

Challenges of Cultures and Religions in Asia to Christian Liturgy

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We can look at the role of the Church in the world in two different ways: as a community in a state of mission or as an institution that is engaged in a mission. In the former case its structures and symbol systems will be conditioned by a sense of mission with its two elements, namely, the Gospel message and the people to whom the community is sent; in the latter case, the expressions of the mission will be conditioned by the institutionalized form of this Gospel and the people whom the institution intends to serve. In the former case, the objective will be the conversion of hearts of the peoples who will evolve their own structures and symbol systems, while in the latter case, the objective will be to make the people belong to the institution with all its structures and symbol systems. In the case of the evangelization of Asia, in most of the cases, what happened was the establishment of the institutionalized form of the Gospel. The result was that we have a Church in Asia, but we do not have an Asian Church. As a consequence there has been a change of religion, but not always a change of heart; there has been the Church, but not always the kingdom. This brought with it also an unhealthy tension in the relationship between the Gospel and the cultures of Asia.

In the field of liturgy we find this dichotomy between the Gospel and culture very much reflected. In the early Church, liturgy was very closely related to the fulfilment of the mission of the Church (see Rom 15:16). Christ came to inaugurate a worship which was the continuation of his self-gift (Heb. 10:5-10). He replaced the institutionalized ritual system of worship with his death and resurrection which was an act of relationship to God through relationship among human beings.

Liturgy was the celebration of the Gospel before being an act of worship of God. This is clearly expressed in the breaking of the bread. Christ manifested himself in the breaking of the bread, and the disciples proclaimed their faith in Jesus by breaking the bread in their liturgy and sharing their possessions in life. The liturgy of the Asian Church was not the revelation of Christ breaking the bread, but an act of adoration of Christ. This resulted in delinking worship from the life and mission of the Church.

A liturgy that is genuinely Christian should become in the first place an experience of the risen Lord for the Christian community of Asia. Like the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:13-33), the Asian Church should listen to Christ explaining to them the meaning of the Scriptures, even the non-Christian Scriptures, showing them how everything is fulfilled in his death and resurrection; they should experience the burning of the heart as did the disciples on the way to Emmaus; they should recognize him in the breaking of the bread in their supper room, in their village. Then we shall have a community of Christians who are in a state of mission as were the disciples after the experience at Emmaus. For this what we need is not a mere cultural adaptation of a set of symbols that come from an institutionalized form of Christianity; we need to undergo a process of symbiosis by which our faith becomes an experience in the context and expresses itself in a symbol system that is capable of communicating this experience to others. This is the real problem of liturgy in the Asian context. It is not a mere question of discovering adequate symbols to express certain truths, but it is a matter that deeply affects our ecclesiology, our understanding of the mission of the Church in Asia, our pastoral methodology and other areas of Christian life and its expressions in this continent. In this essay my aim is to present the problem and offer a few guidelines, by way of suggestions, for the creation of a liturgy which will enable the Church to be a community in a state of mission, rather than be a mere worshipping community. The issue that we have to face is wider than inculturation; I would like to call it contextualization of liturgy.

The lines along which we shall proceed are the following: (1) The present state of cultural change; (2) The role of liturgy in cultural change; (3) The challenge of cultures and religions in Asia to Christian liturgy; (4) The implications of the contextualization of liturgy; (5) The process and method of contextualizing liturgy; and (6) The liturgy and mission in Asia: Dialogue of worship.

I. Present State of Cultural Change

We are living in an age in which profound cultural transformations are taking place all over the world. Some of the characteristics of this cultural revolution seem to be the following:

a) *Subjectification of reality*

There is a heightened consciousness of self in the human person today. This awareness has become so strong that the existing structures are questioned and evaluated in terms of their usefulness to the self in search of fulfilment. In secular life it has resulted in consumerism; in religious life, it is described by some as ontological individualism; "the individual is a primary reality whereas society is a second-order, derived or artificial construct."¹

b) *Lack of confidence in social and cultural institutions*

Society is built on personal intimacy and not on principles that transcend one's own likes and dislikes. There is a desire for the small, more intimate and easily communicable groups. This is slowly replacing the large communities and gatherings in which people feel more impersonal and incapable of communicating meaningfully.

c) *Universalization and politicization of cultures*

The growth of communication systems and the capacity of the technologically progressed countries to import their life-patterns into other peoples' lives has given the impression that a global culture is evolving; in fact, it is nothing but politicization of culture by a particular cultural group. This is affecting to some extent, the traditional cultures, especially in the urban areas.

