilizations, to their enrichment and the enrichment of the Church herself" (*GS*, No. 58, § 1).

### **Meaning of "inculturation" herein**

As a neologism, "inculturation" has been subjected to many different definitions throughout history, ranging from anthropological and sociological, to missiological and even theological interpretations. "Its meaning and employment have not yet become standardized by frequent and repeated use. [...] Another factor that complicates this understanding is the fact that this term is situated in the borderlands between anthropological sciences and theology" (Roest, 1991, p. 1-2).

However, it is not our intention to expound upon all of the meanings this word has taken on in recent decades since its birth in the early 1960s. "Inculturation" herein refers to "not the insertion of an individual in his culture, but the process by which the Church becomes part of the culture of a people" (p. 5).

Thus, our goal is to focus primarily on some theological criteria for an inculturation of the Gospel, seeking to explain how the Church feels compelled to adapt her work of evangelization to the many different races, peoples and cultures to which she is called to carry the Gospel by divine mandate: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (Mt 28:19-20).

## **INCULTURATION IN THE VATICAN II AGE**

"And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor" (Lc 2:52). What is said about the head can also be said of the body, for they make up one indivisible unit; what is said of Jesus can also be applied to the Church, His mystical Body. As history marches on and mankind constantly advances towards new forms of progress, the Church, prompted by the Spirit, also grows unceasingly in wisdom and grace, before God and man, in the manifestation of new charisms and new doctrinal developments.

At the time of Vatican II, the world was a vastly different reality than that of the first Christians, the Patristic Age, or even medieval times. Human society was no longer “governed by the philosophy of the Gospel” as Leo XIII had said of the Middle Ages, but rather had become secularized and hedonistic; the divorce between Gospel, culture, faith and science had come to be “the drama of our time”, in the words of Paul VI.

In view of these circumstances, a new impulse in evangelization — a new pathway to spread the Good News far and wide — had to be found, in order for the Church to face these difficulties and challenges. “Like a master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Mt 13:52), Vatican II redefined the concept of evangelization of cultures, enriching it with new anthropological and ethnological dimensions not present in its primitive meaning, in order to meet the needs of contemporary man.

Although in virtue of her universal mission, the Church “is bound to no particular form of human culture, nor to any political, economic or social system,” as affirmed by *Gaudium et Spes* (GS, No. 42, § 4), it is also true that the Church’s message can only influence peoples when it is embodied within their own cultures, when she becomes part of their cultural environments: “The Church, in order to be able to offer all of them the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, must implant herself into these groups for the same motive which led Christ to bind Himself, in virtue of His Incarnation, to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt” (No. 10), as the Decree *Ad Gentes* of Vatican II states.

Inculturation is, therefore, “this incarnation of the Christian life and message within a particular concrete culture so that the Christian life unfolds with a language proper to the culture encountered. [...] Inculturation is this indwelling of the Word within cultures” (Niyibizi, 2001, p. 409).

Pope John Paul II, talking from a catechetical point of view in his Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, also insists on the need for inculturation as a mean not only for the Gospel to take roots in a particular culture, but also for the culture, illuminated by the light of Christ, to contribute to the enriching of the Church with new expressions of life, liturgy, and intellectual knowledge.

We can say of catechesis, as well as of evangelization in general, that it is called to bring the power of the Gospel into the very heart of culture and cultures. For this purpose, catechesis will seek to know these cultures and their essential components; it will learn their most significant expressions; it will respect their particular values and riches. In this manner it will be able to offer these cultures the knowledge of the hidden mystery and help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought (No. 53).

It is also the mission of the Church, entrusted to her by the Divine Master, to fertilize the *semina Verbi* found in every culture with the lifeblood of the Gospel. By doing so, the Church not only achieves a great spiritual work in the salvific sphere but also efficaciously contributes to make man more humane; to bring men and society to a higher degree of perfection and civilization.

In the past or present experiences of evangelization of these peoples, the missionary intervention has always been accompanied by profound cultural changes, not the least of which is the introduction of writing. However, in such situations, perfection does not consist in keeping men and societies in their primitive state, but allowing them access, without violence and with respect for their distinguishing characteristics, to a higher level of humanity. That is why the proclamation of the Gospel itself is a bearer of civilization and creator of culture (Poupard, 1992, p. 33)<sup>3</sup>.

