

**FAITH AND CULTURAL VALUES:
INTEGRATION IN THE CONSECRATED LIFE**

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ABSTRACT

The necessity and beauty of inculturation can never be overemphasized as it appears to pose a challenge on the essentials and the values of our root and on the significance and impact of our mission. Culture as a way of life brings out a practical aspect of our Christian life. In this paper, we shall see how integrally our cultural values cannot be exempted from our Christian values. More so, the role of Consecrated persons in integrating authentic cultural values into every aspect of their witnessing to the Gospel values.

*To this end, this paper will reflect the meaning of the word ‘Culture’. It will also consider the integral understanding on how it primarily appears as an awareness on our own identity despite its diversity. It will also reflect the meaning of **Consecrated life**; and how through the beauty of our diverse cultures, our Gospel witnessing will be in the limelight while not compromising our Christian faith. However, the role of Consecrated persons in achieving the aforementioned through self witnessing is highly important. Based on this, it will correlate culture with our mission as Consecrated men and women and with our community life.*

“Faith that does not become culture is not wholly embraced, fully thought, or faithfully lived.” (John Paul II)

“The consecrated life itself is the bearer of Gospel values and, where it is authentically lived; it can make an innovative contribution in meeting the challenges of inculturation.” (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, n.80).

INTRODUCTION

The first Special Synod of Bishops on Africa in 1994, in its Proposition 3, noted the dichotomy between certain African practices and the Faith. Confirming African Bishops, Pope John Paul II’s post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), seeks to overcome this dichotomy by recommending inculturation, in order to advance an in-depth and deep-rooted evangelization. Pope Benedict XVI in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, in paragraph 38, stated that the Church’s initiatives for the positive appreciation, and safeguarding of African cultures are well known and should be continued; it asks the Church to emphasize and be committed to the transmission of positive African cultural values. In relation to the two preceding Apostolic Exhortations, the theme of culture is very relevant to Consecrated life in our contemporary time. Today, we find ourselves in a culturally pluralistic world, but not undermining the fact that our culture plays a very important role in bringing home our various Charisms, we are expected to live out the values of our various cultures in spirit and purpose of our Founders. More so, in our Gospel witnessing, we are not so much concerned with our diverse ethnicity but on how through the beauty of our diversity, the Gospel message can penetrate the hearts of all to whom we witness in our mission.

Inculturation, therefore, goes a long way to show how authentically we can incarnate the Consecrated life in the world since by our calling as Consecrated persons, we are already

incarnating the Gospel into a particular way of life. Our life ought to portray putting things in perspective and showing the relevance of inculturation. For no doubt, it consists of taking cultures seriously, one's own as well as those of others. We must also know how to discern and assess these cultures honestly and critically, beginning with one's own. Our own culture is not the standard for other cultures. For the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, says that 'the positive values in African cultures are endowed by God'.

In the same vein, this paper will point out several significant ways of inculturating the Gospel values, regarding some important areas of Consecrated Life. The focal points in this paper will be the meaning and understanding of culture, the meaning of Consecrated life, and who are Consecrated persons as well as their role in bringing to limelight the incarnation of our culture in their Gospel witnessing.

CULTURE: OUR WAY OF LIFE

The word *culture*, evidently, has various definitions as it relates to the subject matter. Here we shall mention but a few of them. "Culture is our way of life. It is the behaviours, beliefs and characteristics of a particular social, ethnical age group. It also can be said to be the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted by members of the group. It is the sum of attitudes, customs and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, rituals, institutions and arts from one generation to the next."²

WHAT IS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF 'CULTURE'

Given the various definitions of culture, and what it entails, it is better to review it as it relates to our subject matter. With this, we can say from a well understood form that:

Culture defines the social forces within a community involving its conventions for behaviour, ranging from food preparation techniques, to forms of entertainment that keep the community together like music or dancing, to dating rituals, and so on.³ Culture develops through human interaction and is created and maintained via human communication.⁴ Culture is everything that people have, do, and think as members of the society⁵. In addition, it is perceived as an "organized system of meanings which members of that culture attribute to the persons and objects which make the culture".⁶ "Culture is an emerging phenomenon evolving out of shared cognitions that themselves arrive out of individual interactions with both the social and physical environment"⁷. According to Gaudium et Spes, culture refers to all those things which go to the refining and development of man's diverse mental and physical endowments.⁸

Culture, though often fragmented by the process of colonization, is the primary reference point for the construction of black and indigenous identity. In these cases, the category of identity does not simply indicate a function or a role but rather a process of construction of meaning that is based on a cultural attribute or, even more, based on a group of attributes that are interrelated and which prevail over other sources of meaning.⁹

WHO ARE CONSECRATED PERSONS?

