

# Local Church, the Community in Mission: Physiognomy of an Inculturated Community

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The title assigned is quite a mouthful – and not only that – it is also a challenge to bring these various elements together: local church, community in mission, and the physiognomy of an inculturated community. I have taken this latter expression to mean: the features of inculturation in a PNG church community. All this will be considered in the context of the papal exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, with reference also to *Novo Millennio Ineunte*.

## **Inculturation in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania***

No. 16 of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Oceania*, under the sub-heading “The Gospel and Culture” explicitly addresses the issue of “inculturation.” The position in the document does little to indicate the importance given to it by the bishops at the Synod. In fact, at the Synod, after the topic of the “Unique contribution of Oceania,” “Inculturation” was the subject of the second of the fifty propositions approved and given to the Pope. The proposition noted both modern “Western” values such as promotion of the dignity of the person, and the ecological movement; and values from indigenous cultures such as a sense of the sacred, of joy, of community, of sharing, and of communal ownership.

In no. 16, the Exhortation uses expressions like “Inculturation is born out of respect for both the Gospel and the culture in which it is proclaimed,” “The word made flesh is foreign to no culture,” “In each culture the Christian faith will be lived in a unique way,” and, “the Church ... must respect

each culture and never ask the people to renounce it.” Such ideals are laudable and possibly thought provoking. Implementation in practice, in today’s changing world is another issue, hardly addressed.

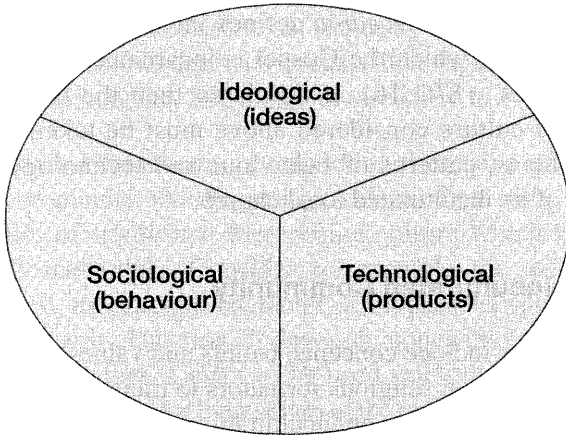
References relevant to inculturation are not limited just to no. 16, but occur throughout the document. For example we also read how “it is the Church’s task to help indigenous cultures preserve their identity and maintain their traditions (*EIO* 28), and about the importance in the liturgy of the appropriate use of symbols drawn from the local cultures so as to avert the cultural alienation of indigenous people (*EIO* 39). The Pope says that the Church in Oceania needs to study more thoroughly the traditional religions of the indigenous populations, in order to enter more effectively into the dialogue which Christian proclamation requires.”

Thus, the papal exhortation provides a helpful basis for consideration of inculturation in the community called Church. It also acknowledges the so-called “double aspect” of inculturation whereby the Gospel challenges cultures and requires that some values and forms are transformed or purified, while at the same time culture offers positive values and forms that enrich and modify our understanding of the Gospel. This requires a “dialogue” which involves both Gospel and cultural values. The document puts it in terms of “identifying what is and what is not of Christ.” Pope John Paul II notes how the Synod Fathers, “recognised that the many cultures each in different ways provide insights which help the Church to understand better and express the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (*EIO* 17).

## **Culture and Inculturation**

Sometimes in the PNG press one sees pictures of people wearing traditional decorations and a comment about “pre-

serving our culture.” The culture I refer to is not something that one would “preserve” at the Mt Hagen Cultural Show or in a museum. Rather, it is something alive and changing today. A definition of culture from an anthropological perspective is: “The integrated system of learned patterns of, ideas, behaviour, and products characteristic of a society.



Ideas include shared concepts by which people carve up their worlds, beliefs by which they organise these concepts into rational schemes, and values by which they set their goals and judge their actions. Thus culture helps provide people with an explanation of reality. The Melanesian worldview may be quite different from that of the average Australian, or Filipino.