This continuous progress, this ennoblement and ascension of man and society to a higher level of civilization when they open wide their hearts to Christ's message should be in no way surprising. In fact, it should be seen merely as a consequence of abiding by the principle proclaimed by the Lord, which summarizes all the beatitudes: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48).

### **Inculturation: a "long and courageous process" of transformation**

This process of "inculturating" the Word of Life into a particular society does not take place overnight. Experience shows that it takes a lifetime for a human being to reach the fullness of his transformation in Christ; that is, his sanctification, or the complete fulfillment of God's salvific plan for him. If we consider groups of people or an entire society, such a metamorphosis happens at a much slower pace, and it may even take centuries for a given culture to become fully imbued with the light of the Gospel.

This reality is expressed as follows by Poupard (1992): "To Inculturate the Gospel is to engage in a long and courageous process which aims to transform the patterns of behavior typical to an environment, its criteria for evaluation, the

3 "Dans les expériences passées ou actuelles d'évangélisation de ces peuples, l'intervention du missionnaire s'accompagne toujours de profondes mutations culturelles, ne serait-ce que l'introduction de l'écriture. Or, dans ce type de situation, la perfection ne consiste pas à maintenir les homes et les sociétés dans leur stade 'primitif', mais à leur permettre d'accéder sans violence et dans le respect de leur spécificité à un degré supérieur d'humanité. Voilà pourquoi l'annonce de l'Évangile est en soi porteuse de civilization et créatrice de culture" (Personal translation).

dominant values, habits and customs that mark its work life, recreation, and the exercise of family, social, economic and political life” (p. 30)<sup>4</sup>.

The Prelate goes even further in stating: “The study of Christian spirituality and Church history reveal the existence of periods and milieux of holiness, which appear to the twentieth-century reader as privileged periods and milieux, conducive to the blossoming of the Gospel seed in people and societies” (p. 30)<sup>5</sup>.

Approaching the subject of inculturation as a lengthy process from an anthropological point of view, Roest Crollius (1991) draws a similar conclusion:

The anthropological concept of enculturation denotes a process that is not limited to the first infancy of the individual but which continues throughout his life. [...] In a similar way, it can be said that for a particular Church the process of inculturation continues throughout its life. The culture in which it is embedded is such a vast and complex reality, that its exploration and assimilation can hardly ever be said to have reached its fulfillment. Moreover, a culture is a living reality, in a continuous process of change. [...] Since inculturation takes place not only in the formative period of a local Church but throughout its existence, it becomes evident that inculturation is the concern of every local Church without exception (p. 10).

As mentioned above, inculturation is an ongoing process of mutual enrichment. On one hand, the Church cleanses, fosters and nourishes the *semina Verbi* found in a given culture and incorporates them within herself. On the other hand, that culture is also enriched by the sacramental action of the Church, which introduces the life of God in human souls, elevating them to the dignity of being children of God, brothers and sisters of, and co-heirs with Jesus Christ of the Kingdom of Heaven.

This is the most precious contribution of the Church to any culture or civilization, namely, the gift of the indwelling of the Blessed Trinity in souls through sanctifying grace. This participation of human souls in God’s life through sanctifying grace then becomes the propelling force for any upward and ennobling

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4 “Inculturer l’Évangile, c’est s’engager dans un long et courageux processus qui a pour vocation de transformer les modèles de comportements typiques d’un milieu, les critères de jugement, les valeurs dominantes, les habitudes et coutumes qui marquent la vie de travail, les loisirs, la pratique de la vie familiale, sociale, économique et politique” (Personal translation).

5 “L’étude de la spiritualité chrétienne et de l’histoire de l’Église met en lumière l’existence de périodes et de milieux de sainteté, qui apparaissent au lecteur du XXème siècle comme des périodes et des milieux privilégiés, propices à l’épanouissement de la semence évangélique dans les personnes et dans les sociétés” (Personal translation).

movement of that culture or civilization towards its own perfection, both in the spiritual and secular realms.

