**THEOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY, MINISTRY AND INTERCULTURALITY**

**Relevance and Challenges in the Formation of the Salesian Priest**

*Meeting of the Heads of Salesian Theological Centres, UPS, Rome, 17 March 2015*

The topic suggested to me is complex. It involves four terms: theology, spirituality, ministry, and interculturality. The newest of these is interculturality. I am far more familiar with inculturation, though of course the plurality of cultures is a matter of fact for someone born and brought up in India. I will not, in the course of this paper, attempt to study with the necessary care the meanings of each of these terms and their relationship. I will merely bring together certain elements, some of them more established than others, and offer some practical reflections on theology as one of the elements in the formation of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

**1. Inculturation**

As far as inculturation is concerned, I want to put down four or five theological premises, which I refer to as established because largely drawn from the magisterium:

* The Christian faith is transcultural
* The Salesian charism is transcultural
* Grace supposes culture
* The faith is to be preached to all cultures, and the faith and the charism are to be incarnated in all cultures

*1.1 The Christian faith is transcultural*: Pope Francis says this explicitly in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as monocultural and monotonous. While it is true that some cultures have been closely associated with the preaching of the Gospel and the development of Christian thought, the revealed message is not identified with any of them; its content is transcultural. (EG 117)

He is repeating, more explicitly, what Pope Paul VI had said in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: “The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures.” (EN 20)

We could presume that the Salesian charism too, as a gift of the Spirit, is transcultural, meant to be a gift to all peoples, each in their own culture.

*1.2 Grace supposes culture*:

The People of God is incarnate in the peoples of the earth, each of which has its own culture. The concept of culture is valuable for grasping the various expressions of the Christian life present in God’s people. It has to do with the lifestyle of a given society, the specific way in which its members relate to one another, to other creatures and to God. Understood in this way, culture embraces the totality of a people’s life. Each people in the course of its history develops its culture with legitimate autonomy. This is due to the fact that the human person, “by nature stands completely in need of life in society” and always exists in reference to society, finding there a concrete way of relating to reality. The human person is always situated in a culture: “nature and culture are intimately linked”. (EG 115)

Grace supposes culture, and God’s gift becomes flesh in the culture of those who receive it. (EG 115)

We might note that the recent magisterium of the church presupposes an empirical rather than a classicist notion of culture.[[1]](#footnote-1) Revelation is God’s entry not just into the physical world but into a world mediated and constituted by meaning and motivated by value. Such meanings and values are not one but many, and not static but evolving. The world into which God enters, first through the words of the prophets and then through the Word that is the Son, is dynamic and pluricultural.

*1.3 The faith is to be preached and incarnated in all the cultures of the world*

Nevertheless, the kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture, and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human culture or cultures. Though independent of cultures, the Gospel and evangelization are not necessarily incompatible with them; rather they are capable of permeating them all without becoming subject to any one of them. (EN 20)

The individual Churches, intimately built up not only of people but also of aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world, which distinguish this or that human gathering, have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into the language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language. (EN 63)

**2. Interculturality**

In contrast to inculturation, interculturality is a term that has recently entered the documents of the congregation. The more familiar terms to many of us will be multiculturality and pluriculturality. All these terms, being new, have meanings that are fluid. As far as our Salesian documents are concerned, multiculturality seems to be a descriptive term, referring to the fact of the diversity and plurality of cultures within a given situation. As for interculturality, it is often used for studies of different cultures in relation (e.g. in transcultural psychology), highlighting the differences and the dynamics of encounter.[[2]](#footnote-2) In our documents, it would seem to include a positive appraisal of multiculturality, seeing in it a gift, an opportunity and a task, in the context of faith in the triune God who calls to a communion that does not destroy difference. Thus, for example, in his letter on the inculturation of the Salesian charism Fr Pascual Chavez says:

In the Congregation, as in the Church… we will have to take seriously the challenge to promote and pass on “a living culture, a culture capable of fostering communication and brotherhood between different groups and peoples, and between the different fields of human creativity. Today’s world is challenging us, in other words, to know and respect one another in and through the diversity of our cultures.” Through our apostolic presences, and first of all within our religious communities, becoming more and more pluricultural, we are being called to live and to bear witness to a communion in which “solitude is overcome through concern for one another, in which communication inspires in everyone a sense of shared responsibility, and in which wounds are healed through forgiveness… The nature of the charism in communities of this kind directs their energies, sustains their fidelity and directs the apostolic work of all towards the one mission. If the Church is to reveal her true face to today's world, she urgently needs such fraternal communities, which, by their very existence, contribute to the new evangelisation, inasmuch as they disclose in a concrete way the fruitfulness of the "new commandment".[[3]](#footnote-3)

Fr Angel Fernandez Artime is explicit on the point: “cultural diversity, a multicultural and intercultural situation are a treasure towards which we have to move in this sessennium.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Echoing Pope Francis, he notes that the Salesian charism is not ‘monochromatic,’ and that we need to ensure this dimension by exchanging confreres between provinces, learning languages, and encouraging confreres to study outside their province.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**3. Principles of inculturation and interculturality[[6]](#footnote-6)**

*3.1 The mission of the Spirit*

John Paul II described inculturation as cooperation with grace in facing cultural diversity: “The challenge of inculturation ought to be taken up by consecrated persons as a call to fruitful cooperation with grace in facing cultural diversity.” [VC 79] Francis observes that whenever a community receives the message of salvation, “the Holy Spirit enriches its culture with the transforming power of the Gospel.” (EG 116)

When properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity. The Holy Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, transforms our hearts and enables us to enter into the perfect communion of the blessed Trinity, where all things find their unity. He builds up the communion and harmony of the people of God. The same Spirit is that harmony, just as he is the bond of love between the Father and the Son. It is he who brings forth a rich variety of gifts, while at the same time creating a unity which is never uniformity but a multifaceted and inviting harmony. Evangelization joyfully acknowledges these varied treasures which the Holy Spirit pours out upon the Church. (EG 117)

Both inculturation and interculturality, then, are rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit.

*3.2 The mission of the Son*

If the Holy Spirit is the moving principle of inculturation, the Son, the Word made flesh, is the supreme model. We find in Jesus someone who is totally Hebrew and yet supremely open to everyone, though again to each in a different way: to the Roman conqueror and to Jewish zealots, Sadduccees and Herodians; to the Pharisees but also to publicans, tax collectors, and public sinners; to women, children, men. In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II speaks of many consecrated persons who, “supported by the charism of their founders and foundresses … have been able to approach cultures other than their own with the attitude of Jesus, who ‘emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’ (Phil 2:7).” (VC 79) Such inculturation, after the example of the Lord, calls for great detachment, even from one’s own culture:

A genuine inculturation requires attitudes similar to those of the Lord when he became man and walked among us in love and meekness. In this sense the consecrated life makes its members particularly well suited to face the complex work of inculturation, because it accustoms them to being detached from things, even from many features of their own culture. Applying themselves with these attitudes to the study and understanding of other cultures, consecrated persons can better discern the real values in them, and the best way to accept them and perfect them with the help of their own charism. (VC 79)

“[S]upported by the charism of their founders and foundresses”: the fact is that the mission of the Son is extended in space and time in the church, and shines forth in a particularly brilliant manner in certain members of the church. We can think here of the wonderful figure of the recently canonized apostle of Sri Lanka, José Vaz, and the way he went to the peripheries of his time, constructed cultural bridges, broke through barriers of caste, creed and community, and incarnated himself into the life of people. We can think of many people who are not yet canonized, figures like Christian de Chergé and his companions, who shine out in a particular way for their wonderful openness to the Islamic world without abandoning or compromising their Christian faith.[[7]](#footnote-7) We can think, naturally, of our own father and founder, Don Bosco.

