



**Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life**  
**A participant reflects on the World Congress on Consecrated Life**  
**November 22-27, 2004**

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## Introduction

The Congress of the Consecrated Life, held last November in Rome, was the first of its kind. Initially I was struck by the sheer number of delegates, some 850 consecrated women and men, and right after that, by the many different responsibilities (Superiors General, young people in formation, theologians, etc.) and origins of everyone involved. In spite of our differences we all came to feel remarkably unified when meditating and reflecting on the two passions chosen as the theme of this great assembly: *Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity*. Everyone present knew how to enhance and refine this topic with different shades of meaning.

As a participant in the Congress, in particular as a member of the “culture” group, I’ve been asked to present some thoughts on the topic of inculturation. The liturgies of the Congress brought home to us the richness of the cultures to which we belong. In addition, they gave witness to our own subcultures as consecrated men and women, with their varied ways of praying and celebrating. So it didn’t surprise me at all that our work group on inculturation drew considerable interest; competing with 14 other groups, it wound up consisting of some 90 members.

I will use some of the material I put together in my role as secretary of this group, and combine it with my own experience – in the central administration of a missionary congregation and, prior to that, as a missionary in Paraguay. To start with I will highlight current conditions concerning the topic of inculturation in order to offer some key thoughts straight-away. Based on this, I will correlate cultures with our mission as consecrated men and women and with our community life.

### A. The topic of inculturation in today’s world

There are many reasons why the issues of culture and inculturation are so relevant today, and the Congress expressed them well.

#### 1. Cultural pluralism in our world

We read in the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Congress (No. 32): “We live in a pluralistic world, and we are more sensitive than ever to differences due to ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and generations. The acceptance of pluralism makes our way of thinking and acting difficult.” A pluralistic world ... that was the specific topic of our work group: “Inculturation – incarnating the consecrated life in a culturally pluralistic World.”

Our group came up with the following reflections on cultural pluralism:

*Where does it come from?* As the engines of cultural pluralism we identified the media, that overcomes insularity, and air travel, that facilitates tourism and immigration. Both are leading to globalization, causing us to feel that we are citizens of the same global village, one in which the rich and varied traditions of its inhabitants amazes us.

*How is pluralism lived?* Unfortunately, in our all-embracing world, inequalities are also emphasized. Even though we all recognize that we live in our one and only pluralistic world, that doesn’t mean that contradictions and conflicts will fade away. History continues to weigh on cultures – for example colonialism still calls for concerted efforts to achieve reconciliation (and redemption from on high). Until this happens the ghosts of inflexible and overarching notions

of what culture is all about will continue to haunt us. As far as dominant cultures are concerned, there is need for profound conversion to overcome erroneously constructed dualisms that affirm: the West is better than the East, the North than the South and the masculine than the feminine. Likewise, disadvantaged cultures are tempted to overstate the gallantry of their own ethnicity and race. Contradictorily, this amounts to the poorest peoples sometimes depending unimaginatively and unquestioningly on those who are rich.

## **2. In the Church, especially with regard to liturgy**

We know that in the Church the reality of inculturation dates back as far as New Testament times. In particular our group made several observations about the liturgy. The Second Vatican Council has reformed the liturgy and brought back the vernacular. But today, in spite of radical changes in this world, it's plain to see that many of our shepherds waver when faced with what's required for inculturation. According to our group, there are places where religious lament the imposition of liturgical norms and symbolic language having nothing to do with the local culture. We also noted that we Catholics are sometimes reluctant to express our emotions during the liturgy. Today many people are won over by fundamentalist groups that feature lively singing, preaching by members of the congregation, and healing rites as an integral part of their celebrations.

## **3. In the consecrated life**

These days the topic of culture is also a very important one for the consecrated life. As mentioned already, we find ourselves in a culturally pluralistic world. Today inculturation means incarnating the consecrated life in this world.