Meaning of consecrated life

"Life Consecrated through profession of the evangelical Counsels is a stable form of living in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God who is supremely loved. By a new and special title, they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God's kingdom, for the honour

of God, the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory. By vows or other sacred bonds, in accordance with the laws of their institutes, they profess the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience".¹⁰ The Consecrated life is a life of 'love'. It is a call to love in its entirety.

Religious are men and women consecrated to God, who, by being in union with the divine, nurture in them, through an on-going process of conversion and submission, their commitment to God's plans for themselves and for their fellow human beings. Through the life of their evangelical vows, they try to live the self-giving of Jesus to the Father, for the salvation of the world. God is the focus of who they are, and who they wish to be and what they wish to do. Their foremost desire is to reflect God in their life, through words, action and inter-relationships. They give preference to a God-perspective through all their activities in the world. As a result, their religious life confirms what is good, and challenges whatever is evil in the society. Through their works of charity and justice, they sow the seeds of God's kingdom. By being in union with God they are called to reincarnate God in the hearts of people, through their cultural and social milieu, thus helping them recognise and experience, the life-giving presence of God in their midst.¹¹

WHAT IS INCULTURATION?

Inculturation is the term that Catholic church and theologians have used in recent decades to denote a process of engagement between the Christian Gospel and a particular culture. The usage of the term is intended conceptually both to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and to encourage appreciation and sensitivity to various cultural contexts.

"Inculturation was seen by the African Bishops from the perspective of Incarnation, and not Adaptation. They saw that it was involved in the very process of God-becoming-man"¹² It includes two dimensions: "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures". It is an urgent priority in the life of the Church, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. It is "a requirement for evangelization, a path towards full evangelization".¹³ Inculturation includes 'the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelization, that is, theology, liturgy, the Church's life and structures'.¹⁴ Inculturation is a movement towards full evangelization. It seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit".¹⁵

Upon Pope St. John Paul II visit to Nigeria in March 1998, he called on the Nigerian church hierarchy to ensure that inculturation is given its proper place in evangelisation. He encouraged the Nigerian Bishops to do all they can – in the areas of liturgy, theology and administration -- "so that your people will feel more and more at home in the Church, and the Church more and more at home in your people."¹⁶ Just as "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn1; 14), so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaim to the nations, must take root in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word. Precisely, the insertion of the Gospel message into cultures, the incarnation of the Son of God, was complete and concrete because it was also an incarnation in a particular culture. Every culture needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the paschal mystery".¹⁷ Through inculturation, the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own

values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within.¹⁸

It is by looking at the Mystery of the Incarnation and of the Redemption that the values and counter-values of cultures are to be discerned. Just as the Word of God became like us in everything but sin, so too the inculturation of the Good News takes on all authentic human values, purifying them from sin and restoring to them their full meaning.¹⁹ Since it questions the Churches fidelity to the Gospel and Apostolic tradition amidst the constant evolution of culture, “the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is and a more effective instrument of mission”.²⁰ The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, it is indeed a difficult and delicate task which involves the Christian message and also the Church’s reflection and practice. But at the same time, it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith.

INCULTURATION OF CONSECRATED LIFE

In culturation as seen from the various angles of evangelisation, which entails incarnating the Gospel value into our culture and vice versa, has a resemblance in the Consecrated life which draws its relevance by incarnating the Gospel into a particular way of life. For to evangelize is to proclaim by word and witness of life the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified, died and risen, the Way, the Truth and the Life. “At the origins, we see the hand of God who, in His Spirit, calls certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the time with the eye of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church”.²¹

Therefore, as consecrated African persons chosen from diverse cultural background with the mandate of Christ to ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations’ (Mt 28:19), our active mission is to enhance the growth of the Church in Africa “since by Christ’s will, the Church is by her nature missionary, it follows that the Church in Africa is itself called to play an active role in God’s plan of salvation. For the Church in Africa is a missionary Church and a mission Church”²² and therefore as Consecrated persons and evangelizers, we must proclaim the hope of life rooted in the Paschal Mystery.

“The mystery of our Christian faith provides an outstanding incentive and encouragement to fulfil the role and discover the full sense of commitment by which human culture becomes important in man’s total vocation”.²³ The inculturation of consecrated life must “aim to provide Consecrated persons not only with technical expertise in passing on more clearly the content of the faith but also with a profound personal conviction enabling them to bear effective witness to it in daily life. Their call to proclaim the Gospel will therefore seek to act with total docility to the Spirit, who “today, just as at the beginning of the Church, acts in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and led by him”.²⁴

Inculturation refers to the “incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the cultures, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about “a new creation”²⁵: inculturation, consequently, calls consecrated persons to live a fully integrated life of the beautiful values of their culture in resemblance of the Christian values. “Faith, hope and charity must influence the actions of these true followers of Christ in every activity, situation and responsibility. Since “evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new”, Consecrated African persons must be formed to live the social implications of the Gospel in such a way that their witness will become a prophetic

challenge to whatever hinders the true good of the men and women of Africa and of every other continent”²⁶

