

Class #10: Evangelization and Inculturation: A Dynamic of relationships with Culture, Gospel, and Church Tradition(s)

Overview:

By virtue of the dignity of baptism, every Christian is called to spread (to evangelize) the Good News, the message and teaching of Jesus Christ, throughout the world. The Gospel message is always expressed through the belief and value system of a particular culture (inculturation).

Evangelization is about spreading the kingdom of God in our lives as Jesus did. It occurs in a specific time and place. Inculturation, as an element of evangelization, dialogues with a culture and the culture dialogues with the faith expressions in order to bring about a deeper awareness of the Spirit's movement working in *La Iglesia Mestiza*.

"People listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if people do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41).

Objectives:

- To grasp that Evangelization is about spreading, or witnessing to, the Gospel message (Jn.13.34-35).
- To realize that the Gospel is communicated in and through language, symbols, music, traditions, and customs. In other words, the Gospel is communicated through culture. This is the meaning of in-culturation.
- To appreciate that each of the four Gospels was written for a specific culture. For example, the Gospel of Matthew was written for Jewish communities.
- To recognize that the Gospel message transforms the world and continues to be inculturated in different times and places(Mt. 5.1-16).
- To identify love, communion, and justice as the heart of the Gospel message (Mt. 25. 31-46).
- To realize that the Church's heartbeat is evangelization and the deepest meaning of what it means to be church (Mt. 28.19).

Resources:

Download [Evangelii Nuntiandi](#) from vatican.va and use it as the major text for the course (Hereafter "EN"). Numbers are paragraphs. (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* en [español](#).)

Vatican II: *Gaudium et spes*, *Ad gentes*, and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*. Click [here](#) to access all the Vatican II documents.

On Evangelization in the modern world (Evangelii Nuntiandi), Paul VI, esp. 18.

Handbook for Today's Catholic, 121-125.

National Directory for Catechesis, 21-40, 41-53, 63-68.

["Go and make disciples,"](#) USCCB, 1992.

Catechism of the Catholic Church (Hereafter "CCC"), 2044-2051.

"Evangelization" in *New Dictionary of Theology*, The Liturgical Press, (1987), 357-360.

Outline

1. Jesus and evangelization

- a. Jesus is the evangelizer and his mission is to proclaim the Kingdom of God (EN, 6-16).
- b. God becoming human in Jesus was the supreme act of inculturation, it is the mystery of the Incarnation.

2. What is evangelization? What is inculturation? (EN, 17-24).

- a. The definition given in the Catholic Catechism for inculturation: Adapting the cultural elements of a people to Christian initiation (CCC, 854). Evangelization is the transformation of humanity from within through the Gospel. It begins with the person and always includes the relationship between persons and with God.

The church "seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs" (EN 18).

Through the Word of God the Church seeks to penetrate all dimensions of personal and cultural life. The purpose of evangelization is much more than promoting the outward observances of religion. Evangelization is the process of transforming all values, models and modes of life that are in contrast to the message of the Gospel. In this fullest sense, we, the people of God, are always in need of our own deeper evangelization and that of our society.

3. The content of evangelization is the message of love and liberation; salvation=liberation (EN, 25-39).

The core message of evangelization is the message that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life. God did not send the son to condemn the world, but that the world may be saved through him" (Jn 3:16-17).

God's love is visible through Jesus and given to us through the Holy Spirit. By opening ourselves to this love we begin the process of liberation as God's beloved sons and daughters. We are freed FROM our sins and freed FOR transformation and community, or communion with each other.

There are two ways this message is commonly misunderstood and distorted:

The first is to think and behave as if we can earn salvation by our virtue and religious acts.

Salvation is God's pure gift of love and liberation, we can only accept it and cooperate with it (*gratia cooperans*), we can never earn it, no matter how good we are. In his lifetime it was mostly the good people who rejected Jesus and saw him as a threat to

their own ways of earning salvation and thus “controlling” God.

The second misunderstanding is to focus on seeking salvation mainly so that I will not go to hell. Such a private and limited focus is a case of arrested spiritual development. Freedom from our sins through the acceptance of God’s pardon and love for us is only the first step in our salvation. Our liberation means that we are freed to cooperate with God’s transformation becoming other Christ’s in and through our communion with our sisters and brothers to carry on the mission of Jesus. When we allow God to change us, we will discover the meaning of “living life to the full” (Jn. 10.10).

4. Methods for evangelizing (EN 40-48)

“...the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal” (EN 40).

The Gospel is credible when the messenger’s life is itself a witness to the love and power of God. We cannot preach the Good News if we are the “bad news.”

Evangelii Nuntiandi emphasizes the need for preaching, catechesis, and the catechumenate.

This encyclical states that we would be guilty before the Lord if we did not use the new media as ways to proclaim the Gospel (EN 45). As the people of God we are charged with using all available means to spread the Word of God.

5. Popular religiosity and religion of the people (EN 48).

Evangelii Nuntiandi describes the expressions of popular faith as being “at the same time so rich and so vulnerable.” On the one hand, the faith customs and practices of the people can be a means of deepening Gospel values. But on the other hand such practices can be an obstacle to living the faith in an authentic way. Pastoral sensitivity is needed to determine the orientation of popular devotions and practices. A rule of thumb is to assess the growth in charity that popular devotions encourage in the people. Are such practices causing divisions and creating “outsiders” and “insiders,” or the “holier” ones?