There are many signs of vitality in this area, as well as a great readiness to dialogue with people of every culture. Some consecrated men and women, getting involved in oppressive and violent situations, where the yearning for freedom inherent in every human being is strongly opposed, have even suffered martyrdom. Cultural openness has resulted in profound demographic changes in institutes of the consecrated life. Often vocations come less from the countries where institutes were founded and more from cultures where they have inserted themselves. Culturally, many orders and congregations have now gone from having single centers to multiple ones.

In our conversations at the Congress, we also recognized that the consecrated life has some notable blind spots in the field of inculturation. When our style of life becomes secular and consumerist, when the media has an excessive influence on us, the tension between the Gospel and culture tends to weaken and the salt begins to lose its taste. We no longer inculturate the message of Jesus, we are simply acculturated by our surroundings. The same lack of inculturation occurs when we don't live within our means and depend too much on economic resources from outside. Comforts can lessen our enthusiasm for launching new adventures in intercultural dialogue.

As participants we made several observations about the Congress itself being an intercultural event. To quote from its final message, "The Congress gave priority to the experiential aspect of the consecrated life in its different socio-cultural and ecclesiastical contexts." (Page 1) We shared and listened to our stories from all over the world with great openness. For me the Congress was a privileged occasion that helped me to become more conscious of the feminine perspective in the consecrated life, in which women make up 70% of the membership.

To affirm the importance of the topic of inculturation today, I will conclude with a sentence from the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which quotes *Vita Consacrata*: "To follow the process of in-

culturation ‘which entails, discernment, courage, dialogue, and the challenge of the Gospel’ (VC 80), is a vital question for consecrated life and a proof of its authenticity” as it faces the future. (No. 95)

## **B. Some reflections on inculturation**

Most of these reflections come from our work group. I’ll do my best to organize them.

### **1. Culture – a complex reality**

When analyzing cultural situations we should avoid oversimplifying things. In our topic many issues have at least two sides that need to be recognized and carefully defined.

- a) In view of the danger of ethnocentrism that dwells in each human being, it is necessary TO AFFIRM THE DIGNITY OF EVERY CULTURE. At the same time, however, we must ADMIT THAT NOT EVERYTHING THAT WE LABEL CULTURAL IS AUTOMATICALLY GOOD. In any given culture there are subcultures of life and death. Therefore we need to avoid justifying human weaknesses, denying the reality of the struggle between good and evil, and claiming that cultural issues are quite simple and uncomplicated.
- b) INCULTURATION REQUIRES NEW EXPRESSIONS AND LOTS OF ROOM FOR FREEDOM that many times does not exist and must be achieved. WE ALSO NEED A COMMON LANGUAGE of convenience so we can communicate among the different cultures. Many people use a lingua franca even though they know it is a holdover from colonial times. Even more so, we urgently need to learn the language of mutual understanding and find out more about what makes us similar rather than different.
- c) Today it is essential TO GET IN TOUCH WITH OTHER CULTURES. It can be beneficial to personally experience a powerful culture shock. To reach this point, however, people need FIRST OF ALL TO BE WELL-ROOTED IN THEIR OWN WORLD. In formation, basic human maturity must be attained before one goes to live and work in a different cultural milieu.
- d) Finally, it is good TO REMEMBER THAT PEOPLE EXPERIENCE INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE VERY DIFFERENTLY IN DIFFERENT SETTINGS. It is not the same if we Christians are held in high regard or looked down upon, if we are a majority or a minority, if we enjoy extensive religious freedom or endure barely concealed persecution.

### **2. Some guidelines to achieve inculturation in the consecrated life**

- a) *Let’s find encouragement from our successes in inculturation!*

My years in Italy convince me that the faith and also the consecrated life have been inculturated well in this country. There are many other examples; it is enough to take a close look at the non-Latin rites of the Catholic Church. In every case there has been a process of inculturation over many centuries, and along the way not only monuments but also many saints have been created.

