

**INCULTURATION OF WORSHIP**  
**Forty Years of Progress and Tradition**  
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*Introduction*

For four years last century I had the rare privilege of taking part in a series of liturgical consultations organized by the Lutheran World Federation. I say “rare”, because it is not often that a Roman Catholic becomes member of an international study group of Lutherans and, to my gratification, declared by the group an honorary Lutheran! By coincidence or perhaps providence Martin Luther and I were born on the same day. During those memorable years I made lasting friendship with Lutheran scholars like Gordon Lathrop and Anita S. Stauffer. Friendship meant dialogue, and dialogue with them richly endowed me with liturgical knowledge. Thanks to my Lutheran connection, the World Council of Churches paired Lathrop and me in a number of conferences on Christian worship.

*A Lutheran Experience*

Two volumes resulted from the consultations held in Switzerland (1993), Hong Kong (1994), Nairobi (1995), and Chicago (1996). The titles of these volumes convey the common concern that brought Lutheran theologians, liturgists, musicians, and pastors together. The first is *Worship and Culture in Dialogue* (LWF Studies 1994) and the second is *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity* (LWF Studies 1996). It is evident from these titles that the participants wanted to study the influence worship and culture have on each other and to set the conditions or parameters for the inculturation of Christian worship.

To answer these questions the participants followed a well-defined methodology, which is worth developing here. Since the chief components of Christian worship are baptism and Eucharist, the discussions focused on them, even though questions concerning other church ceremonies like marriage and funerals were also addressed.

The methodology consisted of several steps. The first step was to expound the biblical teaching and Lutheran tradition on the essential elements of baptism and Eucharist. This defined the basic premise of the entire consultation. What is essential is non-negotiable, although it can be re-expressed in ways that are more congenial to the people of today, without prejudice to the doctrine of Scriptures. To re-express what is essential requires the participation of culture. This was the second step. Historical researches on baptism and Eucharist have uncovered the fascinating influence of different cultures on the ritual development of these sacraments. In the case of the Western liturgy one should indeed speak of cultural strata such as the Jewish, Greco-Roman, and Franco-Germanic. The third step concluded the process by proposing, or at

least envisioning, possible cultural re-expressions of the rites of baptism and Eucharist. This final step had to take into account the experiences of local communities, the unity in faith and baptism of the Christian churches, and the do's and don'ts of liturgical inculturation.

My principal role in the Lutheran consultations rested with the definition of inculturation. I described it as a process whereby pertinent elements of a local culture are integrated into the worship of a local Church. Integration means that human values, cultural patterns, and institutions form with Christian worship a unified whole, so that they are able to influence the way prayer formularies are composed and proclaimed, ritual actions are performed, and the message expressed in art forms. Integration also means that local festivals, after due critique and Christian reinterpretation, become part of the liturgical worship of the local assembly.

The immediate aim of inculturation is to create a form of worship that is culturally suited to the local assembly, which should be able to claim it as its very own. The ultimate aim of inculturation, on the other hand, is active and intelligent participation of all in the congregation. Inculturation properly understood and rightly executed will lead the assembly to a profound appreciation of Christ's mystery made present in the liturgy through the dynamism of cultural signs and symbols. Inculturation, in other words, aims to deepen the spiritual life of the assembly through a fuller experience of Christ who is revealed in the people's language, rites, arts, and symbols.

To achieve inculturation one needs to work within a given method. I proposed to the Lutheran participants the method of dynamic equivalence, as opposed to formal correspondence. Dynamic equivalence starts with the liturgical *ordo*, which I will briefly define below. Dynamic equivalence is a type of translation. It re-expresses the *ordo* in the living language, rites, and symbols of the local community. Concretely, dynamic equivalence consists of replacing elements of the *ordo* with something that has equal meaning or value in the culture of the people, and hence can suitably transmit the message intended by the *ordo*. Because dynamic equivalence draws its elements from people's culture and traditions, the liturgy is able to evoke life experiences and paint vivid images rooted in the people's history, traditions, and values.