In the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, the Conciliar Fathers explain this beneficial and far-reaching cultural exchange between the Church and a given society:

For the Church is compelled by the Holy Spirit to do her part that God's plan may be fully realized, whereby He has constituted Christ as the source of salvation for the whole world. By the proclamation of the Gospel she prepares her hearers to receive and profess the faith. She gives them the dispositions necessary for baptism, snatches them from the slavery of error and of idols and incorporates them in Christ so that through charity they may grow up into full maturity in Christ. Through her work, whatever good is in the minds and hearts of men, whatever good lies latent in the religious practices and cultures of diverse peoples, is not only saved from destruction but is also cleansed, raised up and perfected unto the glory of God, the confusion of the devil and the happiness of man. (LG, No. 17).

### **Phases and dimensions of inculturation**

As previously commented, the process of inculturation is gradual and lengthy; it does not occur from one moment to the next. Roest Crolius divides this process into three different phases (Dupuis, 1992):

- *Translation*: the Church comes in contact with a new culture, presenting the Christian message and life in the forms of another culture. Translations are prepared and the Church has a foreign outlook. A process of acculturation takes place, in which missionaries and local Christians assimilate elements of each other's culture.
- *Assimilation*: when larger numbers of locals join the Church and a local clergy is also developed, then the Church becomes increasingly assimilated by the surrounding culture and the proper process of inculturation begins.
- *Transformation*: it occurs when the active reorientation, the transformation of the local culture becomes predominant.

From a dimensional perspective, inculturation has also two elements: “on the one hand, ‘the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity’ and, on the other, ‘the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures’” (John Paul II, No. 59).

## **Original sin imposes some restraints on inculturation.**

Another aspect that should also be considered, one which hinders the process of inculturation to a certain extent, is the effect of original sin over any given culture. A perfect culture does not exist, as culture is a product and creation of man. Although man was created in the image and likeness of God, “the image has been altered by the first sin, that poison which injures the will in its leaning to the good and thereby obscures intelligence and deviates the senses. The beauty of the soul, thirsty for truth and the beloved, loses its splendor and becomes capable of evil, of ugliness” (Pontifical Council for Culture).

In addition to the fact that man is a contingent being, with consequential innate shortcomings, the sin of Adam and Eve affected not only themselves and their offspring but has also tarnished, in some way, the whole of creation. Referring to these effects, the Apostle states:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now (Rm 8:19-22).

As a result of this taint of corruption in the whole of creation, culture, for its part, was also affected by original sin:

Indeed culture is not a neutral reality. This is due to its close relationship with the sin of man. In fact, it is the result of work and human action, and all men are implicated in Adam’s sin. Because, ‘by the disobedience of one man, all were made sinners.’ Only the existence of sin explains the overwhelming misery which oppresses men and their inclination to evil. And its existence not only affects the individual man, but in some manner his community forms, human societies, the product of his action, and also his culture (Tomé, 2002, p. 452-453)<sup>6</sup>.

Since culture is a product of human work and creativity, thus also being affected by the consequences of original sin, to inculturate does not simply mean

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6 “A cultura, efectivamente, não é uma realidade neutra. Isto deve-se à sua íntima relação com o pecado do homem. Na realidade, ela é fruto do obrar e da acção humana, e todos os homens estão implicados no pecado de Adão. Porque, ‘pela desobediência de um só homem, todos foram constituídos pecadores’. Só assim se entende a imensa miséria que oprime os homens e a sua inclinação ao mal: pela existência do pecado. Existência esta que afecta não só o homem individualmente, mas também, de alguma forma, as suas formas comunitárias, as sociedades humanas, o produto do seu actuar, e também, a sua cultura” (Personal translation).

to assimilate everything found in every culture; rather, it is necessary to employ a process of careful discernment in order to distinguish what is the *semen Verbi* and what is a counter-value in each culture.

In this vein, Pope John Paul II points out the criteria for any inculturation: “It is by looking at the Mystery of the Incarnation and of the Redemption that the values and counter-values of cultures are to be discerned. Just as the Word of God became like us in everything but sin, so too the inculturation of the Good News takes on all authentic human values, purifying them from sin and restoring to them their full meaning” (No. 61).

Again, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, John Paul II emphasizes the need to differentiate between positive and negative aspects in order to achieve an authentic inculturation: “Certain cultural values must be transformed and purified, if they are to find a place in a genuinely Christian culture. [...] The process of inculturation engages the Gospel and culture in a dialogue which includes identifying what is and what is not of Christ” (No. 16).

