

## INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION

### ***FAITH AND INCULTURATION***

(1988)

#### **INTRODUCTION**

1. The International Theological Commission has had, on several occasions, the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between faith and culture.<sup>1</sup> In 1984 it spoke directly on the inculturation of faith in its study on the mystery of the Church, which it produced with a view to the extraordinary synod of 1985.<sup>2</sup> For its part, the Pontifical Biblical Commission held its 1979 plenary session on the theme of the inculturation of faith in the light of Scripture.<sup>3</sup>

2. Today the International Theological Commission intends to continue this reflection in a more profound and systematic manner on account of the importance assumed by this theme of the inculturation of faith throughout the Christian world and on account of the insistence with which the Church's magisterium has considered this theme since the Second Vatican Council.

3. The basis is furnished by the Conciliar documents and by the synod papers which have continued them. Thus, in the constitution *Gaudium et spes*, the council has shown what lessons and what tasks the Church has drawn from its first experiences of inculturation in the Greco-Roman world.<sup>4</sup> It then devoted an entire chapter of this document to the promotion of culture ("De *culturae progressu rite promovendo*").<sup>5</sup> After describing culture as an effort toward a deeper humanity and toward a better plan for the universe, the council considered at length the relationships between culture and the message of salvation. It then enunciated some of the more urgent duties of Christians regarding culture: defense of the right of all to a culture, promotion of an integral culture and harmonization of the links between culture and Christianity. The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity and the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions develop some of these positions. Two ordinary synods expressly treated the evangelization of cultures, that of 1974, on the theme of evangelization,<sup>6</sup> and that of 1977, on catechetical formation.<sup>7</sup> The 1985 synod, which celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, spoke of inculturation as "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity in the various human cultures".<sup>8</sup>

4. Pope John Paul II himself has taken to heart in a special manner the evangelization of cultures: In his view, the dialogue of the Church and of

cultures assumes a vital importance for the future of the Church and of the world. To assist him in this great work, the Holy Father has created a specialized curial body: the Pontifical Council for Culture.<sup>9</sup> It is moreover with this Dicastery that the International Theological Commission is happily in a position to reflect today on the inculturation of faith.

5. Relying on the conviction that "the incarnation of the Word was also a cultural incarnation", the pope affirms that cultures, analogically comparable to the humanity of Christ in whatever good they possess, may play a positive role of mediation in the expression and extension of the Christian faith.<sup>10</sup>

6. Two essential themes are bound up with this view. First, that of the transcendence of revelation in relation to the cultures in which it finds expression. The Word of God cannot, in effect, be identified or linked in an exclusive manner with the elements of culture which bear it. The Gospel quite often demands a conversion of attitudes and an amendment of customs where it establishes itself: Cultures must also be purified and restored in Christ.

7. The second major theme of the teaching of John Paul II revolves around the urgency of the evangelization of cultures. This task presupposes that one would understand and penetrate with a critical sympathy particular cultural identities and that, in the interest of a universality corresponding to the truly human reality of all cultures, one would favor exchanges between them. The Holy Father thus bases the evangelization of cultures on an anthropological conception firmly rooted in Christian thought since the fathers of the Church. Since culture, when pure, reveals and strengthens the nature of man, the Christian impregnation presupposes the surpassing of all historicism and relativism in the conception of what is human. The evangelization of cultures should therefore be inspired by the love of man in himself and for himself, especially in those aspects of his being and of his culture which are being attacked or are under threat.<sup>11</sup>

8. In the light of this teaching, and also of the reflection which the theme of the inculturation of faith has aroused in the Church, we first propose a Christian anthropology which situates, one in relation to the other, nature, culture and grace. We shall then see the process of inculturation at work in the history of salvation: in ancient Israel, in the life and work of Jesus and in the early Church. A final section will treat problems at present posed to faith by its encounter with popular piety, with non-Christian religions, with the cultural traditions in the young Churches and finally with the various characteristics of modernity.

## **I. NATURE, CULTURE AND GRACE**

1. Anthropologists readily return to describe or define culture in terms of the distinction, sometimes even opposition, between nature and culture. The significance of this word *nature* varies moreover with the different conceptions of the natural sciences, of philosophy and of theology. The magisterium understands this word in a very specific sense: The nature of a being is what constitutes it as such, with the dynamism of its tendencies

toward its proper ends. It is from God that natures possess what they are, as well as their proper ends. They are from that moment impregnated with a significance in which man, as the image of God, is capable of discerning the "creating hand of God".<sup>12</sup>

2. The fundamental inclinations of human nature, expressed by natural law, appear therefore as an expression of the will of the Creator. This natural law declares the specific requirements of human nature, requirements which are significative of the design of God for his rational and free creature. Thus all that misunderstanding is avoided which, perceiving nature in a univocal sense, would reduce man to material nature.