Indeed, Christ took flesh in his people’s culture and therefore brings to each historical culture the gift of purification and fullness. All the central values and expressions that can be oriented to Christ foster what is genuinely human. The action of God, through his Spirit, is forever given to the interior elements of all cultures. Culture has reappeared with fundamental values of reference. Giving culture a value and making culture a way in which one is able to give witness to the original following of Jesus are practices that enable Consecrated persons to recover the universal spirit of the Gospel.²⁷ “Whenever there is a question of human life, nature and culture are intimately linked”²⁸ “The difference between the cultural and the natural in man is: “That which is cultural in a person, is that which varies from one group of peoples to another. What is natural in a person is that which is common to all peoples. The natural is universal; the cultural is what varies” “Culture is the expansion of human nature; “The more we delve into human nature, the more human nature blossoms, be it at the expense of a few sacrifices” . This assertion comes to affirm this Christian nature, this way/culture of the men and women who have chosen to follow Christ”.²⁹

However, we see how much Consecrated life as a culture, supposes a difference from the surrounding cultures. Christ's culture asks of us to love beyond limitations. This type of culture being the sign of a person who chooses to withdraw from the ways of the world, imposing on themselves to make war against nature, and becomes the source of the highest human values, calls the consecrated person to bear authentic witness to the redemptive love of Christ. “For without culture or holiness, which are always gift of a very few, a man may renounce wealth or any other external thing, but he cannot renounce self-indulgence. Culture is the sanctity of the intellect”.³⁰

Indeed, the mission of Christ in this world was to enhance a person's dignity, and as children of God, to give them the fullness of life, even at the cost of great sacrifice, that of the cross. By this salvation, Christ has elevated mankind to the highest level of vitality, thus has begun, the highest culture, eternal culture and divine culture. Men and women, who have chosen to consecrate their lives to God, ought to be in perpetual tension that is, striving toward higher values. In this world, where the atmosphere of culture is the unbridled searching for power, possessions and sexuality, the culture of Consecrated life, promotes service, solidarity and brotherhood. Religious culture in this context ought to be the beacon that attracts and points out continuously, the way of higher values and those of the true development of human beings.³¹

ROLE OF RELIGIOUS IN BRINGING OUR FAITH TO BECOME OUR CULTURE

‘Faith as we know is a supernatural gift of God which enables us to believe without doubt whatever God has revealed’.³² “Religion defines how the community members interpret their role in the universe, with this teaching based on the local culture, different religions rise out of different cultures. Similarly, when members of one religion convert members of a foreign culture often the resulting religion in that area is affected by the host culture”.³³ “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith”, because “a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived”. The Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops considered inculturation a priority and an urgent task in the life of Africa's particular Churches. Only in this way can the Gospel be firmly implanted in the Continent's Christian communities.”³⁴

Our understanding of Consecrated life, confines us to a general understanding of culture. By culture we mean, the social heritage — the institutions, customs, conventions, values, skills, arts, modes of living of a group of people, identifying themselves as members of a closely bound community, and sharing with each other, a deep-rooted affinity and loyalty. Culture is not static; its dynamism lies in the fact that, each generation, while learning from the past has to respond to the existential needs of their time. We speak of the culture of a particular community in the light of what could be observed, as a general pattern of thinking and living-out, of the majority of its people. Consecrated persons are called to deepen the contemplative dimension of their lives; to give substance, and a Gospel depth to an already existing understanding of the divine presence, healing and guidance.³⁵

"Our world, in which any trace of God seems to have been lost from sight, feels the urgent need of giving a strong prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons".³⁶ This is the link which attaches us to the material culture of a people, a culture which, without doubt, follows us everywhere. Consecrated life considered also in its cultural aspect, leads us to examine the methodology of transmission and of the integration of that culture, all the more, we have seen that culture does not have biological phenomena, but rather, learning.³⁷

Above all, it is necessary to remember that culture, like human being needs to be converted in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24) and that the passage from African values to those of the Consecrated life will always demand qualitative jump and should transcend the assumed values. 'Conversion implies a break with one's former cultural and religious practices, and also with one's former social ties. [Moreover], missionary practices were not merely a proclamation of God's saving love in Jesus Christ, but also simultaneously transmitted Western civilization as well as European worldviews, customs, lifestyle, organization and even dress, language and names'.³⁸

Seemingly, missionaries brought formal Western education, medical care and agricultural methods, to name but a few. In relation to cultural concerns, there is the importance of creating a shared cultural cognition, which could lead to cultural awareness and competence. In this view, the Catholic Church introduced inculturation so as to foster dialogue by listening to both Christian and African cultures and to engrain aspects of African culture in liturgical practices and in all other areas of Christianity