Don Bosco is in many ways a man of his time, but his extraordinary capacity to love his poor boys, and to reach out to them in their particularity and singularity, is a heritage he has left to us his sons. The love that he left us as an example, and our own love for him is an important principle in the inculturation of the Salesian charism and for interculturality. This came home to me very strongly recently when I happened to meet a senior Salesian who was one of the key players during the Special General Chapter, and who told me that the great tensions between different tendencies in that chapter were overcome only because at a certain point the capitulars realized that they were united in their love for Don Bosco. In a simpler way, all of us have experienced the ‘inter’ of interculturality in our international communities, in our international meetings and chapters, in the wonderful sight of confreres from different nations working peacefully together in provincial and local councils, etc. We have all come across Salesians whose smile, unassuming approach, simplicity and family spirit reveal their own basic goodness, deep respect for the mystery of the Other, the charity that is able to recognize the Other as brother, as sister, as friend, and also, when necessary, bear burdens cheerfully. (Gal 6:2) When the gift of the Spirit that is the Salesian charism (Const. 1) meets hearts filled with faith, hope and charity, hearts full of the Spirit and attuned to the mystery of God, inculturation and interculturality happen.[[8]](#footnote-8)

**4. Implications for Theology**

We have been speaking about inculturation and interculturality, and now we ask about the implications of all this for a theology that takes its formative, pastoral, evangelizing functions seriously.

*The practical aim of theology.* I am well aware of the destructive potential of overly practical attitudes, and I am a votary of the adage that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. Still, all theory exists for the sake of life, and so we need to affirm clearly the ultimately practical nature of theology, and certainly of the theology that our young Salesians study as part of the formation process. Pope Francis reminds us that theologians “must always remember that the Church and theology exist to evangelize, and not be content with a desk-bound theology.” (EG 133) He goes on:

Universities are outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrated way. Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even in those countries and cities where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods. (EG 134)

*Context and situation as theological locus.* I would consider very important a sustained and ongoing contact with the context and situation within which the university operates, global as well as local. The global context would include cultural, religious, political and economic factors, but also what Pope Benedict XVI has called the ‘digital continent.’ The local context would include awareness of the reality of both students and professors, including the reality of oneself, as called to ongoing conversion, as hearing and accepting or refusing the call to conversion.

Not being satisfied merely with contact, theology would consider it important to bring to light this context and situation, to objectify or thematize it, so as to understand it in the light of the Word, so as to carry out its function of mediation, incarnation, contextualization, inculturation, so as to present itself to judgment and decision.

*The ability to listen and dialogue.* A living theology, a theology in contact with life, would call for skills of listening and dialogue. What Timothy Radcliffe says of pastoral care and of preaching is true also of such theology: “All pastoral care, all preaching, even in the global village, is essentially dialogical…. The Word was made flesh in Jesus’ conversations.” He goes on to add: “If Jesus was a man of conversation, it is because the Trinity is the eternal, living, equal, undominative conversation of God.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

Conversation always begins with *recognition*. Jesus recognizes people: Nathanael, Zacchaeus on the fig tree, Mary in the garden. He recognizes them because he knows them from within: he is the Word through whom all things were made. But if we share the life of God, then we too somehow recognize people from within. “Many people in the Church are wounded by our failure to grant that recognition,” says Radcliffe, and cites women, the poor, ethnic minorities, gay people, and even a street child from Peru: “‘Saben que existo, pero no me ven’: ‘They know that I exist, but they do not see me.’ They know that I exist as a statistic, as a menace, as a problem, but they do not see me.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This can happen in our communities: we could live together without really ‘seeing’ each other. It is a risk to be avoided in the ‘missions’: the risk of seeing the people to whom we are sent as ‘objects,’ and not really as people. A great principle of inculturation and interculturality, then, is recognition. “Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Deus caritas est*: ‘Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love for which they crave.’”[[11]](#footnote-11) And Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* speaks in the same way of the “mirada cercana”: “La Iglesia necesita la mirada cercana para contemplar, conmoverse y detenerse ante el otro cuantas veces sea necesario.” The church needs the look of love, it needs to contemplate the mystery of the Other, to stop before the Other, to be moved by the Other, the Other who is our burning bush, before whom we are called to take off our sandals. (EG 169)

What we have been saying here about people could well be applied to *cultures*: we run the risk of at best ignoring and at worst looking down upon the cultures of which people form a part. We need to be able to say to the Other, in all the glory of her cultural particularity: “How wonderful that you are!”