3. It is appropriate, at the same time, to consider human nature according to its unfolding in historical time: that is, to observe what man, endowed with a fallible liberty and often subjected to his passions, has made of his humanity. This heritage transmitted to new generations includes simultaneously immense treasures of wisdom, art and generosity, and a considerable share of deviations and perversions. Attention therefore, as a whole, revolves around human nature and the human condition, an expression which integrates existential elements, of which certain ones—sin and grace—affect the history of salvation. If, therefore, we use the word *culture* in a primarily positive sense—as a synonym of development, for example—as have Vatican II and the recent popes, we will not forget that cultures can perpetuate and favor the choice of pride and selfishness.

4. Culture consists in the extension of the requirements of human nature, as the accomplishment of its end, as is especially taught in the 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.... The word 'culture' in its general sense indicates everything whereby man develops and perfects his many bodily and spiritual qualities." Thus the domain of culture is multiple: "He strives by his knowledge and his labor, to bring the world itself under his control. He renders social life more human both in the family and the civic community, through improvement of customs and institutions. Throughout the course of time he expresses, communicates and conserves in his works, great spiritual experiences and desires, that they might be of advantage to the progress of many, even of the whole human family"<sup>13</sup>

5. The primary constituent of culture is the human person, considered in all aspects of his being. Man better himself—this is the first end of all culture—but he does so thanks to the works of culture and thanks to a cultural memory. Culture also still designates the milieu in which and on account of which persons may grow.

6. The human person is a community being who blossoms in giving and in receiving. It is thus in solidarity with others and across living social relationships that the person progresses. Also, those realities of nation, people, society, with their cultural patrimony, constitute for the development of persons a "definite, historical milieu which enfolds the man of every nation and age and from which he draws the values which

permit him to promote civilization."<sup>14</sup>

7. Culture, which is always a concrete and particular culture, is open to the higher values common to all. Thus the originality of a culture does not signify withdrawal into itself but a contribution to the richness which is the good of all. Cultural pluralism cannot therefore be interpreted as the juxtaposition of a closed universe, but as participation in a unison of realities all directed toward the universal values of humanity. The phenomenon of the reciprocal penetration of cultures, frequent in history, illustrates this fundamental openness of particular cultures to the values common to all, and through this their openness one to another.

8. Man is a naturally religious being. The turning toward the absolute is inscribed in his deepest being. In a general sense, religion is an integral constituent of culture, in which it takes root and blossoms. Moreover, all the great cultures include, as the keystone of the edifice they constitute, the religious dimension, the inspiration of the great achievements which have marked the ancient history of civilizations.

9. At the root of the great religions is the transcendent movement of man in search of God. Purified of its deviations and disagreeable aspects, this movement should be the object of sincere respect. It is on this that the Christian faith comes to engraft itself. What distinguishes the Christian faith is that it is free adherence to the proposition of the gratuitous love of God which has been revealed to us, which has given us his only Son to free us from sin and has poured out his Spirit in our hearts. The radical reality of Christianity lies in the gift that God makes of himself to humanity, facing all the aspirations, requests, conquests and achievements of nature.

10. Therefore, because it transcends the entire natural and cultural order, the Christian faith is, on the one hand, compatible with all cultures insofar as they conform to right reason and good will, and, on the other hand, to an eminent degree, a dynamizing factor of culture. A single principle explains the totality of relationships between faith and culture: Grace respects nature, healing in it the wounds of sin, comforting and elevating it. Elevation to the divine life is the specific finality of grace, but it cannot realize this unless nature is healed and unless elevation to the supernatural order brings nature, in the way proper to itself, to the plenitude of perfection.

11. The process of inculturation may be defined as the Church's efforts to make the message of Christ penetrate a given sociocultural milieu, calling on the latter to grow according to all its particular values, as long as these are compatible with the Gospel. The term *inculturation* includes the notion of growth, of the mutual enrichment of persons and groups, rendered possible by the encounter of the Gospel with a social milieu. "Inculturation [is] the incarnation of the Gospel in native cultures and also the introduction of these cultures into the life of the Church."<sup>15</sup>

## II. INCULTURATION IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION

1. The relationships between nature, culture and grace shall be considered in the concrete history of the covenant between God and humanity that began with a particular people, culminated in a son of this people, who is also Son of God, and extending from him to all the nations of the earth, this history demonstrates the "marvelous 'condescension' of eternal wisdom".<sup>16</sup>

### **Israel, the People of the Covenant**

2. Israel understood itself as formed in an immediate manner by God. And the Old Testament, the Bible of ancient Israel, is the permanent witness of the revelation of the living God to the members of a chosen people. In its written form, this revelation also bears the traces of the cultural and social experiences of the era during which this people and neighboring civilizations encountered each other. Ancient Israel was born in a world which had already given birth to great cultures and progressed together with them.

3. The most ancient institutions of Israel (for example, circumcision, the spring sacrifice, the Sabbath rest) are not particular to it. It borrowed them from the neighboring peoples. A large part of the culture of Israel has a similar origin. However, the people of the Bible subjected these borrowings to profound changes when it incorporated them into its faith and religious practice. It passed them through the screen of a faith in the personal God of Abraham (the free Creator and wise planner of the universe, in whom the source of sin and death is not to be found). It is the encounter with this God, experienced in the covenant, which permits the understanding of man and woman as personal beings and in consequence the rejection of the inhuman practices inherent in the other cultures.

