CHAPTER 7

Inculturation, the Catholic Church and the Cultures of the World

Never as in our days are major cultural groups of humanity felt and which want to defend their cultural uniqueness, together with their own character, language, art, symbolism, labels, and their general way of life: American, Indian Svadharma, Weltanschauung, or negritude, which used to be source of shame but now are brandished like a proud banner.1

JOSEPH MASSON

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Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addresses [sic], if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life. But on the other hand, evangelization risks losing its power and disappearing altogether if one empties or adulterates its content under the pretext of translating it...2

EVANGELII NUNITIANDI

Introduction

From the turn of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church has been undergoing radical shifts in the ways it views the ethnocultural groups (henceforth cultures) of the world. The complexity of interrelated global issues at the turn of the twentieth century forced Christians to rethink the implications of

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the relationship between the cultural\textsuperscript{3} and faith. I focus on shifts in Roman Catholic thinking in this chapter. Two interrelated points are worth noting at the outset. First, the church was confronted with its own past and complicity with Western European colonial projects and the colonizing nature of missionary enterprises. And two, the church finally realized that most Catholic Christians live(d) in the southern hemisphere, outside the centres of power in Western Europe and Euro North America. I agree with Joseph Masson’s insight that this realization of the global breadth of Christianity, or what he calls “planétisation,” opened the church to become truly Catholic for the first time.\textsuperscript{4}

In this chapter, I intend to briefly articulate some of the ways in which the Catholic Church has shifted its perception and degree of openness towards the other cultures of the world. This chapter is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of the complex and multiple theological streams within the Catholic Church. In broad strokes, I examine some of the important moments/key official documents that have contributed to shaping the Catholic Church’s position on the relation between the Christian faith and the cultural,\textsuperscript{5} as well as the theological implications of these moments. While the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) is often understood as the crucial climactic moment which sets the tone for many of these changes, I also bring to bear prior and later developments in this discussion including the reception of these documents in Latin America and recent pastoral letters and encyclicals by Pope Francis. I draw on all these documents to demonstrate how the church’s position has shifted. The notion of inculturation has become a central category in describing how the Catholic Church imagines/describes the relationship between the cultural and faith. This shift leads to an enriched theological

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\textsuperscript{3} As a form of a reminder, “the cultural” points to multiple all-encompassing aspects by which human collectives codify the world. Make sense of reality, and engage in the complex processes of culturalization of life, relationships, the environment, and their understanding of the divine. The cultural highlights that all peoples engage in cultural activities and participate in the construction of cultural elements and traditions.


\textsuperscript{5} As stated earlier, by the cultural I mean the complex set of inherited codes, segments of codes and activities passed down from generation to generation through processes of culturalization that define, shape, condition, and impact the ways humans engage life, and interact with their immediate environment, each other and the divine. The cultural also identifies the broad range of rich, complex, changeable, unfinished/open-ended, dynamic, contested, fluid, and interconnected processes of culturalization that are part of the human experience in its greatly diverse multiplicity of concrete cultural traditions and expression and their intimate relation to experiences and expressions of (religious) faith and religious traditions.