Patterns of behaviour include ways of relating and doing things. Every culture has expectations about what behaviour is expected and tolerated and what is not, for example: styles of dress, ways of greeting, and conduct between women and men. French sociologist Emile Durkheim found that even an antisocial act such as suicide is culturally patterned.

Human thought and behaviour often lead to the production of material goods. As knowledge develops, human technology tends to become increasingly complex. Nine thousand years ago people in the PNG highlands at a place now called Kuk, in the Wahgi Valley were leaders in the world in developing drainage ditches for agricultural technology. Why did they not continue to be at the forefront of technological development?

*Ecclesia in Oceania* defines inculturation as “the gradual way in which the Gospel is incarnated in the various cultures” (*EIO* 16). If this is so then the three dimensions of culture considered above must be taken into account. Ideas, patterns of behaviour and technology are all part of an inculturated local church.

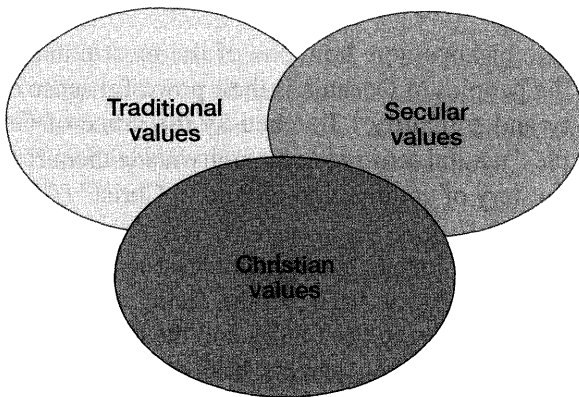
## **Ideas in an Inculturated Community**

Ideas include concepts, beliefs and values. Recently I asked a group of religious formators to translate into Pidgin a two page document on inculturation and Religious Life from the Federation of Religious in PNG. Many struggled to find Pidgin expressions suitable for translating parts of the document. How does one talk about evangelical poverty? The term, “*stap rabis*” that one hears in some vows formulas was recognized as being inadequate. But what is the alternative? In a place like PNG where material poverty is seen as a sign of one being out of favour with God, are we dealing with a maze of foreign categories? People who are monolingual may well be more prejudiced in their understanding of culture as they have only one reference point for naming realities and experiences. One winged birds cannot fly across cultural boundaries.

Beliefs too will be a distinctive part of an inculturated community. In the Highlands when people die, some people are accused of causing the death and are then tortured and killed as

*sanguma* or “witches”. In order to develop pastoral solutions in this situation we at the Melanesian Institute have an on-going study about witchcraft and sorcery. At one time we were referring to the “victims” of *sanguma*. The expatriates were referring to the people, mostly older women, who had been accused of witchcraft and killed. However, we found that the nationals on our team were thinking of the “victims” as those who had died in the first place as a result of *sanguma*. Obviously there were different beliefs about the reality of *sanguma* in our group. How does one deal with an issue like *sanguma* in a local Christian community in Chimbu or elsewhere in PNG?

Shared values are an important dimension of any healthy community. On the positive side we find many characteristics of traditional Melanesian culture which fit well with Gospel values. Consider, for example, the sense of the sacred, the integral character of indigenous spiritualities and the spirit of sharing. Today cash money may modify some of these values. Cash can be used selfishly by individuals to make money for themselves at the expense of the community.



Garry Trompf (1986) claims that there are three sets of values affecting the destiny of PNG: traditional, Christian and secular values. He points out how traditional societies survived through the development of “military” values: Revenge on the foe was a virtue. Trompf claims that pacification through colonial and missionary interventions

has radically affected those military values and adds that now people use neo-traditional ways of sorcery to protect and to harm. Trompf notes that most traditional values are influenced by Christian values in Melanesia today. He points out that perhaps the “noble traditions” referred to in the Preamble to the PNG Constitution are really only “noble” because they have already become indistinguishable from Christianity as Melanesians express it. The interplay of traditional, Christian, and Secular values results in what Trompf calls a “moral muddle” in PNG today. Finding a way through this muddle is certainly a challenge for an inculturated Christian community.