At some point during the consultations a question of terminology was amply discussed. Is it contextualization or is it inculturation? In the 70's the World Council of Churches adopted the word "contextualization" to signify the process of updating church structures so that they would keep pace with the changes in the modern world. The context in which the Christian community lives should be a chief player in the modernization of church structures. Context includes socio-economic, political, cultural, religious, and geographical factors. In a way, it is more encompassing than inculturation, but unlike inculturation it does not focus specifically on culture. Let me note that the Roman Catholic Church later adopted the word contextualization, but with a distinctly political meaning. It became synonymous with the liberation movement, especially in Latin America and some countries in Asia that were under dictatorial and abusive political leadership.

Inculturation, on the other hand, was a word that cultural anthropologists preferred, because it expresses the creative and dynamic relationship between two cultures. In 1981 Pope John Paul II said that inculturation, though a neologism, “expresses one of the elements of the great mystery of the incarnation”. In 1985 the Extraordinary Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops defined it as “an interior transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the rooting of Christianity in various cultures”.

I must admit that during the Lutheran consultations I advanced the adoption of the term “inculturation”. Both Lathrop and Stauffer were understandably hesitant to abandon the term “contextualization”, which was in the active vocabulary of Reformed Churches. I am delighted to see that my Lutheran sisters and brothers are starting to take interest in the word “inculturation”.

The Lutheran consultations were an experience of the process of inculturation. Many questions were raised and several left unanswered. I reproduce two salient questions. The first question was where to set the boundaries to the incursion of culture in Christian worship. Failure to do this could lead to a situation where violence is done to biblical doctrine in order to accommodate culture. It could also happen that the cultural elements that are integrated in worship overly evoke their cultural provenance and thus divert attention from the Christian rite or worse send an altogether different message to the assembly.

Another scenario would be the mere incorporation of cultural elements into Christian worship without the benefit of integrating them. They could be attractive, perhaps even entertaining, but if they are not integrated with the Christian rite they are no more than decorative appendices or cultural tokens with small role to play in the unfolding of the rite.

In the course of the consultations a few put across a rather negative view of culture. They raised the warning that culture is inherently evil because of human sin: it needs to be redeemed. As someone who is engaged in inculturation, with all due respect I could not disagree more. I reasoned out that, while some elements of culture are sinful and erroneous, not all fall under that category. The incarnation of the Son of God proves that after the fall human nature had kept redeemable traits. The work of inculturation is precisely to integrate what is liturgically suitable in order to redeem and transform it interiorly into a vehicle of Christ’s grace.

The challenge therefore was, on the one hand, how to protect the doctrinal integrity of Christian worship and, on the other, how best to utilize whatever is good, noble, and beautiful in culture.

The second question dealt with the liturgical *ordo* of Lutheran communities. By *Ordo* is meant a standard liturgical rite that contains the essential elements of Christian worship as handed down by tradition and accepted as such by the church. The standard *Ordo* for

baptism, for example, would include the following components: proclamation of the word of God, blessing of water, renunciation of Satan, profession of faith, immersion or infusion while reciting the baptismal formula, and possibly anointing with chrism and the vesting of the neophyte in white garment. The *ordo*, however, is not a mere arrangement of the various components of the liturgical rite; rather it is the proclamation of what the Church believes about the sacrament. This belief is expressed by the choice of the biblical reading and the formulation of the liturgical texts. These are the articulation of the ancient adage: *lex orandi, lex credendi*: the rule of prayer is the rule of belief. Centralized churches like the Roman Catholic and several in the Orthodox Communion own standard *Ordo* for baptism and Eucharist. Is the same true with the Lutheran churches? The absence of a fixed *ordo* has a disadvantage. Since the *ordo* should generally be the starting point of liturgical inculturation, in its absence where does one begin?

I devoted a significant portion of my paper to the Lutheran experience of liturgical inculturation in order to bring across the message that an international group of Lutheran theologians, liturgists, musicians, and pastors had already begun the work. This is what they have initiated and done so far. Their effort and dedication are truly remarkable and worthy of emulation. The question now is where do Lutherans go from here?