II. The Role of Liturgy in Cultural Change

When we look at the history of Western Europe we find that liturgy and mode of worship have played a significant role in the period of cultural changes. According to Christopher Dawson, "In the West,

¹ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and commitment in American Life* (New York, 1985), p.10.

after the fall of the Empire, the Church possessed in the liturgy a rich tradition of Christian culture as an order of worship, a structure of thought and a principle of life."² The second Vatican Council was an event deeply related to the cultural change that is taking place in the world today. The Liturgical Constitution was one of the important documents of this Council. Can our liturgy contribute towards the shaping of our culture? There are certain principles that Vatican II has enunciated for the renewal of liturgy which can play a significant role in this period of cultural revolution. The idea that liturgy is a community celebration in which every individual has a role to play is an important contribution towards the building up of a new society. The personality of the individual is to be built up by a process of harmonious collaboration of all individuals. The medieval concept of a community protecting and providing the individual with the necessary means of salvation is replaced by a new concept: salvation is the result of a common endeavor in which each person has a role to play. In every period of cultural change the place that the human being gives to God and to the experience he has of Him plays a crucial role. The human person of today wants to meet a God who allows him to be a collaborator in the building up of the world and not a mere passive receiver of His benefits. This would require that our liturgy is very closely related to the life of the world today and that it is a celebration not only of the presence of God to the human person, but also of his response to God from within his concrete situation. Here comes the role of culture in the liturgy. Such a living contact of liturgy with the living context of the people is what we mean by contextualization of liturgy.

III. The Challenges of Cultures and Religions in Asia to Christian Liturgy

The attitude of the Church towards Asia has been formed starting from a Christian European mentality. As Christians the missionaries could not tolerate any non-Christian religions; as Europeans, with their monocultural attitude, were not able to appreciate anything that was not European. In this situation evangelization

² Christopher Dawson, *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture*, (Garden City, New York, 1958), p. 26ff.

could not be anything but the transplantation of the institutionalized Gospel or the expansion of the Roman Church. With regard to the celebration of the liturgy, there was no choice but to reproduce the Roman form in the Christian communities of Asia. Today there is a reawakening of the Asian awareness in many Christians of this continent. The Churches in Asia feel the need of affirming their identity as Asian identity. The challenges to Christian liturgy come from this reawakened consciousness. We shall see which are the constituent elements of this Asian awareness.

1. The present situation of Asian society

(a) *Asia, a Continent of Religions*

Several world religions have their birthplaces in Asia. They have shaped the lives of the peoples of this continent and their cultures in the course of centuries. Even today, they play a significant role in all the aspects of their lives. Neither colonialism, nor the invasion of Western ideologies have succeeded in weakening or diminishing their vitality. The Church in Asia feels an urgent need to enter into dialogue with these religions as an integral part of her mission. The Federation of Asia Bishops (FABC) has very clearly expressed this:

In Asia especially, this involves a dialogue with the great religious traditions of our peoples. In this dialogue we accept them as significant and positive elements in the economy of God's design of salvation. In them we recognize and respect profound spiritual and ethical meanings and values. Over many centuries they have been the treasury of the religious experience of our ancestors, from which our contemporaries do not cease to draw light and strength. They have been (and continue to be) the authentic expression of the noblest longings of their hearts, and the histories and cultures of our nations.³

(b) *Asia, a Continent marked with poverty and social injustice*

Like all the third world countries of today, the majority of Asian countries have also emerged from the colonial regime. This has created in this continent a poverty of the masses caused by the past

³ *Evangelization, Prayer, Communion in Asian Context*, n.14.