## **Patterns of Behaviour in an Inculturated Community**

From various possibilities, the bishops at the Synod for Oceania chose the church as *communio* as their model for the Christian community (*EIO* 10ff). Christians are called to live in communities in which their ordinary human relationships are healed and enriched by a common commitment to Christ and the Gospel. This communion does not refer simply to friendly relations between people in a sociological sense, but rather the bonds of brotherly and sisterly love that rest upon a deeper spiritual communion of charity with its source in God’s grace.

The bishops note how one of the most notable features of the peoples of Oceania is their powerful sense of community and solidarity. “Touched by the grace of God, the peoples’ natural sense of community made them receptive to the mystery of communion offered in Christ” (*EIO* 7).

The inculturated church promotes a sense of community and the communion between the living and dead. It complements loyalty to the family and the desire for children who will care for their parents in their old age and pass on the family heritage to future generations. The Church tries to promote these values, but at the same time tries to perfect them by discouraging tribalism and the “wantok” system in so far as it fosters injustice and corruption. The family is not

a healthy one when it is indifferent to those around them. Nor should a woman be judged by her ability to bear children. Thus the value of community is supported by the Church, but not when that value is absolutised thus becoming a disvalue.

The recent General Assembly of the Catholic Church in PNG provides a good example of *communio* in action in the local church. A General Assembly Preparatory Committee (all Papua New Guineans except 2) was formed, and in January 2003, representatives from the 18 dioceses in PNG gathered at Good Shepherd Seminary near Banz. The process was marked by dialogue, participation and consultation. After the gathering the discussion continued in most of the dioceses from community through to the diocesan level. Then eighteen months later, in July 2004 representatives from 19 dioceses (the diocese of Kimbe had been formed in the meantime), along with hundreds of pilgrims, met for a week at Vunapope near Rabaul. Melanesian hospitality was very much in evidence. Again, it was an experience of the local church with co-chairs being Mr Bernard Narakobi, former Speaker of the PNG House of Parliament, and Sr. Antoinette OLSH. The formulation committee composed only of nationals developed a vision, mission and pastoral priorities for the Catholic Church in PNG. The Vision is: "We are church, alive in Christ."

Two words from the vision are particularly significant for an inculturated church in PNG. Firstly the vision starts with the term "we." Papua New Guineans generally would not identify with the Cartesian, *Cogito ergo sum*. Rather, they would say, "We are in a life-giving reciprocal relationship, therefore we are." The modern Western concept of person results in a pronounced sense of individuality. However, the Papua New Guinean approach tends to see people more as *social individuals*. This social dimension does not imply any

weakening of the sense of self. Particularly in the Highlands, modesty (in terms of being unassuming or retiring) is not evident as a virtue. Often the respected and successful are those who are most loud in their own praise. The closely knit fabric of traditional Melanesian society does not hinder independence of character. Rather it fosters it – but it is a character that is fundamentally *sociocentric* rather than individualistic.

Secondly, the vision refers to “life” which is the ultimate value for Papua New Guineans. In traditional society and today relationships, exchange, and community were not ends in themselves but were all directed towards the value of life for the community and individuals within it. Inculturation also is not an end in itself, but rather a means to a more genuine and vital local church community. A sign of a truly inculturated community will be the life evident in the community.

It is obvious in PNG today that the churches that are growing quickly tend to have what could be termed a charismatic approach. From a Melanesian perspective charismatic phenomena are signs of life. In some churches prophecy is an everyday reality, and exorcism, faith-healing and dream-visions are commonplace. In PNG, despite modernisation, most people are open to “signs and wonders.” They find similarities between their world and the world of the Bible. Thus there is great interest in manifestations of the miraculous through the power of the Spirit, especially in healing and deliverance ministries. When they experience God’s presence in their lives people have a sense of liberation from fear and fate. Theirs is not a God of the poor, so much as a Saviour whose Spirit can overpower forces of evil both spiritual and social. This is life experience as *gutpela sindaun* both now and as a sign of life in its fullness promised by Jesus (Jn 10.10). Such signs of life will be part of an inculturated community in PNG.