### *The Roman Catholic Experience*

Forty years ago, on December 4, 1963, 2,152 Council Fathers gathered in the Vatican voted on the Constitution on the Liturgy with a solid 2,147 votes in favor. Of this document Pope Paul VI, in his Address at the conclusion of the second session of the Council, said: "The arduous and intricate discussions have certainly borne fruit, for one of the topics, the schema on the sacred liturgy--the first to be discussed and, in a certain sense, the first in order of intrinsic excellence and importance for the life of the Church--has been brought to a happy conclusion". The Liturgy Constitution of Vatican II has a particular significance for me and for us gathered here, because it enshrines the Magna Charta of liturgical inculturation.

Forty years have elapsed and much water has passed under the bridge, but it is surely not out of place to recall here how the Liturgy Constitution was shaped and to review what it says about the relationship between Christian worship and culture. For the Roman Catholic Church the Constitution is the official instruction on how to update and reform worship. Alas, after forty years several of its directives have still to be brought to "a happy conclusion", if I may use the words of Pope Paul VI. This is the case with those Roman Catholics who spurn changes in worship, firmly believing that progress in worship ended with the Council of Trent. For other Christian churches Vatican II's Liturgy Constitution is an invitation to take a closer look at their worship services, especially where there is question of culture. I guess it is not presumptuous to say that the Liturgy Constitution somehow influenced the Lutheran consultations I discussed earlier.

After Pope John XXIII announced the Vatican Council II, a preparatory commission on the liturgy was established on June 6, 1960. The composition of the preparatory commission was indicative of the type of reform that the Liturgy Constitution would eventually espouse. Most of the members and consultors were scholars who knew their liturgical history. They admired the noble simplicity and sobriety of the original Roman liturgy before it had merged in the eighth century with Franco-Germanic rites. Ironically, the inculturation of the Roman liturgy by the Franco-Germanic churches induced the disappearance of its classical shape. It took twelve centuries for the Roman Catholic Church to recover the noble simplicity of its worship. It would not have taken this long, had Rome heeded in the sixteenth century Martin Luther's call for liturgical reform.

In the thinking of the preparatory commission history was not static. The dynamism of history led it to regard the recovery of the classical shape as a prerequisite to the "adaptation" or inculturation of the Roman liturgy. There is need to retrieve the original simplicity of the Roman liturgy before it can be effectively inculturated. The preparatory commission set the Franco-Germanic churches, which inculturated the classical form of the Roman liturgy, as model for the churches today.

With this background in mind it is easy to understand why in the Liturgy Constitution there is constant shift from the classical shape of the Roman liturgy to various measures that would ensure that the reformed liturgy was truly contemporary, contextual if you wish. Such salient reforms as active participation, use of the vernacular, and the frequent references to socio-cultural situations are indeed part of a bigger agenda to inculturate the Roman liturgy. Articles 37-40 of the Liturgy Constitution (SC 37-40), for which we are forever indebted to the American Benedictine Godfrey Diekmann, are the articulation of what implicitly runs through the pages of the Constitution, namely the inculturation of the liturgy. Pastoral liturgy should be addressed in the light of human values, patterns, and institutions or, in short, local culture. The Latin word *aptatio*, which is translated as adaptation, refers to Pope John XXIII's catchword for the council: *aggiornamento*. Without inculturation this word would be empty.

Throughout the Liturgy Constitution there is interplay between tradition and progress. Art. 23 is a significant statement: "That sound tradition may be retained and yet the way remain open to legitimate progress, a careful investigation is always to be made into each part of the liturgy to be revised". The investigation should be theological and historical, in order to determine liturgical tradition. It should be pastoral, in order to open the door to inculturation. The phrase "sound tradition and legitimate progress" adequately describes the thrust of the Liturgy Constitution. The phrase also lays down the foundations of liturgical inculturation. In fact, inculturation does not create new liturgical rites apart from the Roman rite. What inculturation aims to achieve is to dynamically translate the Roman liturgy into the culture of local churches. The sound tradition of the Roman liturgy is the basis of legitimate progress that inculturation seeks to achieve.