We have to admit here that conversation and dialogue involve a *reciprocity*, a mutuality that changes both sides. It is precisely in conversation that I move towards a proper sense of self-identity. “And this happens because my sense of who I am is in negotiation with other people’s understanding of my identity. ... Gentle conversation helps me towards a sense of identity that is a convergence between who I know myself to be and who I discover myself to be with the other. Friendship allows us both to discover who we are with each other. So a conversation is pastoral if through it the identities of both people are open to evolution and discovery.” Rowan Williams speaks of the open-ended discovery of identity in dialogue. Fred Lawrence speaks of the simultaneous lighting up of text and self: the coming to light of the text is at once the coming to light of the self.[[12]](#footnote-12) If mutual self-mediation within a culture is the normal process of growth, inculturation and interculturality will involve mutual self-mediation in the context of a plurality of cultures.

The ability to listen and dialogue is vital not only in contact with people and their cultural matrices, but also in the context of the classroom and, in general, in our contact with students. Prof. Giorgio Chiosso has described the Preventive System as “a pedagogy of personal freedom, one that relies on the force of interpersonal relationships, and that gives due value to the affective component.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Such a pedagogy is not less true and effective in the context of the classroom. Active, dialogical methods overcome the distance between masters and pupils and presuppose living relationships. And what Chiosso says about the gifted educator can well be applied also to the classroom: where the gifted teacher is able to translate the great principles of the faith in creative ways into everyday life, the run-of-the-mill one is constantly tempted to hide his own insecurity by means of a bland repetition of doctrine and morals.

But let me wind to a conclusion.

*First*, an intercultural theology demands a certain set of attitudes and skills. Among the attitudes: the acceptance of the fact of multiculturality and of the value of interculturality, and a profound respect for diversity and difference. Among the skills: the ability to listen, engage in dialogue and conversation, pay attention to one’s own inner processes in order to be attuned to those of the other, the ability to thematize these processes. Such skills would be important not only in the area of study and research (which today necessarily involves teamwork), but also in the classroom and in other interaction with students. They are, in fact, fundamental to the process of theologizing.

*Second*, an intercultural theology would demand a holistic and intercultural preparation of professors. A holistic preparation would mean one that is not purely academic, one that develops the affective, moral, spiritual dimensions of the person, one that enables him to listen, ‘recognize,’ engage in conversation. For “How can a man take care of the household of God if he cannot take care of his own household?” (1 Tim 3:5) An intercultural preparation would imply a healthy contact, along the arc of one’s formation, with at least one other culture. “Until a man acquires some knowledge of another culture, he cannot be said to be educated, since his whole outlook is so conditioned by his own social environment that he does not realize its limitations.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Fr Angel Fernandez has, in fact, extended to all young Salesians a vigorous call to the learning of languages, without neglecting the Italian language, “so that with the passing of time access to the sources and the original writings of our Founder and of the Congregation does not become something almost impossible through ignorance of the language.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

*Third*, we might ask about the *syllabus*: does it reflect the fact that we belong to a multicultural church and congregation? Whatever be our evaluation of different trends and tendencies in contemporary theology, is it right to exclude them completely from the horizon of our students? A university level institution would need to be aware of the subaltern theologies emerging in Asia, America and Africa; of interreligious dialogue and the cultures, histories and religions of the world. Then again, are the so-called pastoral courses considered an important and integral part of theological formation?[[16]](#footnote-16) One of the most useful courses in my own years of theology was a practical one on counselling. The same could be said about courses on homiletics, spiritual accompaniment, group processes and leadership, when done well.

*Fourth*, we could ask about the possibility of integrating reflection on pastoral experience into the process of theologizing.

*Fifth*, there are the great tasks of inculturation of the faith and of the charism. These are, of course, large topics, but I will content myself with the appeal made by Fr Chavez in his letter on inculturation:

It is absolutely necessary to know the preventive system well if we are to develop its great potential, modernise its applications, re-interpret its great basic ideas (the greater glory of God and the salvation of souls; a living faith, a firm hope, theological-pastoral charity; the good Christian and the upright citizen; cheerfulness, study and piety; health, study and holiness; piety, morality, culture; evangelisation and civilisation), the great methodological guidelines (making oneself loved before making oneself feared; reason, religion, loving kindness; father, brother, friend; friendliness especially in recreation; winning over the heart; plenty of freedom to jump, run, shout at will). All of this for the formation of new young people capable of changing this world.

