Inculturation in Africa: Challenges and Prospects

The theme of inculturation is not new among African theologians, especially in recent studies. Because of its importance, it needs to be considered in the light of the context in which we live. We believe that the process of inculturation is a precious tool for spreading the Gospel in Africa. But to make it happen, we need to consider the motivations behind the process. In this article, we will consider some “routes” that the process of inculturation could take today in Africa.

Why inculturation?

In his book *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, John Mary Waliggo describes inculturation as “the honest and serious effort to understand and to make the Gospel meaningful and acceptable to the people who receive it.” He points out that inculturation is not just the translation of liturgical norms but also an adaptation to cultural elements such as language, dress, and food. It is the continuous endeavor to make Christianity truly ‘feel at home’ in the cultures of each people.

The refusal to inculturate the Gospel message slows down the process of the Church putting down roots in the African continent. As a result, it continues to remain a foreign ‘plant’, forever living in a foreign soil. This belittles the dignity and self-respect of Africans as children of God.

Christianity has remained alive in some areas of Coptic-speaking Egypt, Ethiopia and the Sudan because it had been translated into the local languages, adapted to these cultures and propagated by local evangelizers. However, it was unable to survive the invasion of Islam in North Africa.

There is no reason to doubt that what happened in the past could happen again to the flourishing and numerically strong Church in Africa. For example, the situation in Rwanda and Burundi, where there was a population of 4.5 million Catholics in 1968, is an example of what can happen if the Church is not inculturated. The horror of the Rwanda genocide, when almost a million Rwandans were exterminated because of their identity, is a wake-up call for the Church in Africa.

In West Africa it is said: “We eat everything they give us, but we digest it in our own way.” This “digestion” also applies to the process of appropriation of the faith. Faith ceases to be external when it becomes a part of the life of each individual. This is the reason why St. Paul VI wrote: “Evangelization loses much of its strength and merit if it is not adapted to the needs of the situation, its symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask it, if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.”

The fears, challenges or “allergies” that arise in people every time the word “inculturation” is mentioned can be summarized in seven points:

1. It could lead to divisions in the Church;
2. It could generate a gap between the local Church and the universal Church;
3. It could make the Church dependent on other Churches;
4. It could lead to a loss of identity;
5. It could lead to a loss of mission;
6. It could lead to divisions in the Church; and
7. The theologians of inculturation want to create their own Church in order to gain recognition.

Some of these fears may have a foundation, but it is only when we face them head on that we can present a truly effective solution. The Church in Africa must be rooted in the soil of its culture, in its traditions and in its history. This is the only way to ensure that the faith will be truly accepted and lived.

Saint John Paul II declared: “A faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully accepted, not entirely thought through, not faithfully lived. Christianity exists when people believe; and it becomes deeply rooted when it touches people and their lives where they are and how they are. Faith can only find its expression and life within cultures.”

Saint Paul VI, who had a strong interest in inculturation, wrote: “Evangelization loses much of its strength and merit if it is not adapted to the needs of the situation, its symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask it, if it does not have an impact on their concrete life.”
Since its foundation in 1622, Propaganda Fide has insisted on the need for evangelizers to respect the cultures of the ... transporting France, Italy or Spain, or some other European country, to China? Bring them your faith, not your country.”

In the last century Saint Paul VI, with regard to the Church’s commitment to inculturation, affirmed: “An adaptation of ... life in the pastoral, ritual, didactic and also spiritual fields is not only possible, it is even favored by the Church.”

He urged the African Church: “You can and must have an African Christianity. Indeed, you have human values and characteristic forms of culture that can … find in Christianity and for Christianity a genuine and superior fullness.”

On the other hand, he expressed himself in favor of a wise caution: their desire to have an African Christianity, the ... should remember the Tradition, because undermining the deposit of the apostolic tradition would mean taking a wrong path.

The desire for inculturation should find its expression within the essential patrimony of the teaching of Christ as ... suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius and culture of the one who professes this one Faith.”

The challenge is twofold: a clear and systematic understanding of the faith, and a rooted understanding of our cultures.