Firmly rooted in the premises of the liturgical movement, the Liturgy Constitution sets forth active participation as the principle and criterion of the conciliar reform of the

liturgy. Art. 14 states, "In the reform and promotion of the liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else". The theology on which the Constitution bases itself is the doctrine on what would later be called "common priesthood" by the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. According to the Liturgy Constitution, active participation is "called for by the very nature of the liturgy" and that such participation by the Christian people "is their right and duty by reason of their baptism" (art. 14). I am certain that Martin Luther would have smiled in triumph should he read those lines. Let me note that the ultimate aim of liturgical inculturation is to foster active participation in consonance with the cultural patterns or traits of the local community.

The Liturgy Constitution regards the use of the vernacular as an effective means to promote active participation. Art. 36 is a classic case of *via media* or conciliar compromise on the use of the vernacular. The shadow of Martin Luther still caused uneasiness among the Council Fathers. Nonetheless the Liturgy Constitution embraced the principle that active participation requires understanding, and understanding requires the use of the vernacular. For this reason, and within the spirit of compromise, art. 36 prioritizes those parts of the liturgy where the vernacular may be used to great advantage, namely the readings and instructions and some prayers and chants. Thus the Constitution allows the use of the vernacular for the purpose of implementing its fundamental principle of active participation. At the same time, the vernacular language is one of the most significant elements of culture. The adoption of the vernacular is a basic work of liturgical inculturation. Lutherans might flatter Roman Catholics for their progress in this area; the reality, however, is that the Lutherans in the sixteenth century already engaged in the work of inculturation when they used the vernacular in worship.

The Liturgy Constitution uses the word "adaptation", but it should be read as "inculturation", a word that the Roman Catholic Church adopted in the '70s, thanks to Pope John Paul II. The Constitution devotes four articles on inculturation. A brief description of the articles might be useful.

Art. 37 advances the principle of liturgical pluralism among local churches. Pluralism includes respect for the culture and traditions of local communities and the integration of suitable cultural elements found among them, provided they are not indissolubly bound up with superstition and error.

Arts. 38-39 deal with "legitimate variations" in the Roman rite. Legitimate variations means that the changes introduced by local Bishops for their churches of responsibility are those suggested or recommended in the liturgical books published by Rome. Art. 38 cautions that "the substantial unity of the Roman rite" should be preserved in the process. The expression "substantial unity" is somewhat difficult to define. Art. 40 addresses the question of radical adaptations in the Roman rite. Radical means that the changes local Bishops make in their local churches are not envisaged by the official books. The Bishops are given the task to "carefully and prudently weigh" what elements from the people's culture may suitably be introduced into the Roman rite. I should add that all intended changes on the local level need the approval of the Vatican.

I realize that the above description of the provisions of the Liturgy Constitution on inculturation has little or no relevance to Lutherans who do not have to grapple with centralized system and hierarchical prerogatives. However, underneath such provisions we can detect a certain valid concern that might interest Lutherans. The concern is unity of churches through the confession and celebration of the same faith. In light of this the second volume of the Lutheran consultations was entitled, *Christian Worship: Unity in Cultural Diversity*. The problem that besets the Roman Catholics is that some want unity to embrace not only belief but also its cultural expressions.

### *A Roman Catholic Attempt at Inculturation*

At this point, allow me to offer an example of liturgical inculturation that attempted to implement the provisions of Vatican II's Liturgy Constitution. The example comes from my home country, the Philippines.

The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines has produced two major attempts to inculturate the Roman liturgy. The first is the *Misa ng Bayang Pilipino or Mass of the Filipino People*. Rome has unfortunately not yet approved this Mass, which was submitted to it in 1976! Rome, it is said, is eternal. The second is the Rite of Marriage. Luckily, this second attempt has received the Roman *placet*. For lack of time I will concentrate on the first.

Several criteria guided the shaping of the *Misa*. First, the prayers, which were composed in the Tagalog language, must clearly express the Church's doctrine on holy Mass as both Christ's sacrifice on the cross and a sacred meal. Second, they should incorporate genuine Filipino values, idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and images drawn from the experiences of people. Third, without forgetting the needs of the universal Church, the texts should include such contemporary concerns of the Church in the Philippines as social justice, peace and development, and lay leadership. Fourth, when proclaimed, the texts of the prayers should be clear, dignified, and prayerful. Fifth, enough occasions should be provided for active and prayerful participation through bodily posture, songs, and responses. And lastly, an atmosphere of prayer and reverence should be encouraged amidst the Filipino pattern of festive or fiesta-like celebration.