exploitation of resources by colonial powers and by the present accumulation of wealth and concentration of economy power in the hands of the few economic and social elite created by the colonial rulers. As a result of this, we not only have a state of economic poverty, but there is a politics of poverty. The departure of colonial governments did not result in the severing of economic and cultural ties between the colonial and the local elites. Instead, these local elites gradually banished the masses from political power and co-opted the major religions and cultures of each country so that they remain insensitive or at least neutral towards socio-economic injustices. They manipulate the political system to their advantage at the expense of the masses of struggling poor. In the first Plenary Assembly of the FABC, in 1975, the Bishops made the following analysis of Asia:

The majority of the people of Asia are poor, poor not in human values, qualities nor in human potential, but poor in that they are deprived of access to material goods and resources which they need to create a truly human life for themselves, deprived because they live under oppression, that is, under unjust social, economic, and political structures.⁴

(c) *Asia, a Continent of millennial cultures*

Asia can be diversified into seven major linguistic zones, the highest any continent can boast of. The language of myths, legends, songs, etc. put us in touch, in different ways, with the basic truths that every religion grapples with, namely, the meaning and destiny of human existence, man's crippling limitations and his infinite capacity to break through them, the liberation both human and cosmic; in short, the struggle for humanity. Every Asian culture has grown around a soteriological nucleus (salvation content) the recovery of which is indeed a new creation. Thus in Asian culture, religion and society are interdependent, interacting, and mutually transforming. In our Asian world, culture and religion are integrated and interact with the socio-political system of society, permeating every sphere of life.

(d) *Asia, a Continent of spirituality and contemplation*

The contemplative dimension dominates the religiosity of Asia. This is coming from a holistic approach to reality. We can notice an

⁴ On *Evangelization in Modern-Day Asia*, Taipei, 1975, n.19.

integration of cosmic and meta-cosmic elements in Asian religions. This spiritual and the contemplative dimension should be discovered if any one wants to enter into dialogue with Asia.

(e) Asia, a continent of youth

The great majority of the population is young. We might even say that the majority of the young people in the world live in Asia. This has its consequences on the life and activity of the Church. The hope of humanity is in the youth. Their aspirations and struggles indicate the energies of growth hidden in this vast continent. By and large this youth is attracted by western technological progress. It is necessary that they contribute towards the growth of this continent having their roots firmly established in their cultural foundations. No authentic growth can take place without being rooted in one's own soil and in one's own traditions. The Church has to strive to maintain a delicate balance in this dynamics of progress.

2. Challenges of Asia to Christian Liturgy

The Church is called to face the Asia we have described in the fulfilment of her mission. The Church's mission is to proclaim the Gospel to Asia, situating herself in that particular context. Liturgy is one of the moments of this proclamation. Therefore the celebration of liturgy will have to be situated in this Asian context. This can pose some challenges to our way of celebrating liturgy today. We shall try to enumerate some of them.

(a) Asia's Religions and Christian liturgy

Christian liturgy is the celebration of Christian faith. Hence it can be performed only where there is Christian faith. However, this celebration of faith has also a mission orientation. It is a proclamation of the Gospel; therefore, it cannot be delinked completely from the religious situation of the people who may not directly participate in our liturgy. One of the characteristics of the Asia religions is that they are not rigidly bound by dogma. They are based on experience. In worship the symbols make the participants enter into this experience. In such worship it is possible to associate others who may not belong to the same religion. This is not the case with Christian worship. And yet, it is not possible to encounter Eastern religions without this dialogue

with the praying religious communities of Asia. This is a serious challenge not only for liturgy, but also for the very fulfilment of our mission.

(b) Asia's poor and Christian liturgy

Christian liturgy is a celebration of our being together in Christ. It is basically the breaking of the bread. The Lord revealed Himself in the breaking of the bread and the Christians reveal themselves as His disciples in the sharing of the bread at Eucharist and living in charity. In the midst of the poor of Asia, what is the meaning of this Christian celebration of the breaking of bread? Our liturgy is challenged by the unjust situation in which our people live.

(c) Asia's culture and Christian liturgy

All liturgical celebrations are culturally conditioned. We celebrate the mystery of Christ using the signs and symbols taken from the culture of the people who have accepted the Gospel message in a milieu that is totally alien to us. Our symbolic languages have not yet fully entered into our celebrations. Only when we can express our faith in symbols taken from our cultural context will our liturgy become our celebration of the mystery of Christ. Here we have before us the very serious and important question of inculturation.