Examination of cultural elements that can be engrained in Consecrated life and practices is necessary. First, while the majority of indigenous institutes in Africa have retained the "Western" religious habit, some female institutes have adapted a dyed African-made fabric, and others wear simple dress. When temporary vowed religious are taking perpetual vows, some institutes integrate cultural rituals. These rituals especially in female institutes are conducted to incorporate and elevate a woman's role in the society to become a counsellor and a leader, so that others can confide in her. This practice can be an area for inculturation — for incorporation of Christian and African values practices — as it entwines Consecrated persons with their culture and communities. Most female Religious institutes assume roles in their communities as teachers, nurses, and social and pastoral care agents. In these roles, they continue their responsibility as enshrined and practiced by the African woman to be a counsellor, infuser of morals, healer, adviser and educator. Particularly, in these examples, religious women engrain elements of African identity in their practices, while remaining in harmony with the Church's teaching and in faithfulness to their religious consecration.³⁹

The Synod Fathers rightly affirmed that "a serious concern for a true and balance inculturation is necessary in order to avoid cultural confusion and alienation in our fast evolving society". Pope John Paul II posed a challenge during the African Synod, namely, to

look inward, our African cultures, and to reject a way of living which does not correspond to the best of our African traditions, and our Christian faith: “Today, I urge you to look inside yourselves. Look to the riches of your own traditions, look to the faith which we are celebrating in this assembly. Here you will find genuine freedom, here you will find Christ who will lead you to the truth”.⁴⁰

With these in mind, there are several approaches to this effect that Consecrated Persons can cultivate in order to bring about the actualization of this africanization⁴¹ or inculturation in Consecrated life.

INCULTURATED FORMATION

A fundamental responsibility is seen in the concern for vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated life. “It is necessary to discern them wisely, to provide competent directors and to oversee the quality of the formation offered. The fulfilment of the hope for the flowering of African missionary vocations depends on the attention given to the solution of this problem, a flowering that is required if the Gospel is to be proclaimed in every part of the continent and beyond”.⁴²

In order to bring about a well inculturated witnessing of the Gospel, the integration of cultural values ought to play a vital role in the initial formation of Consecrated women and men. An inculturated formation motivates the candidates to express their cultural values through liturgy and other moments of community life. It is necessary to allow the candidates to have an experience of the common Charism of the founders without setting aside their own cultural values. This will enable them to enrich the charism from their own experience. Many problems in formation occur because of a lack of sensitivity to important and particular elements of culture. Inculturated formation from the perspective of pluralism occurs in those formation environments where there is no predominance of one culture but a true diversity of cultures. In these cases, inculturated formation process is also necessary.

Sensitivity to the distinct cultures of the particular candidates is very important. In the first place, we must realize that just as the past formation in the tradition of Consecrated life was marked by discipline and uniformity of action, so now creativity and awareness of the cultural differences are necessary in an inculturated formation in multi-cultural environments. At times in the same community a ‘No’ spoken to one candidate has different connotations from the same ‘No’ that is said to another candidate. The reactions reveal different cultures. The inattentive formator is tempted to treat everyone in the same way, when in reality, the candidates are quite different. Experiences in the houses of formation, where there exists a diversity of cultures, show that the charism of the institute has a certain bonding function. It is in this environment that the individuals, though they maintain their differences, will find a common point of connection. An inculturated formation is a path with a double meaning; that is, it concerns the formation that is directed toward the candidates, but also involves their formation in the charism and the culture of the tradition that gives shape to the institute as a whole. It can be said that the charism forms a certain culture, that is, a certain way of being and acting that includes one’s own identity. In formation, basic human maturity must be attained before one goes to live and work in a different cultural milieu.⁴³

RECOGNITION OF OUR PLURALISM

There are several reasons why the issue of culture and inculturation are relevant today. “We live in a pluralistic world, and we are more sensitive than ever to differences due to ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and generations. The acceptance of pluralism makes

our way of thinking and acting difficult.” Even though we all recognize that we live in our one and only pluralistic world, that doesn’t mean that contradictions and conflicts will fade away.

“The Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances and has utilized the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful. The Church is faithful to its traditions and is at the same time conscious of its universal mission. It can then, enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves”.⁴⁴

History continues to weigh on cultures – for example colonialism still calls for concerted efforts to achieve reconciliation (and redemption from on high). Until this happens, the ghosts of inflexible and overarching notions of what culture is all about will continue to haunt us. As far as dominant cultures are concerned, there is need for profound conversion to overcome erroneously constructed dualisms that affirm: the West is better than the East, the North than the South and the masculine than the feminine. Likewise, disadvantaged cultures are tempted to overstate the gallantry of their own ethnicity and race. Contradictorily, this amounts to the poorest peoples sometimes depending unimagatively and unquestioningly on those who are rich.