4. The biblical authors used, while simultaneously transforming, the cultures of their time to recount, throughout the history of a people, the salvific action which God would cause to culminate in Jesus Christ and to unite the peoples of all cultures, called to form one body of which Jesus is the head.

5. In the Old Testament, cultures, fused and transformed, are placed at the service of the revelation of the God of Abraham, lived in the covenant and recorded in Scripture. It was a unique preparation on the social and religious plane for the coming of Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, revealed at a deeper level and manifested in the fullness of the Spirit, invites all cultures to allow themselves to be changed by the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

6. If the pagans were "grafted onto Israel",<sup>17</sup> it must be emphasized that the original plan of God concerns all creation.<sup>18</sup> In fact, a covenant is made through Noah with all the peoples of the earth who are prepared to live in accordance with justice.<sup>19</sup> This covenant is anterior to those made with Abraham and Moses. Beginning from Abraham, Israel is called to

communicate the blessings it has received to all the families of the earth.<sup>20</sup>

7. Let us also draw attention to the fact that the various aspects of the culture of Israel do not all maintain the same relationship with divine revelation. Some testify to the resistance to God's word while others express its acceptance. Among the latter, one must distinguish between the provisional (ritual and judicial prescriptions) and the permanent, universal in scope. Certain elements (in the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms),<sup>21</sup> derive their signification from being the prehistory of Christ.

### ***Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior of the World***

#### **1. The Transcendence of Jesus Christ in Relation to All Culture**

8. One conviction dominates the preaching of Jesus: In Jesus, in his word and in his person, God perfects the gifts he has already made to Israel and to all nations, by transcending them.<sup>22</sup> Jesus is the sovereign light and true wisdom for all nations and all cultures.<sup>23</sup>

He shows, in his own activity, that the God of Abraham, already recognized by Israel as Creator and Lord,<sup>24</sup> is preparing himself to reign over all those who believe in the Gospel, and much more, through Jesus, God already reigns.<sup>25</sup>

9. The teaching of Jesus, notably in the parables, is not afraid to correct or, when the need arises, to challenge a good number of the ideas which history, religion as practiced and culture had inspired among his contemporaries concerning the nature and action of God.<sup>26</sup>

10. The completely filial intimacy of Jesus with God and the loving obedience, which caused him to offer his life and death to his Father,<sup>27</sup> show that in him the original plan of God for creation, tainted by sin, has been restored.<sup>28</sup> We are faced with a new creation, a new Adam.<sup>29</sup> Also, the relationships with God are profoundly changed in many respects.<sup>30</sup> The newness is such that the curse which strikes the crucified Messiah becomes a blessing for all peoples<sup>31</sup> and faith in Jesus as savior replaces the regime of the law.<sup>32</sup>

11. The death and resurrection of Jesus, on account of which the Spirit was poured out into our hearts, have shown the shortcomings of completely human wisdoms and moralities and even of the law (nonetheless given by God to Moses), all of which were institutions capable of giving knowledge of the good, but not the force to accomplish it; knowledge of sin, but not the power to extract oneself from it.<sup>33</sup>

#### **2. The Presence of Christ to Culture and Cultures**

##### ***A. The Uniqueness of Christ, Universal Lord and Savior***

12. Since it was fully and historically realized, the incarnation of the Son

of God was a cultural incarnation: "Christ [bound] Himself, in virtue of His Incarnation, to certain social and cultural conditions of those human beings among whom He dwelt."<sup>34</sup>

13. The Son of God was happy to be a Jew of Nazareth in Galilee, speaking Aramaic, subject to pious parents of Israel, accompanying them to the temple of Jerusalem where they found him "sitting among the doctors, listening to them and asking them questions".<sup>35</sup> Jesus grew up in a milieu of customs and institutions of first-century Palestine, initiating himself into the trades of his time, observing the behavior of the sinners, peasants and business people of his milieu. The scenes and countrysides on which the imagination of the future rabbi was nourished are of a very definite country and time.

14. Nourished by the piety of Israel, formed by the teaching of the law and the prophets, to which a completely singular experience of God as Father added an unheard-of profundity, Jesus may be situated in a highly specific spiritual tradition, that of Jewish prophecy. Like the prophets of old, he is the mouthpiece of God and calls to conversion. The manner is also quite typical: The vocabulary, literary types, the manner of address also recall the tradition of Elijah and Elisha—the biblical parallelism, the proverbs, paradoxes, admonitions, blessings, right up to the symbolic actions.

15. Jesus is so bound up with the life of Israel that the people and the religious tradition in which he shares acquire in virtue of this liaison a unique place in the history of salvation; this chosen people and the religious tradition which they have left have a permanent significance for humanity.