Summarizing this doctrine, the Pope states:

The power of the Gospel everywhere transforms and regenerates. When that power enters into a culture, it is no surprise that it rectifies many of its elements. There would be no catechesis if it were the Gospel that had to change when it came into contact with the cultures. To forget this would simply amount to what St. Paul very forcefully calls “emptying the cross of Christ of its power” (CT, No. 53).

### **Catholic culture: splendid fruit of Gospel inculturation**

At this point, one could wonder: what is the ultimate goal and the most beautiful fruit of an inculturation of the Gospel in a given culture? Perhaps our response to this question ought to be: the ultimate and most splendid fruit of Gospel inculturation in any specific culture or civilization is to bring its *semina Verbi* to full maturation.

To fully understand the implications of this answer, let us seek an analogy for such a rich and complex reality in botany. In order for a seed to complete the process of germination, the soil must be watered and nurtured with fertilizers. Once the seed germinates and the tree grows to its full stature, blossoming follows so as to ultimately yield abundant fruit in the harvest season.

Applying this progression to our subject, the “abundant fruit of the harvest season” of our lengthy process of inculturation is the formation of a certain

mentality, a certain view of the world, and of man in relation to God, neighbor and the universe. Essentially, it is a visualization of all aspects of human existence imbued with the spirit of the Gospel. By safeguarding all the legitimate specifics of each civilization, culture, people, race and region, is achieved the formation of a Catholic culture which is consonant with the spirit of the Gospel, but at the same time richly varied in its practical manifestations, according to the gifts the Spirit has given to each people.

In his masterpiece, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution”, Plínio Corrêa (1993) de Oliveira explains the concept of such a Catholic culture:

A soul in the state of grace possesses all virtues to a greater or lesser degree. Illuminated by faith, it has the elements to form the only true vision of the universe.

The fundamental element of Catholic culture is the vision of the universe elaborated according to the doctrine of the Church. This culture includes not only the learning, that is, the possession of the information needed for such an elaboration, but also the analysis and coordination of this information according to Catholic doctrine. This culture is not restricted to the theological, philosophical, or scientific field, but encompasses the breadth of human knowledge; it is reflected in the arts and implies the affirmation of values that permeate all aspects of life (p. 42).

This harmonic and complementary multiplicity of cultures inspired by the Holy Spirit is *pulchra* in itself and reflects the beauties of the Infinite Beauty.

## **INCULTURATION AND THE *VIA PULCHRITUDINIS***

Commenting on the creation of the angels and on God’s intention of excellence in the creation of the universe, Saint Thomas Aquinas explains that according to the greater perfection of creatures, God created them in greater number. “The reason whereof is this, because, since it is the perfection of the universe that God chiefly intends in the creation of things, the more perfect some things are, in so much greater an excess are they created by God” (I, q. 50, a.3, a). And the Angelic Doctor concludes his thought by stating that this is the reason why God created the angels to far outnumber human beings.

Considering culture from this perspective of excellence, as each individual culture reflects some specific aspects of the moral physiognomy of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the greater the number and the more diversified Christian cultures are, the more perfect, rich and splendid will the manifestation of His moral physiognomy be for the wonder of mankind!

Thus, the more numerous and varied Christian cultures are, the more perfectly will they also reflect the beauties of the Uncreated Beauty, and become one of the most extraordinary instruments for the “discovery” of, the “encounter” with and the “experience”, contemplation and love of the One Who is Infinite Beauty Himself.

It was the contemplation of beauty that led Saint Augustine towards conversion: firstly, beauty reflected in created things; later on, the Supreme Beauty, creator of all beauties. His hearing, sight, sense of smell and touch were affected and taken over by beauty. Bruno Forte (2006) thus describes the Saint’s remarkable journey:

The entire journey of Augustine thus seems like a path from beauty towards Beauty, from the penultimate to the Ultimate, so that afterwards he could discover the meaning and the measure of the beauty of everything that exists in the light of the foundation of all beauty. He then understood how the contemplation of God and of everything in God is inseparable from the contemplation of beauty: the theologian, in speaking of God speaks of Beauty and in speaking of everything which is beautiful in this world, continually refers back to He who is the source and destination of all beauty (p.12).<sup>7</sup>

If Saint Augustine<sup>8</sup> found, experienced and delighted himself in contemplating this Infinite Beauty reflected in His creatures, how much more profoundly his experience of such a Beauty would have been if he had also contemplated many different and harmonic cultures imbued with the spirit of the Gospel? Would it not really be the fulfillment of his aspiration for a City of God, in an even greater and more splendid degree?