I feel I really must say that the preventive system is an essential element of our charism, which needs to be known, updated according to philosophical, anthropological, theological, scientific, historical and pedagogical developments, and that its inculturation in the varied contexts – economic, social, political, cultural and religious in which those we work for are living is indispensible, if we really want to be faithful to Don Bosco and to inculturate his charism. I would dare to say that this is one of the most urgent tasks facing the Congregation.[[17]](#footnote-17)

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1. EN 20; EG 115, 116. For the distinction between classicist and empirical notions of culture, see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Comunque intercultura è un termine usato più sovente per gli studi che mettono in relazione le diverse culture (per esempio nella psicologia transculturale), e ne rilevano le differenze e le dinamiche di confronto. Mentre la multicultura si riferisce ad uno stato di fatto delle diverse culture, più dal punto di vista descrittivo.” (Giuseppe Crea, email to me of 9 Jan 2015). See Giuseppe Crea, *Vivere la comunione nelle comunità multietniche. Tracce di psicologia transculturale* (EDB, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pascual Chavez Villanueva, “Inculturation of the Salesian Charism,” *Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco*, no. 411 (2011). The first citation is from John Paul II, *Address to the Representatives of the World of Culture and Science,* (Tbilisi, Georgia, 9 Novembre 1999). The second is from *Vita Consecrata* 45, with reference also to Benedict XVI, *Homily on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi* (23 June 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Angel Fernandez Artime, “Belonging More to God, more to the confreres, more to the Young,” *Acts of the General Council of the Salesian Society of St John Bosco*, Year XCV, no. 419 (Sep-Dec 2014) 22; see also 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Fernandez Artime, “Belonging More to God, More to the Confreres, More to the Young,” AGC 419:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It should become obvious from what I am saying that the ‘principles’ I am referring to are principles in the root meaning of the term: they are the sources, the first, that from which we come; they are the persons of the Trinity. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: A Theology of Hope* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press / Cistercian Publications, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I thank Silvio Roggia, SDB for this reflection. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Timothy Radcliffe, “Pastoral Care in the Global Village,” *Pastoral Ministry for Today: ‘Who Do You Say That I Am?’ Conference Papers 2008*, ed. Thomas G. Grenham (Dublin: Veritas, 2009) 25-36. Thanks once again to Silvio Roggia for bringing this wonderful article to my notice. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Radcliffe. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Radcliffe. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Frederick G. Lawrence, “Critical Realism and the Hermeneutical Revolution,” Paper at the Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, 1990 (unpublished) 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Giorgio Chiosso, “Problemi aperti e prospettive del Congresso,” Congresso Storico Internazionale: Bicentenario della nascita di don Bosco, sul tema “Sviluppo del carismo di Don Bosco fino alla metà del secolo XX,” Roma, Salesianum, 19-23 novembre 2014. Unpublished. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961) 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Fernandez Artime, “Belonging More to God, more to the confreres, more to the Young,” AGC 419:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Lonergan, *Method in Theology* ch. 14 for an important proposal in this regard. The ‘pastoral courses’ are not the whole of what the functional specialty ‘communications’ might cover, but they are by no means to be excluded from a holistic conception of theology. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Chavez Villanueva, “Inculturation of the Salesian Charism,” AGC 411. Fr Chavez made the same point more extensively in a little known lecture of 2006: see Pascual Chavez Villanueva, “Don Bosco’s Educational System Today,” *Divyadaan: Journal of Philosophy and Education* **21**/1 (2010) 1-18. [Original: Pascual Chávez. “Cristianità e prevenzione,” *L’educatore, oggi: tratti per un profilo di san Giovanni Bosco: Seminario di studio. Salone degli Affreschi – Palazzo Ateneo, Bari, 26 aprile 2006*, ed. Cosimo Laneve, Università degli Studi di Bari, Quaderni di Ateneo 11. ([Bari]: Servizio Editoriale Universitario, 2007) 11-28.] Recently, Fr Chavez delivered the same lecture, this time in English, at the Studium Theologicum Salesianum, Jerusalem. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)