6. Who do we evangelize? (EN, 49-58).

The mission to evangelize is first of all to those who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ; this mandate includes children. Respect is due to those of other faith traditions and the recognition that God has also been revealed to them. Pastoral sensitivity must be used in such places. Often the approach is one of sharing how God has been revealed to Christians in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, and learning how God has been active in other traditions. In this way the evangelizer becomes evangelized by others.

Christians today are challenged to re-evangelize societies where there is growing disbelief in God and a reliance on human knowledge and effort alone. These cultures that have lost the light of faith experience the loss of communion that results from “... a consumer society, the pursuit of pleasure set up as the supreme value, a desire for power and domination, and discrimination of every kind...” (EN 55).

The number of peoples who have never heard the good news of Jesus Christ is much fewer than at Pentecost, the beginning of our mission. Yet the world’s need for the

saving power of the Gospel has never been greater. The Christian mission to evangelize is urgent.

7. Church as missionary (EN, 59-73). The mission of Jesus has a church, not that the church has a mission.

The mission of Jesus is presented in Lk. 4.18-19: to bring good news to the poor. The Church is called to collaborate in the mission of Jesus and to be guided by the Spirit. Many misinterpret the mission as the mission of the Church as though the institutional church must promote *itself*. Another way to say this is to see that the center of the mission is Christ, not the Church. The Church furthers the mission of Christ when it lives the Gospel. Today we hear much about *apologetics*. Taken to an extreme on the defensive posture, apologetics can distort the mission of Christ as though it were the “property” of the Church. The Church is an instrument, not an end in itself.

8. The Holy Spirit animates and is the principal agent of evangelization (EN, 75).

A lively sacramental life and the practice of prayer are needed to discern how the Spirit would have us manifest and speak the Gospel. Our efforts will be fruitless if we are not in daily communion with our God.

9. The bible as a collection of inculturated texts.

- a. “Jesus” inculturated in a specific culture, ie Palestinian, Jewish culture.
- b. Four Gospels, Four cultures, one message.
- c. Letters of Paul: evangelization of Greek cultures
- d. Paul in Athens (Acts 17.22-23).
- e. Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15, 1-30). Acts 17, 22-28; Gal. 2, 1-4.
- f. Mt. 28.19. “Go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations.” How is this done?

Questions for small group discussions

1. Who has been instrumental in your life in forming your faith in Jesus? How was this done?
2. What kind of popular devotions were or are practiced in your family? (Some popular devotions: Virgen de Guadalupe, posadas, images, processions, etc.)
3. How can social media (Internet tools like Facebook, etc.) be used as a means for evangelization? This kind of evangelization is a presence in the world that “invites connection and compassion, encourages comfort and healing for those in need, and challenges those in power to use that power in the service of justice and love” (E. Drescher, *Tweet if you ♥ Jesus*, 127).
4. Talk about this statement: “Jesus’ mission has a church, rather than the church has a mission.” How does this statement strike you?
5. In what ways is the evangelizer evangelized by others? An example: you do pastoral ministry with people in a poor area where there is no running water or electricity. How are the people your “teachers”? How do they evangelize you?

Optional Resources (Use with discretion)

The new concept of “adaptation” or “inculturation” is defined as the dynamic between the Gospel and church tradition (spirituality), on the one hand, and the changing social and cultural context, on the other. Blessed Pope John XXIII remarked: “The deposit of faith is the same, but the way it is expressed is different.”

“Adaptation” eventually became “inculturation.” -- *When the liturgy becomes a living part of the human culture.* There is a new appreciation of the social sciences and anthropology and a new awareness of cultural diversity. Inculturation proceeds “from below,” not “from above.” Initiatives come from specific local contexts, then receives official recognition, like the Virgen de Guadalupe.

“Christianization is not a form of imperialism, but a transformation through which a civilization realizes its deepest identity by means of faith.”

Doctrine of the Incarnation and Mt. 13.24-30 as models for understanding inculturation.

-- Good seed = reign of God, Gospel message, word of God; virtue (faith, hope, love)

-- weed or bad seed = that which is contrary to the reign of God; evil

-- choices for or against God have consequences

-- With other cultures, the “seed” is the Word of God planted among all peoples since the beginning of time (AG, 11), but always needs to be nurtured. The Word of God continues to bear fruit, individually, culturally, socially.

-- The “weeds” represent evil, violence, and all that opposes God.

-- The Gospel “confronts” the weeds in every “garden” (culture) and calls for conversion. There is no single Christian culture. Europe and N. America had fallen into error condemning other cultures. Missionaries thought their garden was only seeds and the garden of the other was weeds. They were mistaken in their assumptions.

-- Christian faith is often enriched by the encounter with other cultures. (eg. Bede Griffiths).

The seeds of God are to be acknowledged, nurtured, and expressed in our own words, regardless of the “culture”: foreign country, a college campus, veterans, young people, elderly, parish.

-- EVERYONE NEEDS TO DO HIS OR HER SHARE OF WEEDING.

Theologian John Dunne says: “The spiritual adventure of our time is one of “passing over” into other religions and cultures in order to “come back” with new insight into our own.”

Biblical foundations: the obligation of welcoming the stranger -- people have welcomed angels (Heb. 13.2), God (Gen. 32.23-32), or Christ (Mt. 25:35) without knowing it.

A new global ethic for an inculturated Christianity will include the spirituality of hospitality, of “welcoming the stranger.” (updated 9/27/11)