Talking Points: Inculturation

Often our work at the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry involves engaging with issues concerning the connection between culture and faith. The relationship between culture and faith is one that has been discussed by the Church for a very long time particularly as the Church moved out into the world and established itself in new places with different cultures. Culture and faith were also discussed at Vatican II and instructions were published to guide the Church as it worked through how to integrate people’s faith and culture. Since then, the term inculturation has been used to describe this concept and since Vatican II the Popes have developed the Church’s instructions further. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples know that the Church teaches that culture is not something to be left at the door but is to be integrated into their faith. Perhaps Pope John Paul II said it best when he said that Aboriginal people were to “express the living word of Jesus in ways that speak to your Aboriginal minds and hearts”. Unfortunately, other people in the Church do not understand this and put up barriers for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics. This short paper presents a summary of what inculturation is and what it means for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in practice. It provides some guidance for non-Indigenous Catholics to reflect on their own understanding of inculturation and whether they are “joyfully receiving” Aboriginal people in the Catholic Church as directed by Pope John Paul II.

What is Inculturation?

According to a renowned expert on inculturation, Frances E. George, inculturation occurs when:

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\text{faith becomes culture, thereby synthesizing } \text{‘man’s (sic) entire existence around Christ, the wisdom of God}. \]

Pope John Paul II says inculturation signifies:

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\text{an intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values by their integration into Christianity and the implantation of Christianity into different human cultures.}\]

The Vatican instructs:

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\text{…by 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. On the one hand the penetration of the Gospel into a given socio-cultural milieu gives inner fruitfulness to the spiritual qualities and gifts proper to each people…strengthens these qualities, perfects them and restores them in Christ. On the other hand, the church assimilates these values, when they are compatible with the Gospel, to “deepened understanding of Christ’s message and give it more effective expression in the liturgy and in many the many different aspects of the life of the community of believers.}\]

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1 Address of Pope John Paul II To the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, Alice Springs, Northern Territory, 29th November 1986
2 Francis E. George, Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion: Culture and Church in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II, Urbaniana University Press, Rome, 44.
The first Aboriginal married Deacon, Boniface Perdjert, said this about culture and faith:

*God has asked us to love Him with our whole mind, heart and soul. So I must give myself to God as an Aboriginal. That is what God wants or else he would not have made me what I am. Really it is the only way I can go about it. When I read the gospels, I read them as an Aboriginal. There are many things in the gospel that make me happy to be an Aboriginal because I think we have a good start. So many of the things that Christ said and did, and the way he lived, make me think of the good things in our way of life... We find it easy to see in Christ the great dreamtime figure, who, more than all the others gave us law and ceremony and life centres, and marked out the way we must follow to reach our true country... So it is not difficult to realize that Christ is with us always...the same yesterday, today and forever. We do not find it strange when he says He is the life, that we can and must live with His life, that in this life of His we are one. In some way he lives in us and is us, so that what we do for each other we do for Him.*

One of the difficulties in a country where there are no Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Catholic Priests or Bishops is the actual process of inculturation as it can only be authentically achieved by people who are of both the culture and the faith.

*The Gospel message itself is not culturally determined, but the persons who believe in the Gospel are all profoundly linked to their own cultures... links must be established through believers who can borrow elements of their culture for Gospel proclamation and who can work so that the Gospel comes to permeate their culture.*

In discussing inculturation the tendency is to start with principles:

*Already shaped within a western denominational [e]nculturation – and then asking what they mean for Indigenous people... There has been very little theological reflection that begins from an Indigenous mindset and engages more directly with biblical theologies and practices.*

Pope John Paul II made this often quoted statement when he spoke to the Aboriginal People in 1986:

*You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.*

However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics know there is still much to be done before they are joyfully received by the Australian Church as equals in baptism and where they are able to express their faith through their culture without barriers.

**Discussion Points:**
- In what ways does our Church engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- What cultural symbols do we incorporate into our liturgies?
- What difficulties do we encounter when we try to integrate culture with faith?
- What do I need to know to understand inculturation more fully?

**Where can I get more information:**
The ACM updates information regularly at www.acmsydney.org.au

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2 George, Inculturation and Ecclesial Communion, 59.
3 Paulson, G. Towards an Aboriginal Spirituality, Pacifica 2006 19:310-320