Wouldn’t such examples embolden us to take even more risks? Who would say that new Christian cultures, including new liturgical rites, cannot spring up in our day, too?

- b) *Let’s welcome putting things in perspective!*

What is the secret behind inculturations that take place successfully? No doubt one part consists of taking cultures seriously, one's own as well as the other. But one must also know how to assess these cultures honestly, beginning with one's own.

- \* My own culture is not the standard. I'll always remember what a learned man told me before I left for Paraguay: If something seems strange to you there, consider that the only thing strange is you! We need to put what is ours in perspective and become very open to the culture to which we are sent. To do that, a whole mystical theology is needed.
- \* But we mustn't idealize the culture to which we are going, either. No culture can be the ultimate norm. This leads us to recognize that the Gospel is the only rule of thumb, with a freshness we never realized it possessed.

*c) Let's continue the dynamics of the Incarnation and Easter!*

Interplay among cultures makes us humble. It puts everything in perspective for us, pulls the ground from under our feet and refers us to the only one who is absolute: God. More than that, it opens up the mystery of God for us. True inculturation makes us participants in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery. Both mysteries are about the utter destruction the Word of God. In our case this means leaving behind our "heaven" where we feel secure and relaxed, agreeing to become strangers, and as far as we can, making ourselves similar to those of another culture, to the point of their taking us in. A new culture, more imbued with the Gospel, can only be born from the utter destruction of our cultural ego.

*d) Let's speak a language that everyone can understand!*

Although you might think this requires a terminology based on advanced theology, everything works out fine if we start using the only language that is universal, common to all cultures. Everyone understands the language of love. Moreover, in the two archetypes for the Congress, the stories of the Samaritan woman and the Good Samaritan, this language takes on the form of neighborliness. Love and caring about our neighbor – quite simply, that is way inculturation is lived. However, it all begins from the depths of Divine Love as we encounter it in the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery.

### **3. A contribution from the consecrated life to the Church?**

Archbishop Franc Rodé, Prefect of the CICLSAL, spoke to us about our mission as consecrated men and women, fortifying the fidelity of the Church. This can apply to different areas such as the life of prayer, witness, and communion. For example, *Vita Consacrata* (No. 46) states, "Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion."

I would add this thought. Taking things a step further, can't this mission also include inculturating the Gospel? We institutes of the consecrated life often have a privileged position in the sphere of cultural undertakings, whether through our missionary work or our very community life. Even the worlds of masculinity and femininity have their own inculturations in the consecrated life. It is said that the consecrated life has made room in the Church for providing for a wonderful equality between men and women.

From all this, doesn't a mission materialize for us: to strengthen the fidelity of the Church in its constant striving to inculturate the Gospel? Just as it is asking us to be experts in communion, perhaps the Church is awaiting our contribution in the area of inculturation, in intercultural communion. The wealth of intercultural experience that characterizes the consecrated life car-

ries with it a greater responsibility for the Church and the selfsame world to which we are sent.

What follows are recommendations for living inculturation in the consecrated life in the areas of mission and community, beginning with what came out of the Congress.

### **C. The mission of the Consecrated Life in relation to cultures**

Every vocation is bound up with a mission. As consecrated men and women deeply involved in an intercultural world, we are keenly aware of the fact that true evangelization cannot exist if the values of the Christian message do not enter into a culture. The Gospel remains very abstract when it does not become inculturated, does not become incarnate. To bring about inculturation, using words is not enough. An integral, thorough evangelization is needed, one that incorporates actions, symbols, and the witness of life.

Here the vows take on a clear-cut missionary meaning. During the Congress we were told how our vows can be looked upon as an alternative model of life, in which the use we make of goods, human relationships, and the exercise of power receives its inspiration from the very life of Jesus. By our vows we offer the world an alternative culture, which we are already living. From this perspective, our dialogue with cultures goes to the heart of the mission of the consecrated life.