In the Church, especially with regard to liturgy, we know that the reality of inculturation dates back as far as New Testament times.⁴⁵ The Second Vatican Council has reformed the liturgy and brought back the vernacular. “For this reason, the Church calls to mind that culture must be subordinated to the integral development of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole of mankind. Therefore, one must aim at encouraging the human spirit to develop its faculties of wonder, of understanding of contemplation, of forming personal judgment and cultivating a religious, moral and social sense. Culture, since it flows from man’s rational and social nature, has continual needs of rightful freedom of development and a legitimate possibility of autonomy according to its own principles. Quite rightly, it demands respect and enjoys certain inviolability, provided, of course, that the rights of the individual and the community, both particular and universal, are safeguarded within the limits of the common good”.⁴⁶

But today, in spite of radical changes in this world, it is plain to see that many of our shepherds waver when faced with what is required for inculturation. Many people are won over by fundamentalist groups that feature lively singing, preaching by members of the congregation, and healing rites as an integral part of their celebrations. In the consecrated life these days, the topic of culture is also a very important one. As mentioned already, we find ourselves in a culturally pluralistic world. Today, inculturation means incarnating the consecrated life in this world. There are many signs of vitality in this area, as well as a great readiness to dialogue with people of every culture. Some consecrated men and women, getting involved in oppressive and violent situations, where the yearning for freedom inherent in every human being is strongly opposed, have even suffered martyrdom. Cultural openness has resulted in profound demographic changes in institutes of the consecrated life. Often vocations come less from the countries where institutes were founded and more from cultures where they have inserted themselves. Culturally, many Orders and Congregations have now gone from having single centers to multiple ones. We should recognize that the consecrated life has some notable blind spots in the field of inculturation. When our style of life becomes secular and consumerist, when the media has an excessive influence on us, the tension between the Gospel and culture tends to weaken. We no longer inculturate the

message of Jesus, we are simply acculturated by our surroundings. The same lack of inculturation occurs when we don't live within our means and depend too much on economic resources from outside. Comforts can lessen our enthusiasm for launching new adventures in intercultural dialogue.⁴⁷

CULTIVATION OF THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The challenge of dialogue is fundamentally the challenge of transforming relationships between individuals, nations and peoples in religious, political, economic, social and cultural life. It is the challenge of Christ's love for all, a love that the disciple must reproduce in his own life: "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35)⁴⁸

"To follow the process of inculturation 'which entails, discernment, courage, dialogue, and the challenge of the Gospel', is a vital question for consecrated life and a proof of its authenticity" as it faces the future.⁴⁹ "In this way, all the individuals and social groups of a particular people will be able to attain a full development of their cultural life in harmony with their capabilities and their traditions. We must do everything possible to make all persons aware of their right to culture and their duty to develop themselves culturally and to help their fellows".⁵⁰

The Church in Africa is aware that it has to become for all, through the witness borne by its own sons and daughters, a place of true reconciliation. Forgiven and mutually reconciled, these sons and daughters will thus be able to bring to the world the forgiveness and reconciliation which Christ our peace (cf. Eph 2:14) offers to humanity through his Church. Otherwise, the world will look more and more like battlefield, where only selfish interests count and the law of force prevails, the law which fatally distances humanity from the hoped-for civilization of love.⁵¹

In view of the danger of ethnocentrism that dwells in each human being, it is necessary to affirm the dignity of every culture. At the same time, however, we must admit that not everything that we label *cultural* is automatically good. In any given culture there are subcultures of life and death. Therefore, we need to avoid justifying human weaknesses, denying the reality of the struggle between good and evil, and claiming that cultural issues are quite simple and uncomplicated. Inculturation requires new expressions and lots of room for freedom that many times does not exist and must be achieved. We also need a common language of convenience so we can communicate among the different cultures.

More so, we urgently need to learn the language of mutual understanding and find out more about what makes us similar rather than different. Today, it is essential to get in touch with other cultures. It can be beneficial to personally experience a powerful culture shock. To reach this point, however, people need first of all to be well-rooted in their own world. It is good to remember that people experience intercultural and interreligious dialogue very differently in different settings. It is not the same if we Christians are held in high regard or looked down upon, if we are a majority or a minority, if we enjoy extensive religious freedom or endure barely concealed persecution.