16. There is nothing improvised about the incarnation. The Word of God enters into a history which prepares him, announces him and prefigures him. One could say that the Christ takes flesh in advance with the people God has expressly formed with a view to the gift he would make of his Son. All the words uttered by the prophets are a prelude to the subsistent Word which is the Son of God.

17. Also, the history of the covenant concluded with Abraham and through Moses with the people of Israel, as also the books which recount and clarify this history, all together hold for the faithful of Jesus the role of an indispensable and irreplaceable pedagogy.

Moreover the election of this people from which Jesus emerges has never been revoked. "My brethren, my kinsmen by race," writes Saint Paul, "they are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises, to them belong the patriarchs and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen."<sup>36</sup>

The cultivated olive has not lost its privileges to the wild olive, which has been grafted onto it.

*B. The Catholicity of the Unique Event*

18. However historically distinctive the condition of the Word made flesh may be—and consequently of the culture which receives, forms and continues him—it is not first this factor which the Son of God united to himself. It is because he became man that God has also assumed, in a certain way, a race, a country and a time.

"Since human nature as He assumed it was not annulled, by that very fact it has been raised up to a divine dignity in our respect too. For by His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man."<sup>37</sup>

19. The transcendence of Christ does not therefore isolate him above the human family but renders him present to all, beyond all restriction. He "cannot be considered foreign anywhere or to anybody."<sup>38</sup> "There are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus."<sup>39</sup>

Thus Christ is at one with us in the unity we form as in the multiplicity and diversity in which our common nature is realized.

20. However, Christ would not be one with us in the reality of our concrete humanity if he did not affect us as well in the diversity and the complementarity of our cultures. It is in fact cultures—language, history, general attitude to life, diverse institutions—which for better or worse receive us into life, form us, accompany us and survive our passing. If the cosmos as a whole is, in a mysterious sense, the scene of grace and sin, do not our cultures have a similar role inasmuch as they are both fruits and seeds in the field of our human labors?

21. In the body of Christ, the cultures, insofar as they are animated and renewed by grace and faith, are moreover complementary. They permit us to see the multiform richness of which the teachings and energies of the same Gospel are capable, the same principles of truth, justice, love and liberty, when they are traversed by the Spirit of Christ.

22. Finally, is it necessary to recall that it is not in virtue of a self-interested strategy that the Church, bride of the incarnated Word, preoccupies itself with the fate of the various cultures of humanity? She wishes to animate from the inside, protect, free from the error and sin with which we have corrupted them these resources of truth and love which God has placed, as *semina Verbi*, in his creation. The Word of God does not come into a creation which is foreign to it. "All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together."<sup>40</sup>

## **The Holy Spirit and the Church of the Apostles**

### **1. From Jerusalem to the Nations: The Typical Beginnings of the Inculturation of the Faith**

23. On Pentecost day, the breaking in of the Holy Spirit inaugurates the



relation of the Christian faith and culture as fulfillment in flower: The promise of salvation fulfilled by the risen Christ filled the hearts of believers by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit himself. "The marvels of God" will from now on be "preached" to all men of every language and culture.<sup>41</sup> While humanity was living under the sign of the division of Babel, the gift of the Holy Spirit was offered to it as the transcendent and now so human grace of the symphony of hearts. The divine unification (*koinonia*)<sup>42</sup> recreated a new humanity among people, penetrating without destroying the sign of their division: languages.

24. The Holy Spirit does not establish a superculture, but is the personal and vital principle which will vivify the new community in working in harness with its members. The gift of the Holy Spirit is not of the order of structures, but the Church of Jerusalem which he fashions is a *koinonia* of faith and of *agape*, communicating herself in many ways without loss of identity; she is the body of Christ whose members are united but with many faces. The first test of catholicity appears when differences of cultural origin (conflicts between Greeks and Hebrews) menace the communion.<sup>43</sup> The apostles do not suppress the differences but are concerned with developing an essential function of the ecclesial body: the *diakonia* at the service of the *koinonia*.

25. In order that the good news might be announced to the nations, the Holy Spirit awakens a new perception in Peter and the Jerusalem community, to wit,<sup>44</sup> faith in Christ does not require that new believers abandon their culture to adopt that of the law of the Jewish people; all peoples are called to be beneficiaries of the promise and to share the heritage entrusted for them in the people of the covenant.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, "nothing beyond the essentials", according to the decision of the apostolic assembly.<sup>46</sup>

26. Scandal for the Jews, the mystery of the cross is foolishness to the pagans. Here the inculturation of the faith clashes with the radical sin of idolatry which keeps "captive"<sup>47</sup> the truth of a culture which is not assumed by Christ. As long as man is "deprived of the glory of God",<sup>48</sup> all that he "cultivates" is nothing more than the opaque image of himself. The Pauline kerygma begins therefore with creation and the call to the covenant, denounces the moral perversions of blinded humanity and announces salvation in the crucified and risen Christ.

