INCULTURATED EVANGELIZATION
AND CONVERSION

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Inculturation is a matter of fidelity to the truth of the incarnation of God's Word in history. When people talk of inculturation based on the Incarnation, often it is not recognised that while Jesus did become human, he did not accept the outlook of his time, the value system at work in his time and place, and that he was not conformed to the world and its ways and in that sense he did not accept the "culture" of the "world". Unless this fundamental fact about Jesus is recognized, we may continue to do disservice to the gospel. Therefore, I shall first of all point out the general outlook of the world which Jesus rejected, but in which we all continue to live. I will speak of a de-culturation, freeing us from the particular prevalent outlook of the "world", and a re-culturation, a re-entry into the outlook of Jesus, as a preliminary stage before any inculturation of the gospel message can be spoken of meaningfully. This is of great importance in talking about Inculturation, Evangelization and Conversion today, as we shall see later. Hence in the following pages I shall 1) situate the problem, 2) develop the meaning of culture and inculturation, 3) look at Jesus' and the early Church's ways of inculturation and finally 4) the meaning of evangelization and conversion in an inculturated context.

1. Situating the Problem

The outlook that permeates our life, the life practically of everyone, is something that is contrary to the spirit of the gospel, is something which Jesus had explicitly rejected. The incarnation is God becoming one of us, but without accepting the prevalent value system, meaning system, outlook of the world; he stood out as a non-conformist, he was a light in the darkness. Though he was born as a Jew, and hence within the Jewish culture, his outlook was very distinct, different from the prevalent outlook in his time, in that sense I say that he was counter cultural. We have to become very aware of and see how, practically everyone, the Churches, religious congregations, each one of us have been governed by the outlook of the world. It is enough to look at Christianity in the West of the last 20 centuries to see the effects of this value system. Centuries of slave trade, colonialism, extermination of whole tribes in America and Australia, the Holocaust, innumerable wars, the present economic system, are part of the value system, of the world by which Christians have been and are living.

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What is that outlook in which all have been immersed since their birth? How deeply does it affect everyone? It is a way of looking at, a way of evaluating and understanding a person. In the world a person is equated with his/her possessions, positions, achievements, actions, the linguistic, religious or cultural group s/he belongs to, an outlook that leads to competition, which implies hatred, fear, ghettoism, regionalism, jealousy, selfishness, non-cooperation, pride. In this system a person's intrinsic worth is not recognised.

Once we become aware of the extent to which we have been immersed in the worldly outlook, when we recognize that our pattern of life is contrary to the gospel, then we need to be gospelled by Jesus, and be re-culturated by his outlook.

'You are all brothers/sisters' (Mt 23:8). Jesus envisaged a new pattern of relationship among humans, which he called the Rule of God. He broke down the walls of separation (Eph 2), the dividing barriers erected by religions, races, cultures and gender. Hence he said: 'Love as I have loved you', which is very distinct from the way of the world: Matthew 5. 43-48. Love according to Jesus is not a reaction to what obtains outside, but a way of being for and with others irrespective of what they have, do, appear, the group they belong to. Jesus chose to be with and for the poor and the despised of society, which we shall develop later.

2. Culture and Inculturation

Inculturation presupposes an understanding of culture. Culture deals with not just rituals, life-style and symbols but the way people live and die. Culture is an inherited and transmitted way of living and dying of a particular group of people. Culture in general means the way in which a group of people live, work, think, feel, organize themselves, celebrate and share a common life. In every culture there are underlying systems of values, meanings and views of the world, which are expressed, visibly in language, art, rituals, myths, gestures, symbols and styles. We may speak of various levels of culture, such as personal, social, economic, political, symbolic, cosmic and religious. Normally various aspects like the anthropological, sociological and psychological are considered as culture; but a very important dimension of human life is still not reflected in the above notion of culture, namely, the “little tradition”, the culture of the poor and the deprived and their struggle for life. When talking of culture, normally books deal with what is called the ‘greater tradition’; the ‘little tradition’ is normally left out.

2 For example, even today many people die of violence, hunger, sickness, etc.