(d) Asia's spirituality and Christian liturgy

We have seen that the spirituality of Asia is very much marked by a contemplative dimension. Although this contains the risk of a verticality that can be exaggerated, it cannot be denied that no God-experience is possible without an element of contemplation. In our liturgical celebrations quite often this is missing because of the excessive preoccupation with rituals. Although there is provision for silence, in actual practice it is rarely practiced. Besides, there is a legalistic attitude to liturgy in the Catholic church which does not always go hand in hand with the contemplative dimension of prayer and worship.

(e) Asia's youth and Christian liturgy

We have seen the youth of today in Asia, fully involved in the building up of a technological society. They are caught up in the movement towards progress. They need a liturgy that can give

meaning to all that they deeply desire; they need a liturgy that can justify their hope and keep meaningfully alive their aspirations. Is our present Roman liturgy capable of meeting such a need?

IV. Contextualization of Liturgy: Process and Implications

Liturgy is the celebration of our faith. It is another form of proclamation of the Gospel. It should not be reduced to a mere act of worship. In fact Paul calls himself a *leitourgos* because he proclaims the Gospel (Rom. 15:16). The language used for this proclamations is symbolic and not ritual. Christ abolished all rituals and replaced them with symbols (Heb.10:5-10). The symbol differs from the ritual in this that the former is used in communication between two living persons and it has its origin in personal relationship that exists between them, while the rituals are used in the context of conventional relationships which can be also impersonal. We read in the letter to the Hebrews that Christ, when he came into the world, abolished all the ritual worship of the Old Testament and replaced it with a worship performed with his body in an act of relationship with his Father (Heb.10:5-10). The language of the new worship inaugurated by Christ is a symbolic language in which the body is very much involved.

This symbolic language has to emerge from the context in which the Gospel is proclaimed. This is required for the following reasons: (1) Paul says that he fulfils his ministry of proclaiming the Gospel in order that the gentiles may offer an acceptable sacrifice sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:16). His proclamation should evoke a response from the people. This will not happen if he proclaims the Gospel in a symbolic language that is alien to them. Therefore, the symbols must be taken from the culture of the people. (2) The people have to respond from their concrete life situation because their response must enable them to relate themselves to others, living the same life, in the spirit of Christ. Therefore, the symbols should also be related to their life-situation.

Here we come to the question of the source and dynamics of the liturgical symbols. Immediately after the Vatican II, following the guidelines given by the Liturgical Constitution (art.37-40), we spoke of adaptation and inculturation of liturgy. Today, with the proclamatory character of liturgy and its role in the transformation of society, we feel that a more correct term would be "contextualization of liturgy."

1. The Terminology

Many terms have been used in these last 25 years to express what we are trying to mean by contextualization. Since all of them are related to one another and have a certain affinity among themselves, it is necessary to clarify their meanings before we deal with them in their relationship to liturgy.

- *Adaptation.* This term signifies only an external change. This is what happens when one finds himself or herself in a situation temporarily. This happens to a tourist who visits a new country.

- *Indigenization.* In this case we have also an internal change. The external change is accompanied by a change of attitude and mentality. This happens to a missionary who is committed to the people and the land where he is working.

- *Inculturation.* This term expresses what happens when there is an encounter between two cultures, in our case between the culture of the people evangelized and the Gospel. The Gospel gets rooted in the culture. As a result, both the Christian message and the culture undergo a change. "Inculturation implies that the Christian message transforms the culture. It is also the case that Christianity transformed by culture, not in a way that falsifies the message, but in the way in which the message is formulated and interpreted anew."⁵

- *Acculturation.* Here there is an encounter between two or more cultures. This results in cultural change through a process of cultural evolution. In the case of the encounter of Christianity with culture this can be seen in the effort of the missionaries to adapt or accommodate the message, seeking expressions in order to make it understood. It is a kind of cultural translation of the message.

- *Enculturation.* This refers to the cultural learning process of the individual, the process by which a person is inserted into his or her culture.⁶ The result is that the individual tries to create images and symbols which are culture bound. In the case of Christian message, there is a danger of distorting the message.

⁵ Aylward Shorter, *Towards a Theology of Inculturation*, London, 1988, p.14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.5.