27. After the testing of catholicity among culturally different Christian communities, after the resistances of Jewish legalism and those of idolatry, the faith pledges itself to culture in Gnosticism.

The phenomenon begins to appear at the time of the last letters of Paul and John; it will fuel the majority of the doctrinal crises of the succeeding centuries. Here, human reason in its injured state refuses the folly of the incarnation of the Son of God and seeks to recover the mystery by accommodating it to the prevailing culture. Whereas, "faith depends not on human philosophy but on the power of God."<sup>49</sup>

## **2. The Apostolic Tradition: Inculturation of Faith and Salvation of Culture**

28. In the "last times" inaugurated at Pentecost, the risen Christ, alpha and omega, enters into the history of peoples: From that moment, the sense of history and thus of culture is unsealed<sup>50</sup> and the Holy Spirit reveals it by actualizing and communicating it to all. The Church is the sacrament of this revelation and its communication. It recenters every culture into which Christ is received, placing it in the axis of the "world which is coming" and restores the union broken by the "prince of this world". Culture is thus eschatologically situated; it tends toward its completion in Christ but it cannot be saved except by associating itself with the repudiation of evil.

29. Each local or particular Church is called in the Holy Spirit to be the sacrament which manifests Christ, crucified and risen, enfleshed in a particular culture.

a. The culture of a local Church—young or old—participates in the dynamism of cultures and in their vicissitudes. Even if the Church is in the last times it remains subject to trials and temptations.<sup>51</sup>

b. The Christian "newness" engenders in the local Churches particular expressions stamped by culture (modalities of doctrinal formulations, liturgical symbolisms, models of holiness, canonical directives, etc.).

Nevertheless the communion between the Churches demands constantly that the cultural "flesh" of each does not act as a screen to mutual recognition in the apostolic faith and to solidarity in love.

c. Every Church sent to the nations witnesses to its Lord only if, having consideration for its cultural attachments, it conforms to him in the first *kenosis* of his incarnation and in the final humiliation of his lifegiving passion. The inculturation of the faith is one of the expressions of the apostolic tradition whose dramatic character is emphasized on several occasions by Paul.<sup>52</sup>

30. The apostolic writings and the patristic witness do not limit their vision of culture to the service of evangelization but integrate it into the totality of the mystery of Christ. For them, creation is the reflection of the glory of God: Man is its living icon, and it is in Christ that the resemblance with God is seen. Culture is the scene in which man and the world are called to find themselves anew in the glory of God. The encounter is missed or obscured insofar as man is a sinner. Within captive creation is seen the gestation of the "new universe":<sup>53</sup> The Church is "in labor".<sup>54</sup> In her and through her the creatures of this world are able to live their redemption and their transfiguration.

### **III. PRESENT PROBLEMS OF INCULTURATION**

1. The inculturation of the faith, which we have considered first from a

philosophical viewpoint (nature, culture and grace), then from the point of view of history and dogma (inculturation in the history of salvation) still poses considerable problems for theological reflection and pastoral action. Thus the questions aroused in the sixteenth century by the discovery of new worlds continue to preoccupy us. How may one harmonize the spontaneous expressions of the religiosity of peoples with faith? What attitude should be adopted in the face of non-Christian religions, especially those "bound up with cultural advancement"?<sup>55</sup>

New questions have arisen in our time. How should "young Churches", born in our century of the indigenization of already-existing Christian communities, consider both their Christian past and the cultural history of their respective peoples? Finally how should the Gospel animate, purify and fortify the new world into which we have brought industrialization and urbanization?

To us it seems that these four questions should be faced by anyone who reflects on the present conditions of the inculturation of faith.

### **Popular Piety**

2. In the countries which have been affected by the Gospel, we normally understand by *popular piety*, on the one hand, the union of Christian faith and piety with the profound culture, and on the other with the previous forms of religion of populations. It involves those very numerous devotions in which Christians express their religious sentiment in the simple language, among other things, of festival, pilgrimage, dance and song. One could speak of vital synthesis with reference to this piety, since it unites "body and spirit, ecclesial communion and institution, individual and community, Christian faith and love of one's country, intelligence and affectivity".<sup>56</sup> The quality of the synthesis stems, as one might expect, from the antiquity and profundity of the evangelization, as from the compatibility of its religious and cultural antecedents with the Christian faith.

3. In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI confirmed and encouraged a new appreciation of popular piety. "These expressions were for a long time regarded as less pure and were sometimes despised, but today they are almost everywhere being rediscovered. During the last Synod the bishops studied their significance with remarkable pastoral realism and zeal."<sup>57</sup>

4. "But if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization", continued Paul VI, popular piety "is rich in values. It manifests a thirst for God which only the simple and poor can know. It makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of manifesting belief. It involves an acute awareness of profound attributes of God: fatherhood, providence, loving and constant presence. It engenders interior attitudes rarely observed to the same degree elsewhere: patience, the sense of the cross in daily life, detachment, openness to others, devotion."<sup>58</sup>

5. Moreover the strength and depth of the roots of popular piety clearly manifested themselves in the long period of discredit mentioned by Paul VI. The expressions of popular piety have survived numerous predictions of disappearance of which modernity and the progress of secularity seemed to warn. They have preserved and even increased, in many regions of the globe, the attractions they exercised on the masses.