Much patience is required in this mission because the processes of inculturation advance slowly. Our work group was aware of that when it said: "When we are journeying with peoples and their cultures, only a profound experience of God will provide us with the patience to await the time of God in history. Only with this determination will we know how to also be present at those cultural frontiers where Christ's presence is most needed."

Nowadays this mission of the consecrated life to inculturate the Gospel is being expressed in several new ways. A spirituality of incarnation commits us to experience cultural transformation from the inside out, beginning on the ground floor. Inserted communities in population centers represent one of its expressions. Another great missionary adventure taking place is interreligious dialogue. Without dialogue among cultures and religions, there will be no peace, no openness, and no possibility to proclaim the Gospel in the world. Nor will the wealth of new ways to express the mystery of Christ be revealed.

It is essential for every mission to transcend borders. In the stories of the two Samaritans, the archetypes of the Congress, we see that Jesus was crossing into new territory, in this case over the line that separated Jews from Samaritans. The Good Samaritan, culturally different, is introduced to the Jews as the image of a God who loves people from other lands, too, and who expresses his love through them. The scene with the Samaritan woman brings with it the added delight of the dialogue between a man, Jesus, and a woman who takes on his very mission. These two Samaritan scenes witness to the Lord, who on traversing new frontiers invites us to journey along paths of inculturation.

### **D. Cultures and the community life of consecrated persons**

In point of fact nowadays many religious communities are intercultural. In this respect, during the Congress someone made this interesting observation: "Intercultural living

fosters inculturation (and vice-versa).” I interpret it this way: living in intercultural communities prepares the way for inculturation when it comes to the mission. In other words: it is better if the challenge of incarnating the message of Christ in a certain place is first lived in the community itself. This experience felt in our very bones makes us more sensitive and realistic at the same time. In this way a cultural critique often comes about that is positive and evangelical: one culture appraises itself in light of another and one refines the other.

Several people also noted that intercultural living doesn't always take place as well as it should in community. For example, a global culture can have a negative impact if it superimposes itself on local values; a prevailing culture in a congregation can do the same. Sometimes profound changes are called for, structural ones. It might become necessary to establish new priorities for the use of our time, for example assigning greater prominence to contemplation. Someone also suggested that less emphasis be placed on the way in which the Western world sees community life.

As a concrete method for bringing about inculturation in our communities, some participants from Africa and Asia felt a compelling need to openly question the cultures in which we are immersed, in order to learn how they look upon our consecrated life and each of our vows.

## Conclusion

Viewing the Congress of the religious life through a pair of cultural eyeglasses, it is clear that the topic of cultural pluralism that we are experiencing almost everywhere in world and in our own homes today still needs to be studied much greater detail. Will we have the requisite drive to dedicate ourselves to this?

Someone said that we should first place ourselves in the hands of God who created every culture and took delight in their great variety. That's where we have to start. Then, in each culture the mystery of the *incarnation* must happen again: The Word of God must again put on flesh and blood. For the Gospel to become present, the person who proclaims it needs to keep in perspective all the personal cultural baggage that he or she is bringing along. Eventually, through intercultural and interreligious dialogue, the *Paschal mystery* will become manifest. Cultures are evangelized only by means of painful sacrifices and sometimes martyrdom.

One of the attractive features of the consecrated life is that we do not bring about the entire work of inculturation through our outside activities only. Very often, we experience this effort in our own homes and communities. In doing so, we proclaim the Gospel to every culture with more than just words. This applies especially to the vows when we live them as the proclamation of an alternative culture. This is our way of fortifying the Church and proclaiming the Reign of God.

I'm very grateful to the participants of the Congress for having ignited in me, and I believe in many others, a new passion for Christ and for humanity. For Christ who has become a man to create a new culture of love for the one faraway and hospitality for the stranger.

**OMI DOCUMENTATION** is an unofficial publication  
of the General Administration of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate  
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