• *Interculturation*. In the process of inculturation, it is necessary to keep in mind that the Church is a communion. In this communion the particular Churches interact mutually and thus enrich one another. Inculturation should not make a particular Church to close itself within itself. This mutual enrichment as a result of the communion and communication among Churches existing and operating in a variety of cultural situations is called interculturation.

• *Contextualization*. The Christian community is the sacrament of the risen Lord living here and now in an act of communicating the new life to the world. This is the meaning of being relevant. Relevance is an absolutely necessary condition for the fulfilment of the Church's mission. Context plays a significant role in this effort to be relevant. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the context cannot be reduced to the present; it has its roots in the past and has its dynamism towards the future. Contextualization, therefore, is a process in which life under all its aspects is involved. This is specially true with regard to the proclamation of the Gospel; since liturgy is a particular form of proclamation of the Gospel, perhaps the term more suited for our purpose is 'contextualization'.

2. Factors that Enter into the Process of Contextualization

There are certain elements that we should keep in mind as we describe the process. I would enumerate them as follows: the community and its life-situation, the mystery that is proclaimed, the ecclesial communion, the symbolization or celebration of the encounter between the mystery and life.

(a) *The community that celebrates*. The starting point of any liturgical celebration should be the community in need of salvation. This first element conditions all the other elements. This follows from the very dynamism of Incarnation. By community here we mean an experience of human fellowship with its horizontal and vertical dimensions, its relationship with all the realities which it is situated. According to M. Amaladoss, religious ritual is the actualization, manifestation, celebration, affirmation of this community.⁷

⁷ M. Amaladoss, S.J., *Becoming Indian: The process of Inculturation*, Rome and Bangalore 1992, p. 88.

(b) *The mystery proclaimed.* Liturgy is the proclamation of the Mystery of Christ. This mystery is not the same as those of which we read in the Greco-Roman mystery cultus, in which it is a re-enactment in symbols of a past event only. Here, the mystery is the risen Christ, Christ alive in the midst of the community and the world in which the community lives (Col.1:27). The celebration of the mystery is a call to respond, it is a challenge to the community with all the consequences such a challenge implies.

(c) *Ecclesial communion.* Since the celebration of the liturgy by the community is a faith event, and since this community is in faith-communion with the other ecclesial communities, in the celebration of the liturgy this communion must be safeguarded even as the characteristics and symbol system of the celebrating community is maintained. This communion should also be symbolically expressed.

(d) *Symbolization of the encounter of the community with the Mystery.* The language of liturgy is symbolic. In worship we call it ritual; but it differs from the ritual in this that it is not something that is imposed from above; it is similar to the ritual in this that it is the self-expression of a community. In this sense it has its origin in the culture of the people. At the same time, symbols are not taken from a culture merely to communicate a message; the very performance of symbol is an act communication and in this sense it has its origin in the ethos of the community.

3. The Dynamism of Contextualization

In describing this dynamism we shall first present the official methodology proposed by Vatican II and by the recent Roman document on Inculturation of Liturgy: then we shall make some comments on this methodology.

a) *The Procedure of Contextualization in the Church Documents*

The Liturgical Constitution of Vatican II proposes the following procedure for the cultural adaptation of liturgy. After affirming the validity of pluriformity in liturgical practices consequent on the cultural variety of the peoples who have been evangelized (art.37), the Council document lays down the following conditions for liturgical adaptation:

- Care should be taken that elements that are indissolubly bound up with superstition and error are to be kept out of Christian liturgy;
- The cultural adaptation should harmonize with the true and authentic spirit of liturgy;
- The substantial unity of the Latin rite should be maintained (art. 38).

The Constitution envisages two types of adaptation, namely, simple and radical. The *simple adaptation* consists in effecting changes within the limits set by typical editions of the Roman liturgical books. The Bishops' Conferences are authorized to do it (art.39). On the other hand, the *radical adaptation* aims at creating liturgical celebrations that go beyond the liturgical books published by Rome. The competence to allow this ultimately rests with the Holy See which will act after listening to the Conferences of Bishops who in their turn will have made use of the services of the experts (art.40).