6. The limits of popular piety have often been condemned. They stem from a certain naivete [and] are a source of various deformations of religion, even of superstitions. One remains at the level of cultural manifestations without a true adhesion to faith at the level where this is expressed in service of one's neighbor. Badly directed, popular piety can even lead to the formation of sects and thus place true ecclesial unity in danger. It also risks being manipulated, be it by political powers or by religious forces foreign to the Christian faith.

7. The taking into account of these dangers invites us to practice an intelligent catechesis, won thanks to the merits of an authentic popular piety and at the same time duly shrewd. A living and adapted liturgy is equally called to play a major role in the integration of a very pure faith and the traditional forms of the religious life of peoples. Without any doubt whatsoever, popular piety can bring an irreplaceable contribution to a Christian cultural anthropology which would permit the reduction of the often tragic division between the faith of Christians and certain socioeconomic institutions, of quite different orientation, which regulate their daily life.

### ***Inculturation of Faith and Non-Christian Religions***

8. From its origin, the Church has encountered on many levels the question of the plurality of religions. Even today Christians constitute only about one-third of the world's population. Moreover, they must live in a world which expresses a growing sympathy for pluralism in religious matters.

9. Given the great place of religion in culture, a local or particular Church implanted in a non-Christian sociocultural milieu must take seriously into account the religious elements of this milieu. Moreover, this preoccupation should be in accordance with the depth and vitality of these religious elements.

10. If we may consider one continent as an example, we shall speak of Asia, which witnessed the birth of several of the world's great religious movements. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism: Each of these religious systems certainly located in distinct regions of the continent [is] deeply rooted in the people and [shows] much vigor. One's personal life, as well as social and community activity, was marked in a decisive manner by these religious and spiritual traditions. In addition the Asian Churches consider the question of non-Christian religions one of the most important and most urgent. They have even made it the object of that privileged form of relation: the dialogue.

### ***The Dialogue of Religions***

11. Dialogue with other religions forms an integral part of Christian life; by exchange, study and work in common, this dialogue contributes to a better understanding of the religion of the other and to a growth of piety.

12. For Christian faith, the unity of all in their origin and destiny, that is, in creation and in communion with God in Jesus Christ, is accompanied by the universal presence and action of the Holy Spirit. The Church in dialogue listens and learns. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."<sup>59</sup>

13. This dialogue possesses something original, since, as the history of religions testifies, the plurality of religions has often given rise to discrimination and jealousy, fanaticism and despotism, all of which drew on religion the accusation of being a source of division in the human family. The Church, "universal sacrament of salvation", that is, "sign and instrument both of a very close knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race",<sup>60</sup> is called by God to be minister and instrument of unity in Jesus Christ for all men and all peoples.

### ***The Transcendence of the Gospel in Relation to Culture***

14. We cannot, however, forget the transcendence of the Gospel in relation to all human cultures in which the Christian faith has the vocation to root itself and come to fruition according to all its potentialities. However great the respect should be for what is true and holy in the cultural heritage of a people, this attitude does not demand that one should lend an absolute character to this cultural heritage. No one can forget that, from the beginning, the Gospel was a "scandal for the Jews and foolishness for the pagans".<sup>61</sup>

Inculturation which borrows the way of dialogue between religions cannot in any way pledge itself to syncretism.

### ***The Young Churches and Their Christian Past***

15. The Church prolongs and actualizes the mystery of the Servant of Yahweh, who was promised to be "the light of the nations so that salvation might reach the ends of the earth"<sup>62</sup> and to be the "covenant of the people".<sup>63</sup> This prophecy is realized at the Last Supper, when, on the eve of his passion, Christ, surrounded by the Twelve, gives his body and blood to his followers as the food and drink of the new covenant, thus assimilating them into his own body.

The Church, people of the new covenant, was being born. She would receive at Pentecost the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Lamb sacrificed from the beginning and who was already working to fulfill this desire so

deeply rooted in human beings: a union the more intense with respect to the intense diversity.

16. In virtue of the Catholic communion, which unites all the particular Churches in one history, the young Churches consider the past of the Churches which give birth to them as part of their own history. However, the major act of interpretation which is the hallmark of their spiritual maturity consists in recognizing this precedence as originative and not only as historical. This signifies that in receiving in faith the Gospel which their elders announced to them, the young Churches welcomed the "initiator of the faith"<sup>64</sup> and the entire tradition in which the faith is attested, as also the capacity to give birth to new forms in which the unique and common faith would find expression. Equal in dignity, drawing life from the same mystery, authentic sister Churches, the young Churches manifest, in concert with their elders, the fullness of the mystery of Christ.