7 “Todo o itinerário de Agostinho aparece, assim, como um caminho da beleza para a Beleza, do penúltimo para o Último, para poder depois encontrar o sentido e a medida da beleza de tudo o que existe na luz do fundamento de toda beleza. Compreende-se, então, como a reflexão sobre Deus e sobre todas as coisas em Deus é inseparável da reflexão sobre a beleza: o teólogo, ao falar de Deus fala da Beleza e ao falar de tudo o que é belo neste mundo, remete continuamente Àquele que é a fonte e a meta de toda beleza” (Personal translation).

8 “Too late did I love You, O Fairness, so ancient, and yet so new! Too late did I love You! For behold, You were within, and I without, and there did I seek You; I, unlovely, rushed heedlessly among the things of beauty You made. You were with me, but I was not with You. Those things kept me far from You, which, unless they were in You, were not. You called, and cried aloud, and forced open my deafness. You gleamed and shine, and chase away my blindness. You exhaled odours, and I drew in my breath and do pant after You. I tasted, and do hunger and thirst. You touched me, and I burned for Your peace” (Augustine, The confessions, X, 27).

### **Beauty: pathway to, and fruit of Gospel inculturation**

Much has been said and written about the inculturation of the Gospel among peoples, races and cultures, and these works depart from diverse and significant perspectives; at times historical, sociological and anthropological, or missiological and theological.

Nevertheless, there is still one point as vast as the universe which, to our understanding, in order to deepen the knowledge and pastoral experience of evangelizers, requires more attention, consideration and reflection. This, namely, is the relationship between evangelization and *pulchrum*. A synergism between the two is seen in the action of a missionary who brings the Good News of Our Lord Jesus Christ to a new people, a new culture, and as an apparently “miraculous fruit” of his evangelizing efforts, new and more perfect manifestations of beauty emerge in that people or culture.

In an elucidative manner, Pope John Paul II explains the interchangeable and fruitful relationship existing between good and beauty:

The link between good and beautiful stirs fruitful reflection. In a certain sense, beauty is the visible form of the good, just as the good is the metaphysical condition of beauty. This was well understood by the Greeks who, by fusing the two concepts, coined a term which embraces both: *kalokagathía*, or beauty-goodness. On this point Plato writes: “The power of the Good has taken refuge in the nature of the Beautiful (No. 3).

### **Beauty: “a royal way leading to God”**

At this point, a skeptic could raise the question: is beauty really such an important means to evangelize, and to render the announcing of the Word of Life a living reality in a certain culture? Could not the old Italian proverb regarding philosophy — *La filosofia è la scienza con la quale o senza la quale il mondo va tale e quale*<sup>9</sup> — also be applied to beauty? Is not beauty some sort of platonic ideal, a utopia just for artists and poets, having nothing to do with Gospel inculturation in real society?

The answer to this objection can be found in the Concluding Document of the Plenary Assembly, entitled: *The Via Pulchritudinis, Privileged Pathway for Evangelization and Dialogue*, which describes the irreplaceable role of beauty in the work of evangelization:

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9 “Philosophy is the science that has done nothing to change the world” (Personal translation).

Beauty, as much as truth and good, leads us to God, the first truth, supreme good, and beauty itself. But beauty means more than the truth or the good. To say that something is beautiful is not only to recognize it intelligible and therefore loveable, but also, in specifying our knowledge, it attracts us, or captures us with a ray capable of igniting marvel. Moreover, as it expresses a certain power of attraction, beauty tells forth reality itself in the perfection of its form. It is its epiphany. It manifests it by expressing its internal brightness. If the good speaks the desirable, the beautiful tells forth the splendor and light of the perfection it manifests.

The *via pulchritudinis* is a pastoral way which cannot be exhausted in a philosophical approach. Yet the metaphysician is needed to help us understand why beauty is a royal way leading to God. In suggesting to us who He is, it stimulates in us a desire to enjoy the peace of contemplation, not only because He alone can fill our minds and hearts, but because He contains in Himself the perfection of being, a harmonious and inexhaustible source of clarity and light (II, 2).