We must welcome the notion of putting things in perspective. The secret behind inculturation, no doubt consists of taking cultures seriously, one's own as well as those of other. But one must also know how to assess these cultures honestly, beginning with one's own. Our own culture is not the standard for other cultures. A learned man once said to a Priest on mission that 'wherever you go and whatsoever people you meet, and something seems strange to you there, consider that the only strange thing is you.' We need to put what

is ours in perspective and become very open to the culture to which we are sent. To do that, a whole mystical theology is needed. But we must not idealize the culture to which we are going. No culture can be the ultimate norm. This leads us to recognize that the Gospel is the only rule of thumb. It has a freshness we never realized it possessed. We must continue the dynamics of the Incarnation and Easter. Interplay among cultures makes us humble. It puts everything in perspective for us. It pulls the ground from under our feet and refers us to the only one who is absolute: God. More than that, it opens up the mystery of God for us. True inculturation makes us participants in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery. In our case, this means leaving behind our “heaven” where we felt secured and relaxed, then agreeing to become strangers, and, as far as we can, make ourselves similar to those of another’s culture and to the point of their acceptance of us. A new culture more imbued with the Gospel can only be born from the utter destruction of our cultural ego. We should speak a language that everyone can understand. Although you might think this requires a terminology based on advanced theology. Everything works out fine if we start using the only language that is universal and common to all cultures. Everyone understands the language of love.⁵²

INCULTURATION IN OUR MISSION

“Our mission as consecrated men and women fortifies the fidelity of the Church”. This may apply to different areas such as the life of prayer, witness, and communion. “Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion.”⁵³ That is, taking things a step further. One may ask, could this mission also include inculturating the Gospel? Institutes of the consecrated life often have a privileged position in the sphere of cultural undertakings, whether through our missionary work or our very community life. Even the worlds of masculinity and femininity have their own inculturations in the consecrated life. It is said that the consecrated life has made room in the Church for providing for a wonderful equality between men and women. From all these, does a mission materialize for us to strengthen the fidelity of the Church in its constant striving to inculturate the Gospel? Just as it is asking us to be experts in communion, perhaps the Church is awaiting our contribution in the area of inculturation and intercultural communion. The wealth of intercultural experience that characterizes the consecrated life carries with it a greater responsibility for the Church and the self-same world to which we are sent. What follows are recommendations for living inculturation in the consecrated life in the areas of mission and community. The mission of the Consecrated Life in relation to cultures is that every vocation is bound up with a mission.

As consecrated men and women deeply involved in an intercultural world, we are keenly aware of the fact that true evangelization cannot exist if the values of the Christian message do not enter into a culture. The Gospel remains very abstract if it does not become inculturated and, in other words, does not become incarnated. To bring about inculturation, mere words are inadequate. An integral thorough evangelization is needed. One that incorporates actions, symbols, and the witness of life. Here, the vows take on a clear-cut missionary meaning. Our vows can be looked upon as an alternative model of life in which the use we make of goods, human relationships, and the exercise of power receives its inspiration from the very life of Jesus. By our vows, we offer the world an alternative culture which we are already living. From this perspective, our dialogue with cultures goes to the heart of the mission of the consecrated life. Much patience is required in this mission because the processes of inculturation advance slowly. “When we are journeying with peoples and their cultures, only a profound experience of God will provide us with the

patience to wait the time of God in history. Only with this determination shall we know how to also be present at those cultural frontiers where Christ's presence is most needed." Nowadays, this mission of the consecrated life to inculturate the Gospel is being expressed in several new ways. A spirituality of incarnation commits us to experience cultural transformation from the inside out, beginning on the ground floor. Inserted communities in population centers represent one of its expressions. Another great missionary adventure taking place is interreligious dialogue. Without dialogue among cultures and religions, there will be no peace, no openness, and no possibility to proclaim the Gospel in the world. Neither will the wealth of new ways to express the mystery of Christ be revealed. It is essential for every mission to transcend borders.⁵⁴

INCULTURATION IN COMMUNION/COMMUNITY LIVING

"African culture has an acute sense of solidarity and community life. In Africa, it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village. Indeed, community life in the African society expresses the extended family."⁵⁵

In this regard the Message of the first African Synod emphasizes that the Living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the Father of the one great human family to which we all belong. As such, he wants us to bear witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for human progress and development at all levels.⁵⁶ Our liturgical worship and practices should bring home the richness of the cultures to which we belong, it should give witness to our own subcultures as consecrated men and women, with varied ways of praying and celebrating.

"Intercultural living fosters inculturation (and vice-versa)."⁵⁷ That is, living in intercultural communities prepares the way for inculturation when it comes to the mission. In other words, it is better if the challenge of incarnating the message of Christ in a certain place is first lived in the community itself. This experience felt in our very bones makes us more sensitive and realistic at the same time. In this way a cultural critique often comes about that is positive and evangelical: one culture appraises itself in light of another and one refines the other. Several people also noted that intercultural living does not always take place as well as it should in community.

Shall we have the requisite drive to dedicate ourselves to this? Possibility would be to first place ourselves in the hands of God who created every culture and took delight in their great variety. That is where we have to start. Then, in each culture the mystery of the incarnation must happen again: The Word of God must again put on flesh and blood.