## Technology in an Inculturated Community

*Novo Millennio Ineunte* no. 40 refers explicitly to the theme of inculturation: “In the Third Millennium Christianity will have to respond ever more effectively to this need for inculturation. Christianity, while remaining completely true to itself, with unswerving fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel and the tradition of the Church, will also reflect the different faces of the cultures and peoples in which it is received and takes root. In this Jubilee year, we have rejoiced in a special way in the beauty of the Church’s varied face. This is perhaps only a beginning, a barely sketched image of the future which the Spirit of God is preparing for us.”

What is the varied image of the Church in PNG today? Church institutions take pride in trying to provide the best in terms of education and health facilities. This is laudable and yet there is also the danger of presenting a “foreign” image – a Westernised church still maintained by expatriate missionaries. To what extent does our need for security cause us to live lives separated from the common people who we minister to? To what extent will the enculturated community rely on local means of transport, locally available funds for maintenance and volunteer labour. Recently I have been conducting interviews with pastors of many of the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches and I have been struck by the way the majority of these churches are debt free, being built through the tithes and offerings of the congregations. Some of these churches will support a pastor for one year after graduation from Bible School. After that the pastor must rely totally on the resources of the local Christian community. What would be the response if such a policy would be applied in Catholic dioceses?

Aside from the image of the Church, what of the image of Christ? Hopefully in its pastoral ministry the Church con-

veys an image of Christ as merciful and compassionate. What of our graphic images in Church art or the artwork in our publications? It appears that most people are not attracted to the carved so-called “Sepik crosses”. What alternatives are there? Are the only alternatives plastic reproductions of European and Philippines art forms? Surely the inculturated Christian community will develop its own forms of graphic art. One could say the same for music.

## Dialogue with Cosmic Religion

According to the 2000 census, PNG is 96% Christian. Why have people so readily exchange their traditional religion for the religion brought by the missionaries? The simple answer is that they don't. Aloysius Pieris explains the situation in what he calls the “helicopter theory of religious expansion” (Pieris 1996:66). Pieris says that “cosmic” religions – which is another name for traditional or primal religions – are concerned with sacred, womanly, earthly matters. They represent the basic posture that *homo religiosus* adopts towards the mysteries of life (Pieris 1988:7). Metacosmic religions--concerned with transcendent other-worldly realities--act like helicopters, while the cosmic religions serve as natural landing pads. Their encounter is one of mutual fulfillment as they are complementary. Thus, according to Pieris, there is no need for a radical conversion from one to the other.

Pieris' theory helps explain why Thailand is Buddhist and the Philippines Christian. When it comes to metacosmic religions like Buddhism or Christianity arriving at a cosmic landing pad it is “first come, first served.” Once a helicopter has landed another cannot land on the same pad. Thus mass conversions from one metacosmic religion to the other are improbable. Christian breakthroughs have come in places where cosmic spirituality prevails, PNG being one of them.

All humanity New heaven and earth Salvation Grace Love	CHRIST	Metacosmic Religion (Christianity)
Community Religion integrated with whole of life. "Gutpela sindaun" Reciprocity Life		Cosmic Religion (Melanesian Traditional Religion)



Donal Dorr makes a similar claim, that primal religions are quite different from historical religions such as Islam or Judaism and are, in fact, “the source from which all historical religions spring and the place from which they draw sustenance” (Dorr 2000: 43). The implication from what Pieris and Dorr are saying is that people do not have to give away their traditional religion in becoming Christian, and in fact they cannot, since cosmic spirituality is part of the deep underlying religious dimension of the human spirit. If this is so, then dialogue between these two forms of religion is essential. A genuine inculturated Melanesian Christianity will emerge from this dialogue.