17. People of the new covenant: It is insofar as it commemorates the paschal mystery and ceaselessly announces the return of the Lord that the Church may be called an eschatology that began with the cultural traditions of peoples, on condition, of course, that these traditions had been subjected to the purifying law of death and resurrection in Christ Jesus.

18. Like Saint Paul at the Areopagus in Athens, the young Church interprets its ancestral culture in a new and creative manner. When this culture passes through Christ, "the veil falls".<sup>65</sup> At the time of the "incubation" of faith, this Church has discovered Christ as "exegete and exegesis" of the Father in the Spirit.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, it does not cease to contemplate him as such. Now it is discovering him as "exegete and exegesis" of man, source and destination of culture. To the unknown God, revealed on the cross, corresponds unknown man, announced by the young Church as the living paschal mystery inaugurated by grace in the ancient culture.

19. In the salvation it makes present, the young Church endeavors to locate all the traces of the God's care for a particular human group, the *semina Verbi*. What the prologue of the Letter to the Hebrews says of the fathers and the prophets may in relation with Jesus Christ be repeated, in an analogical manner of course, for all human culture insofar as it is right and true and bears wisdom.

### **Christian Faith and Modernity**

20. The technical changes which gave rise to the industrial revolution and subsequently the urban revolution affected souls of people in depth. They were beneficiaries and also, quite often, the victims of these changes. Therefore believers have the duty, as an urgent and difficult task, to understand the characteristic traits of modern culture, as also its expectations and needs in relation to the salvation wrought by Christ.

21. The industrial revolution was also a cultural revolution. Values until

then assured were brought into question, such as the sense of personal and community work, the direct relationship of man to nature, membership in a support family, at home as at work, implantation in local and religious communities of human dimension, [and] participation in traditions, rites, ceremonies and celebrations which give a sense to the great moment of existence. Industrialization, in provoking a disordered concentrating of populations, seriously affected these age-old values without giving rise to communities capable of integrating new cultures. At a time when the most deprived peoples are in search of a suitable development model, the advantages as also the risks and human costs of industrialization are better perceived.

22. Great progress has been made in many areas of life: diet, health, education, transport, access to all types of consumer goods.

Deep misgivings, however, have arisen in the collective subconscious.

In many countries, the notion of progress has given way, especially since World War II, to disillusion. Rationality as regards production and administration operates against reason when it forgets the good of persons. The emancipation of communities from a sense of belonging has isolated man in the crowd. The new means of communication destroy to as great an extent as they create. Science, by means of the technical creations which are its fruit, appears simultaneously to be creator and destroyer. In addition some despair of modernity and speak of a new barbarism. Despite many faults and failings, one must hope for a moral uplift of all nations, rich and poor. If the Gospel is preached and heard, a cultural and spiritual conversion is possible. It calls to solidarity, in the interest of the whole good of the person, to the promotion of peace and justice, to adoration of the Father, from whom all good things come.

23. The inculturation of the Gospel in modern societies will demand a methodical effort of concerted research and action. This effort will assure on the part of those responsible for evangelization: (1) an attitude of openness and a critical eye; (2) the capacity to perceive the spiritual expectations and human aspirations of the new cultures; (3) the aptitude for cultural analysis, having in mind an effective encounter with the modern world.

24. A receptive attitude is required among those who wish to understand and evangelize the world of our time. Modernity is accompanied by undeniable progress in many cultural and material domains: well-being, human mobility, science, research, education, a new sense of solidarity. In addition, the Church of Vatican II has taken a lively account of the new conditions in which she must exercise her mission, and it is in the cultures of modernity that the Church of tomorrow will be constructed. The traditional advice applicable to discernment is reiterated by Pius XII. "It is necessary to deepen one's understanding of the civilization and institutions of various peoples and to cultivate their best qualities and gifts.... All in the customs of peoples which are not inextricably bound up with superstitions or errors should be examined with benevolence and if possible, preserved intact."<sup>67</sup>

25. The Gospel raises fundamental questions among those who reflect on the behavior of modern man. How should one make this man understand the radical nature of the message of Christ: unconditional love, evangelical poverty, adoration of the Father and constant yielding to his will? How should one educate toward the Christian sense of suffering and death? How should one arouse faith and hope in the event of the resurrection accomplished by Jesus Christ?

26. We must develop capacity to analyze cultures and to gauge their moral and spiritual indicators. A mobilization of the whole Church is called for so that the extremely complex task of the inculturation of the Gospel in today's world may be faced with success. We must wed to this topic the preoccupation of John Paul II: "From the beginning of my pontificate I considered that the dialogue of the Church with the cultures of our time was a vital area, whose stake is the fate of the world in this the end of the twentieth century."<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

1. Having said that the important thing was "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", Paul VI asked that one "evangelize man's culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots), in the wide and rich sense which these terms have in *Gaudium et spes*, always taking the person as one's starting point and always coming back to the relationships of people among themselves and with God."<sup>69</sup>