Cultures are evangelized only by means of painful sacrifices and sometimes martyrdom. One of the attractive features of the consecrated life is that we do not bring about the entire work of inculturation through our outside activities, apostolate, only. Very often, we experience this effort – i.e., the strive at practical inculturation --, and we can promote it in our own homes and religious communities. In doing so, we overcome the danger of dichotomy or even schizophrenic attitude in our way of life, and, on the other hand, we proclaim with joy and passion the Gospel to every people and culture with more than just words. This applies to the vows especially when we live them as the proclamation of an alternative culture, which demands a renewed formation of candidates, and other areas of consecrated life that calls more for a witness of life. This is our way of fortifying the Church-as-Family and proclaiming the Reign of God.⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

While it is necessary to make efforts in view of generous evangelization of culture, our consecration to God must take into account the socio-cultural context where it is lived.⁵⁹ This is an indispensable condition in order that it could be seen as witness.⁶⁰ We encourage every consecration to God, to be based above all, on the supernatural, universal values and on fundamentals common to all the religious. The africanisation of religious life must extend to all genres of vocations to consecrated life. Pope St. John Paul II and African Bishops themselves have passionately called for the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa.⁶¹ In line with this, Consecrated persons must wake up to this challenge of owning up to the life and living it as Africans. This can be achieved by imbibing in their own lives and communities all that is good, true and beautiful in the African cultures that can better enrich the Consecrated life.

Religious life has relevance in the cultural setting. As shown in this paper, the religious has much to learn from the culture as well as much to contribute in the process of real transformation and conversion to a Gospel life. Cultures are dynamic by nature and are open 'to the influence of other cultures and traditions. In order to be effective and prophetic in their mission, all religious congregations need to examine themselves. Vatican Council II and the post-Conciliar teachings of the Church has given us the guidelines: go back to the roots of your congregations and examine its essentials and charisms; discarding the non-essentials which we have picked up on the way throughout the years. More so, we have to re-examine the elements that obscure our Gospel witnessing. In what way are we influencing the political, economic and social realities of the world? Where have they influenced us in our attitudes towards the local culture, mission and theology? How much do our understanding of and the practices/customs in Community life, or the conception and living of the vows, or the vision and style of administration (governance) in our religious Institutes reflect a clear sensitivity to authentic cultural values, say in Nigeria?. Have we, consecrated persons, made sufficient efforts to identify, appreciate and integrate these cultural values?. Unless we examine and allow these issues to challenge our community life, and indeed other aspects of Consecrated life, we will not be ready to learn and be enriched from the local culture, nor will we purify and elevate the local culture. Let us be converted in a personal way to the Gospel first and be ready to be sent to establish the kingdom of God by living according to the demands of the Gospels.⁶²

In all, possible ways of achieving inculturation in the consecrated life is to find encouragement from our successes in inculturation. Our years of religious experiences should be able to convince us that faith and consecrated life has to be inculturated well,⁶³ first in our religious communities, the society in which we live as well as our country at large. As St. John Paul II frequently observed, faith must become culture, since "a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived"⁶⁴

ENDNOTES

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³ Cf. www.culture and religion.com (website created in November 7, 2004, last edited in January 10, 2016. Visited 12/9/2016

⁴ Gergen M, and Gergen K.J. (2003). *A Reader*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication

⁵ Ferraro, G. (1994). *The cultural dimension of international business* (2nd edition) Englewood Cliff, NJ: Prentice Hall

⁶ Rohner, R. (1984). "Towards a conception of culture for cross-cultural psychology," *Journal of Cross Cultural psychology*, (p. 36)

⁷ Ross, N. (2004). *Culture and Cognition: Implications for theory and methodology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication (p.8)

⁸ *Gaudium et Spes*, #53. All quotations from the documents of Vatican Council II are taken from Vatican II: The Conciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery, Dublin: Dominicans Publications, 1988

⁹ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18, 2005.

¹⁰ The Code of Canon Law (1983), Canon 573 para. 1&2

¹¹ Paschal Robert, OFM, *Religious Life in the Cultural Context of Pakistan*. Ref: Focus, Vol. 31, 2001

¹² Fr. George Ehusani, *Fully-African-truly-Christian; the challenge of inculturation*,(1999) p. 6 ; Cfr. Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, (Missionary Activity of the Church), n.22.

¹³ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (Church in Africa),(Yaounde, 14/9/1995), #59.

¹⁴ *Ecclesia in Africa* #78

¹⁵ *Ecclesia in Africa* #62

Fr. George Ehusani, *Fully-African-truly-Christian; the challenge of inculturation*,(1999), p. 10.