At the introductory and concluding rites people are blessed with a large cross, which is afterwards venerated with a song of praise. The veneration of the cross stems from the Filipino Catholics' great devotion to the cross. They venerate crucifixes at home or carry them around. Indeed they make the sign of the cross at every significant moment of the day. Basketball players sign themselves before entering the court. People make the sign of the cross when they pass a church or the cemetery. Beginning and concluding the Mass with the cross is the Filipino way of underlining the doctrine that the Mass is the memorial celebration of Christ's death on the cross.

Before the readings the gospel book is venerated with a song in praise of God whose word reveals his will and teaching, and guides us on the path of life. The readers make the *mano po* to the priest and receive his blessing. The gesture is done by placing the right hand of the elder person on one's forehead. It is part of Filipino religious culture to ask for the elder's blessing before performing a special task. At the general intercessions that follow the homily the people kneel rather than stand, which is the Roman posture. Filipinos however associate kneeling, rather than standing, with urgent petitions.

The *Misa* has other characteristics every Filipino Catholic would easily associate with solemn prayer. For example, at the start of the Eucharistic Prayer, which highlights the words of consecration, the candles on the altar are lighted, the church bells are rung, and the priest and people make the sign of the cross. At home people light candles and sign themselves before they kneel to pray.

A Filipino cultural tradition has found a worthy place in the *Misa*. Just as the head of the family or the host eats last, the priest receives communion after he has distributed it to the assembly. It is the Filipino way of expressing the values of leadership, hospitality, and parental concern. Incorporated into the Mass, this practice alludes to the saying of Christ that the first should be the last and the servant of all (Mt 20:26-28).

Language plays an essential role in the liturgy. The liturgy is made up of two basic elements, namely proclaimed texts and gestures. As regards the language of the *Misa*, much effort was made, including several consultations with experts in the Tagalog language, in order to ensure that the texts, when proclaimed or sung, are clear, dignified, and prayerful. The language is also slightly poetic, and often observes terminal as well as internal rhyme. Filipinos have a predilection for sentences that rhyme and place value on rhythmic cadence in solemn speech. Because of the cultural value of idioms, the *Misa* is attentive to idiomatic speech.

Finally, the *Misa* pays special attention to words and phrases that express genuine Filipino values. At the penitential rite the typical Filipino value that combines together humility, unworthiness, and embarrassment stands out. At collection time the priest reminds the assembly of a popular saying: "God blesses those who give with open hands", that is, generously. At Communion the value of meal shared among members of the family and friends underlines the meaning of the Mass as a celebration of God's family.

### *Conclusion*

Forty years ago Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy formalized what was in reality an existing practice in the Church: liturgical inculturation. The Constitution did not introduce something new; it merely codified what had always been there. Inculturation is as old as the Church of Jesus Christ.



Two phrases sum up the thrust of the Liturgy Constitution. The first is “tradition and progress”. Inculturation is a form of progress and the local churches are invited to embark on it. However, the Constitution desires that progress should be rooted in genuine tradition. Inculturation must give the assurance that the local church can trace its origin to the apostolic teaching and practice. The question that arises in the mind of theologians and pastors is how to define the meaning of legitimate progress and genuine tradition.

The second phrase is “unity in cultural diversity”. Local churches form a communion of belief, but between them certain diversity exists. Such diversity springs from the cultural differences obtaining in local churches. People do not believe and pray in a cultural vacuum. Inculturation means that the same universal belief is celebrated in different cultural patterns proper to the local community. The question that needs to be addressed by liturgists is the role culture plays in the liturgical unfolding of Christ’s mystery.

The task of liturgical inculturation extends beyond confessional diversity. Lutherans and Roman Catholics are called to renew the worship in their local liturgical assemblies in the context of their culture and traditions. Forty years have passed, but it is never too late to start.