Challenges

What are the current challenges of inculturation in Africa? What are the factors that prevent it being successful? There ... of the forces of globalization and postmodernism, where the “human being” has been supplanted by “material having.”

We must always remember that inculturation means both reading and living the Gospel in the light of the categories of a ... as Saint Paul did when he appropriated the Greek language and transformed its semantics in the light of the Gospel.

What perspectives, then, could favor the process of inculturation? How do we move from a Church inclined to think that by ... in urgent need of inculturation? How can we actually move from a superficial meaning of inculturation to a deeper one?

Ten perspectives

Proposals can be drawn up to facilitate the debate on inculturation and its implementation.

1) An African adage says: “Build a school, chase out ignorance.” The first people to be trained for inculturation are ... it is vital to develop an inculturated Catholic catechism. This will allow Catholics to be more aware of their faith.

2) We need to educate families today. The current crisis of Christian marriage leads to both family breakdown and ... of divorces today is very high: “At least 30 percent of marriages now end up in divorce after fewer than ten years.”

As a result there are many single parents looking for sexual partners, regardless of whether the latter are married or not.

Recent studies reveal that HIV/AIDS is spreading more in families than in any other sector of the population. Some seek a ... “Let’s try it out and see if we get along; and when we get tired of each other, each one will go his or her own way.”

Today, what is lacking is a sense of value and respect for the family and the community that traditionally kept people ... traditional African religion still teaches us many things, especially about community life as opposed to individualism.

3) Diseases have traditionally been considered as disharmonies within the individual. However, sickness is not just a ... sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick while taking into account the traditional idea of sickness, healing and health.

4) Inculturation, like any development of life or thinking involving culture, usually does not occur according to plans ... human life human. Therefore, the encounter between culture and faith is realized continuously and with mutual influence.

5) Inculturation presupposes an intellectual and spiritual grasp of the Christian faith, that is, that the fundamental ... the Good News is superior to any culture, it can and must be destined to become the Christian culture of a given people.

6) The fact that the liturgy is the principal means of sanctification of the people of God, and therefore the highest act ... to the scrutiny of the Gospel, so that they are in tune with the revealed truths, and the Gospel becomes our culture.

7) For the theologian and for the Church in various parts of Africa the challenge is to identify which cultural values ... linked to these dimensions of life. The Church must promote dialogue in order to find a solution to these questions.

8) The use of liturgical music and dance should be seen within the task of transforming – or possibly strengthening – ... from doctrine, so that the two levels are not confused, which, moreover, must be part of the wider context of faith.

Liturgical dances can easily lapse into religious entertainment or simply banal shows that do not contribute in any way ... body becomes an expression of worship, as in the episode of David narrated in the Second Book of Samuel (cf. 2 Sam 6).

In short, inculturation should concern the practical insertion or “incarnation” of real Gospel values that give Christian ... It is a meeting that aims to become not a competition, but a vital union, the realization of which may take a long time.

9) The role played so far by African theologians, who continue to seek to make the Christian faith truly African, should ... so that Christianity may be established in Africa. These theologians are truly giants, and we rest on their shoulders.

Another area that African theologians should explore is the use of the media in promoting inculturation.
We are aware that syncretism continues to exist in Africa. People go back and forth between the Church and their indigenous beliefs and practices. How can we preserve the principles of the Christian faith? We firmly believe that inculturation can be a solution to the problem of syncretism.

Inculturation is a twofold process: first, it presupposes an understanding of faith and doctrine; second, it requires a deep insight into the concrete realities of human existence in their respective cultures. This transformation is the transformation of life in the service of the Gospel and the salvation of people within their respective cultures.


J.M. Waliggo et al. Inculturation... op. cit., 12.

Laurenti Magesa, Anatomy of Inculturation... op. cit., 6.

Ibid., 7.


Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii nuntiandi (1975), No. 63.


Paul VI, Eucharistic Celebration at the Conclusion of the Symposium of Bishops of Africa, July 31, 1969.


Ibid., 39.

Laurenti Magesa, Anatomy of Inculturation... op. cit., 28.

Ibid., 73.