In its “pastoral proposals”, the document *Via Pulchritudinis* makes some practical and very useful suggestions as to how to use “*pulchrum*” as a means of performing an efficacious and penetrating catechesis with youth and adults alike, “by developing a pedagogy of observation of natural beauties and consequent fundamentally human attitudes: silence, interiorization, listening, patient waiting, admiration, discovery of harmony, respect for natural equilibrium, meaning of gratuity, adoration and contemplation” (III, 1, C).

Pointing at a new perspective in the theology of inculturation, the document continues: “The teaching of an authentic philosophy of nature and a beautiful theology of creation needs a new impulse in a culture where the dialogue faith-science is particularly crucial” (III, 1, C).

Although striking, this concept is nevertheless not new. In his address to artists at the conclusion of Vatican II, Paul VI had already foreseen the unique role of beauty in the life of contemporary man, and indicated it as a requisite for the success of evangelizing work in our days: “This world in which we live needs beauty in order not to sink into despair. Beauty, like truth, brings joy to the human heart, and is that precious fruit which resists the erosion of time, which unites generations and enables them to be one in admiration”.

Therefore, when beauty is authentic and man fully opens his heart to unselfishly admire it, he penetrates into God’s mysteries and is able to “discover” and “encounter” that Uncreated Beauty, Who is the only One capable of filling his heart with peace and quenching his thirst for infinite happiness. With keen insight, Benedict XVI (2009) describes this human journey in the quest for beauty:

Authentic beauty, however, unlocks the yearning of the human heart, the profound desire to know, to love, to go towards the Other, to reach for the Beyond. If we acknowledge that beauty touches us intimately, that it wounds us, that it opens our eyes, then we rediscover the joy of seeing, of being able to grasp the profound meaning of our existence, the Mystery of which we are part; from this Mystery we can draw fullness, happiness, the passion to engage with it every day.

### **Beauty: splendor of truth and flowering of love**

Considering beauty in its metaphysical reality as one of the transcendentals of being, Maritain (1983) explains that “one can say that Beauty is the splendor of all the transcendentals combined. [...] From the transcendental nature of beauty the ancients concluded that the attribute of beauty can and must belong to the First Cause, the Pure Act, who is the supreme analogy of all transcendental perfections; and that beauty is one of the divine Names” (p. 183)<sup>10</sup>.

Indeed, genuine beauty draws man out of himself, reawakens in him the sense of awe, gives him wings to fly into the world of the sublime, which fills him with peace, joy and happiness. This is the feeling that brought Dostoevsky to exclaim: “Man can live without science, he can live without bread, but without beauty he could no longer live, because there would no longer be anything to do to the world. The whole secret is here, the whole of history is here” (Dostoevsky, Cited by: Benedict XVI, 2009).

In a kind of ecstasy of enthusiasm for beauty, Von Balthasar (1982) lets his soul fly into the mysterious, splendorous and alluring universe of the relationship between *pulchrum*, *verum* and *bonum*:

Beauty is the word that shall be our first. Beauty is the last thing which the thinking intellect dares to approach, since only it dances as an uncontained splendor around the double constellation of the true and the good and their inseparable relation to one another. Beauty is the disinterested one, without which the ancient world refused to understand itself, a word which both imperceptibly and yet unmistakably has bid farewell to our new world, a world of interests, leaving it to its own avarice and sadness. [...] We can

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10 “Considerada em sua realidade metafísica como um dos transcendentais do ser, Maritain nos explica que “pode-se dizer que a Beleza é o esplendor de todos os transcendentais reunidos. [...] Da natureza transcendental da beleza os antigos concluíam que o atributo da beleza pode e deve pertencer à Causa Primeira, ao Ato Puro, que é o supremo analogado de todas as perfeições transcendentais; e que a beleza é um dos Nomes divinos” (Personal translation).

be sure that whoever sneers at her name as if she were the ornament of a bourgeois past — whether he admits it or not — can no longer pray and soon will no longer be able to love. [...] In a world without beauty [...] the good also loses its attractiveness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out. [...] In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful, the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency (p. 18-19).