### A Mission Community

At the Synod, Bishop Gilles Côté, SMM of Daru-Kiunga, PNG, argued for the importance of building Church upon the strengths of culture: “The only way to build the Church, Mystery of Communion, in our Melanesian Society, is to build it with the participation of all, making sure that the key values of the culture become somehow the key values of our process of evangelisation... Our efforts and our methods used for evangelisation need to make it possible for the Catholic faith to immerse itself in our Melanesian culture

and to be re-expressed according to the legitimate forms of that culture. Will the Institutional Church allow Jesus to walk the way of the people of Melanesia, just like he did in Palestine, challenging the truth of their own religious experiences, purifying and enriching their lives, not from outside or from the top, but from within?"<sup>25</sup>

Bishop Côté's sentiments are reminiscent of the words of Pope Paul VI (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975) – "What matters is to evangelise 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." (*EN* 20)

I believe that this is where Church in PNG must start in its interpretation of the Gospel: with the person as starting point and the relationships of people among themselves and with God! It is not a matter of magnificent new programmes to establish Ecclesial Communities from the top down, but rather to appreciate what we have. The primary agent of inculturation must be the living community and attempts to impose change from above will most likely result in superficial forms of cultural expression which do not come from the heart. Inculturation will occur when the agents of inculturation get involved in people's struggles and hopes. This means beginning with the communities themselves, encouraging them in a continuing process of conversion as they look at their own experience in the light of the Gospel (Gibbs 1999b).

*Ecclesia in Oceania* mentions Blessed Mary Mackillop,

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<sup>25</sup> Quotation from type-written manuscript by Bp. Côté.

saying that “her holiness was as Australian as she was Australian” (no. 6). A similar ideal confronts Christians in PNG – We have Blessed Peter To Rot. The challenge in PNG is for our holiness to be as Melanesian as he was Melanesian. In discovering this Melanesian form of holiness we will be fulfilling our mission because the universal church is waiting for and in need of the witness of a truly inculturated church community in Papua New Guinea.

## References:

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## Questions & Clarifications

Q: “*We*” mentality seems not to be the case because of the emphasis on the “*mi*” in Melanesia. (Fr. Ziggy). *Could not Seminarians help in the process of inculturation?*

A: Communal values are still important for the people of Melanesia. Marriage is still influenced by the family or by the community. There is much egoism and selfishness but communal values are so much more at work.

Rather than the seminarians, people from the village are better agents of inculturation. Seminarians have been separated from their communities for a long time and they lack confidence in this aspect of inculturation.

*Q: Can missionaries can be counter-cultural ? (Fr. Albert)*

A: "Noble traditions" as written in the Constitutions of PNG are interpreted now through Christian perspectives. The real work of purifying culture will come from the Papua New Guineans themselves. This will entail some problems and difficulties but will be more enriching.

*Q: Ideas, technologies and behaviour are interrelated. Modern technology is changing ideas and behaviour patterns. In this context, how can we still talk about traditional culture? (Fr. Alencherry)*

A: Contextualisation is an important element of inculturation. The Catholic Church can still give more emphasis on music ministry. Unfortunately Catholic homilies tend to be boring. Contextualisation is better done in dialogue with the local people.

*Q: Why has the Catholic Church not been able to indigenise the clergy with much success? (Fr. Alencherry)*

A: The present seminary system seems inadequate. It can be done with more involvement of the local Christian communities and the contribution of both male and female formators. One example is Marianville High School. Though a model exemplary Catholic secondary school for girls, it has not had a single candidate to the religious life. This is something that should make us think. Another factor affecting the recruitment of priestly candidates is the witness of local priests in their parishes.

*Q: The Church in PNG has been very accommodating and perhaps quite timid to confront and purify some practices against Christian values. (Fr. Alex Garces)*

A: In schools rules can be easily enforced. But not all human problems, for example those relating to marriage and sexuality, can be solved through recourse to law. A pastoral solution may be more appropriate. "Go and sin no more" should be our model.