2. "In this the end of the twentieth century," as John Paul II affirmed for his part, "the Church must make itself all things for all men, bringing today's cultures together with sympathy. There still are milieus and mentalities, as there are entire countries and regions, to evangelize, which supposes a long and courageous process of inculturation so that the Gospel may penetrate the soul of living cultures, respond to their highest expectations and make them grow in the dimension of Christian faith, hope and charity. Sometimes cultures have only been touched superficially and in any case, to continuously transform themselves, they demand a renewed approach. In addition, new areas of culture appear, with diverse objectives, methods and languages."<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the documents of the International Theological Commission on theological pluralism (1972), human development and Christian salvation (1976), Catholic doctrine on the sacrament of marriage (1977), and selected questions on Christology (1979), in the collection of the International Theological Commission, *Texts and Documents, 1969-1985* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989; repub. 2009 as vol. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Commission Theologique Internationale, "Thèmes choisis



d'ecclésiologie a l'occasion du 20<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la clôture du Concile Vatican II" (1984). (See "Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council", in International Theological Commission, *Texts and Documents, 1969-1985*, vol. I, chapter 13, pp. 271-310).

<sup>3</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Fede e cultura alla luce della Bibbia / Foi et culture a la lumière de la Bible* (Turin: Editrice Elle di Ci, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> [\*Gaudium et spes\*](#), 44.

<sup>5</sup> [\*Gaudium et spes\*](#), 53-62.

<sup>6</sup> Paul VI, [\*Evangelii Nuntiandi\*](#), 18-20.

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae*, 53.

<sup>8</sup> Extraordinary Synod for the twentieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, final report voted by the fathers, 7 December 1985.

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, Letter of foundation of the Pontifical Council for Culture, 20 May 1982.

<sup>10</sup> John Paul II, Speech to the University of Coimbra, 15 May 1982.

<sup>11</sup> Speech to the bishops of Kenya, 7 May 1980.

<sup>12</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> [\*Gaudium et spes\*](#), 53.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, *Slavorum Apostoli*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> *Dei Verbum*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Rom 11:11-24.

<sup>18</sup> Gen 1:1-2, 4a.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Gen 9:1-17; Sir 44:17-18.

<sup>20</sup> Gen 12:1-5; Jn 4:2; Sir 44:21.

<sup>21</sup> Lk 24:44; cf. v. 27.

- <sup>22</sup> Mk 13:10; Mt 12:21; Lk 2:32.
- <sup>23</sup> Mt 11:19; Lk 7:35.
- <sup>24</sup> Ps 93:1-4; Is 6:1.
- <sup>25</sup> Mk 1:15; Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20; 17:21.
- <sup>26</sup> Mt 20:1-16; Lk 15:11-32; 18:9-14.
- <sup>27</sup> Mk 14:36.
- <sup>28</sup> Mk 1:14-45; 10:2-9; Mt 5:21-48.
- <sup>29</sup> Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:20-22.
- <sup>30</sup> Mk 8:27-33; 1 Cor 1:18-25.
- <sup>31</sup> Gal 3:13; Deut 21:22-23.
- <sup>32</sup> Gal 3:12-14.
- <sup>33</sup> Rom 7:16ff.; 3:20; 7:7; 1 Tim 1:8.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ad gentes*, 10.
- <sup>35</sup> Lk 2:46.
- <sup>36</sup> Rom 9:3-5.
- <sup>37</sup> [\*Gaudium et spes\*](#), 22.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ad gentes*, 8.
- <sup>39</sup> Gal 3:28.
- <sup>40</sup> Col 1:16-17.
- <sup>41</sup> Acts 2:11.
- <sup>42</sup> Acts 2:42.
- <sup>43</sup> Acts 6:1ff.
- <sup>44</sup> Acts 10 and 11.
- <sup>45</sup> Eph 2:14-15.

<sup>46</sup> Acts 15-28.

<sup>47</sup> Rom 1:18.

<sup>48</sup> Rom 3:23.

<sup>49</sup> 1 Cor 2:4ff.

<sup>50</sup> Rev 5:1-5.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Rev 2 and 3.

<sup>52</sup> 1 and 2 Cor passim.

<sup>53</sup> Rev 21:5.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Rom 8:18-25.

<sup>55</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

<sup>56</sup> Third general conference of the bishops of Latin America, *The Evangelization of Latin America in the Present and in the Future*, 448.

<sup>57</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 48.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Lumen gentium*, 1, 48.

<sup>61</sup> 1 Cor 1:23.

<sup>62</sup> Is 49:6.

<sup>63</sup> Is 49:8.

<sup>64</sup> Heb 12:2.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Cor 3:16.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, *Théologie* 41 (Paris, 1959), 1.1, pp. 322-24.

<sup>67</sup> Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*.

<sup>68</sup> John Paul II, Letter on foundation of the Pontifical Council for Culture,

20 May 1982.

<sup>69</sup> Paul VI, *[Evangelii Nuntiandi](#)*, 19-20.

<sup>70</sup> John Paul II, Discourse to the Pontifical Council for Culture, 18 January 1983.