In his state of original justice, man was created in beauty, and beauties filled his soul; virtues, gifts of all kinds — natural, preternatural and supernatural —, the sense of the correlation amongst all created things, and infused knowledge. Above all, there was an instinct of “Theotropism” by which man, like a plant that searches for the sunlight in its own process of photosynthesis, would “search” for the Infinite Beauty reflected in the beauties of creation in order to feed his soul with that sense of awe, admiration, and enthusiasm, leading him to a ever-increasing knowledge of, love for and service to God throughout his earthly existence.

As previously mentioned, although man was created in the image and likeness of God, original sin has disfigured him, jeopardizing God’s original plan for him and introducing ugliness into the universe. Yet Redemption has not merely restored, but has greatly enhanced the original plan, for God Himself became man and dwelt among us through the Word Incarnate, raising man — and concurrently with him the entire creation — to a far superior level of the splendor of beauty, truth and goodness: “The coming of the Redeemer re-establishes man in his first beauty; moreover, it redresses him in a new beauty: the unimaginable beauty of the creature raised up to divine sonship, the transfiguration promised by the soul ransomed and lifted up by Grace, resplendent in all its fiber, the body called to new life” (The Via Pulchritudinis, III,1, B).

In revealing the Father to man (Jn 14:9), Christ has also revealed man to himself, and shown him the grandeur of his own calling (GS, No. 22). Redemption is the apex of man’s re-creation, wherein “Christ, perfect representation of the glory of the Father, communicates to man the fullness of Grace. He makes man gracious, i.e. beautiful and agreeable to God. The Incarnation is the focal center, the correct perspective in which beauty takes its ultimate meaning” (III, 1, B).

The most fundamental goal of any process of inculturation of the Gospel is this new creation of man in Christ, a thorough transformation of man by which he not only recovers his lost original beauty, but moreover receives the fullness of divine grace, which is holiness. In holiness, man achieves the plenitude of *pulchrum*, *verum* and *bonum*, which is manifested through love during his lifetime, and will be transformed into glory in eternity.

## CONCLUSION

In His infinite bounty as Creator, God could have made each and every thing in the highest degree of perfection. He did not proceed in this way, perhaps because He desired human cooperation in the embellishment of the work of creation. In this sense, Dante extolled the works of art as being the grandchildren of God. Therefore, it behooves a civilization that is in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel to make the earth as similar to Heaven as possible” (Clá Dias, 2009, p.235)<sup>11</sup>.

Such an ideal of a civilization shaped according to the spirit of the Gospel can only be achieved through the evangelization of cultures, respecting and cultivating their multiplicity and diversity. In order for the Church to achieve this goal, the necessary path is not only that of the transformation of man into a new creation brought about by Redemption, fulfilling, therefore, her salvific mission as the “universal sacrament of salvation,” but also that of fulfilling God’s ultimate design in creating the universe in such a distinct, varied and unique way so that each creature is one of a kind.

On the other hand, this great diversity and uniqueness of creatures is also mirrored in the plurality and variety of cultures which, when pervaded by the spirit of the Gospel, constitute a magnificent kaleidoscope, reflecting the perfections and beauties of the Uncreated Beauty.

Then, at the end of time, when Christ, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for [...] all things have been created through him and for him” (Col 1:15-16) – after having destroyed all His enemies and having everything already subjected to Him – hands over creation to God the Father, the Son Himself will render homage to the Father who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:24-28).

This final doxology of history, sung to the Father by the Son, will include the whole of creation, both the irrational and rational creatures, *y compris* man. If man is also comprised in such a doxology, the work of his hands – which Dante Alighieri calls the grandchildren of God – will be included as well; not only the arts, but also the various cultures in whatever way they resemble Christ.

From this point of view, it could perhaps be said that the more cultures there are, replete with diversity and imbued with the spirit of the Gospel, the greater,

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11 “Em Sua infinita munificência criadora, Deus poderia ter realizado todas e cada uma das coisas no seu mais alto grau de perfeição. Não procedeu Ele desta maneira, talvez porque desejasse o concurso humano para o embelezamento da obra da criação. Nesse sentido, cantava Dante serem as obras de arte, netas de Deus. Competiria, portanto, a uma Civilização segundo o espírito do Evangelho, tornar a terra tanto quanto possível semelhante ao Céu” (Personal translation).

more noble and beautiful will be the contribution of Christians toward enriching this final doxology sung to the Father by the Son, crowning and culminating the history of creation.

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