¹⁷ *Ecclesia in Africa* #60-61

¹⁸ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990) #85-86

¹⁹ *Ecclesia in Africa* #61

²⁰ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio* (December 7, 1990) #87

²¹ *Apostolic Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to all Consecrated persons on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*. Vatican, November 21, 2014, Article 1 'Aims of the Year of Consecrated Life' #1

²² *Ecclesia in Africa* #29

- ²³ *Gaudium et Spes* #57
- ²⁴ *Ecclesia in Africa* #77
- ²⁵ Arrupe, (P. 1978). *A Letter to the whole Society of Jesus on Inculturation*. May 14, 1978
- ²⁶ *Ecclesia in Africa* #54
- ²⁷ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005
- ²⁸ *Gaudium et Spes* #53
- ²⁹ Balmes Raymond, *Lessons in Philosophy*, t.1, ed. School in Paris, 1965, p. 76
- ³⁰ Louise-Marie Diaw, *Initiation to Religious Life in Africa- A Culture of education or formation?*
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- ³¹ Louise-Marie Diaw, *Initiation to Religious Life in Africa- A Culture of education or formation?*
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- ³² *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, Special Edition. Imprimatur by John Cardinal Heenan, Archbishop of Westminster, July 18, 1971
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- ³⁵ Paschal Robert, OFM, Religious Life in the Cultural Context of Pakistan. Ref: Focus, Vol. 31, 2001
- ³⁶ Pope John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* (On the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World), #85
- ³⁷ Louise-Marie Diaw, *Initiation to Religious Life in Africa- A Culture of education or formation?*
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- ³⁸ Jane Wakahiu, *Journey of Faith: African Girls and Religious Life*, p. 4 , (September 21, 2015)
- ³⁹ Jane Wakahiu, *Journey of Faith: African Girls and Religious Life*, (September 21, 2015)
- ⁴⁰ *Ecclesia in Africa* #48
- ⁴¹ Congregation for the Religious and the Secular Institute, and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, “Instruction ‘From October’ to the Conferences of Religious Men and women in Africa”, 3 June 1978, in: *Enchiridion della Vita Consecrata: Dalle Decretali al rinnovamento post-Conciliare* (385 -2000), nn.5214-5231). Fruit of meetings with the Major Superiors of Religious institutes present in Africa, this *Instruction* from the Vatican Offices, first of all, admits that “The determination to develop an authentic religious life among Africans was manifest throughout the meeting and was unanimously accepted in the discussion that took place. Religious Life in Africa seems to be enjoying a real springtime with all that this conjures up by way of vitality and promise for the future”. Then, after highlighting the importance of formation, and the contribution made by religious life to the local church, the document emphasizes the necessity and value of what it calls “africanization” of religious life, nowadays known as inculturation of religious life. This “so necessary africanization” of religious life (n.5225), the Vatican’s *Instruction* states, involves the following points:
- Africanization “demands that one’s consecration to God be lived within a specifically African socio-cultural context and that it be seen by those around us as authentic love for God and for our neighbour.”
 - Africanization “means integrating into it [*Religious Life*] those African cultural values which are in agreement with the Gospel. ‘The Church looks with great respect on traditional African moral and religious values’. (Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, n,14). You do not have therefore to renounce your cultural values but you should examine them carefully in order to discern what is good and true in them and then give them a

new meaning by your religious life.” “Certain of them may be assimilated immediately: the natural feelings Africans have for the presence of God, their joy, readiness to share, hospitality fostered by the clan system, value placed on fecundity, etc. All this demands research and effort and you are aware of it.”

- Africanization implies that: “...you must remember that every culture, just like every man, needs to be converted in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24) and that the passage from African values to the religious life will always demand a higher qualitative standard and must transcend the real values so far accepted.”
- “Your religious consecration must take account of the socio-cultural context within which we live (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, n.18; *Populorum Progressio*, n.40). This is an indispensable condition for our consecration to be seen as a witness (*Ad Gentes*, n.20; EN, n.69).”
- “This africanisation must extend to all various types of vocation”, not to only becoming brothers or sisters but also to becoming religious priests. “This africanisation (must) extend not only to institutes made up only of Africans but also those which have an international membership.”

⁴² *Ecclesia in Africa* #50

⁴³ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁴⁴ *Guadium et Spes* #58

⁴⁵ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁴⁶ *Guadium et Spes* #59

⁴⁷ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁴⁸ *Ecclesia in Africa* #79

⁴⁹ *Vita Consecrata* #80,90

⁵⁰ *Guadium Et Spes* # 60

⁵¹ *Ecclesia in Africa* # 79

⁵² Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁵³ *Vita Consecrata* #46

⁵⁴ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁵⁵ *Ecclesia in Africa* #43

⁵⁶ *Ecclesia in Africa* #66

⁵⁷ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁵⁸ Cfr. Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

⁵⁹ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, #18, Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #40

⁶⁰ *Ad Gentes*, #20; Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #69

⁶¹ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, #79-80; *Ecclesia in Africa*, #59, #62-63

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⁶⁴ John Paul II, *Address to the Italian National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment*, [Jan. 16, 1982]