The IV Instruction for the right application of the conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy, entitled '*The Roman Liturgy and Inculturation*' (25th January 1994) practically reiterates the principles enunciated in the constitution. It stresses the following conditions for beginning the process of liturgical adaptation:

- Preservation of the integrity and authenticity of the Catholic faith and the safeguarding of the specific characteristic of Christian liturgy should be taken care of.
- The situation of countries that were evangelized centuries ago and where the Christian faith continues to influence the culture should be distinguished from countries which were evangelized more recently or where the Gospel has not penetrated deeply into the cultural values.
- The situation of a Church where Christians are a minority of the population is another factor to be taken into account.
- In some situations, the population has different cultures and languages, a fact to be taken into account when initiating this process.
- At times the cultural area may be wider than the area of a particular country. In such cases the Episcopal Conferences concerned should work together.

- The Bishops's Conferences should exercise vigilance with regard to the authenticity of faith and care that there is a sufficient scientific basis that can sustain the whole movement.
- The substantial unity of the Roman rite is very much stressed.

The Instruction goes into the details of adaptation by pointing out some liturgical symbols that can be changed and some areas of liturgical celebrations that can be adapted. The liturgical symbols are language, music, gestures and postures, art and architecture. With regard to liturgical celebrations there is a constant preoccupation to maintain the unity of the Latin rite through the liturgical books published by Rome. Thus speaking of the Roman Missal, the Instruction says: "For the celebration of the second Vatican Council, must remain a sign and instrument of unity of the Roman rite in different languages." (n.54). There is greater freedom, always within the liturgical books published by Rome, in the case of the sacraments and sacramentals, especially marriage and funeral rites. In the matter of radical adaptation envisaged by the Liturgical constitution art. 40, the Instruction states that "this should be attempted only after having exhausted all the possibilities offered by simple adaptation. Adaptations of this kind do not envisage a transformation of the Roman rite, but are made within the context of the Roman rite." (n.63)

b) *Comments on the Methodology Proposed by the Church Documents*

In the first place, we see that the Church documents do not go beyond *adaptation*. Even when they speak of *inculturation*, they understand it only as a cultural translation of the Roman liturgy.

Second, it is taken for granted that the countries where evangelization has taken place centuries ago have a liturgy that is relevant to the people. It is possible that centuries of dichotomy between culture and Gospel has made it difficult for the Gospel which can result in a Christianity that has been highly ritualized having very little impact on the human community around it.

Third, the recommendation to consider cultural areas rather than countries in the matter of liturgical adaptation is a very positive guideline. This factor can be of great help in Asia where such situations exist.

Fourth, in the same way, the directive that requests to take into account the cultural pluralism and linguistic diversity that exist in certain countries is very relevant for some of our Asian countries. This can make liturgy more contextualized and relevant.

Fifth, the areas pointed out for inculturation by the IV Instruction touch only the surface of the lives of the people. It limits the whole process of inculturation to a mere decorative and superficial level. When it comes to the liturgical celebration par excellence, the Eucharist, there are too many cautions and the need for uniformity is very strongly stressed.

Sixth, finally, the insistence on the unity of Roman rite to be maintained in liturgical adaptation diminishes the possibility of creative liturgies that can emerge from the encounter of the Mystery of Christ with the context of the peoples. If it is culture that differentiates the liturgical families and creates enriching symbolic diversities in the expression of the same mystery, it is necessary that the particular Churches be permitted the freedom to use their own symbolic language. This will bring about a deeper and stronger communion among all the Churches in the same Mystery than the union that comes from maintaining the unity of the Roman rite. It is important to distinguish the communion of all the Churches among themselves and with Rome from the unity of the Roman rite. At times it may be necessary to sacrifice the latter for the sake of the former. In the light of this, the implementation of art. 40 of the Liturgical Constitution, in its true spirit of openness, will create liturgies that are relevant to the context and proclaim the same Mystery in all its riches. This is what we really want to achieve through contextualization of liturgy.

4. Method of Contextualization

It remains now for us to see how we should proceed in our effort to create a liturgy that is authentically contextualized. We propose the following methodology:

a) Involvement in the context

Liturgy is the saving intervention of God in a world that needs salvation. Where this need is not present or perceived, the saving action cannot become operative. The God who descends there will end up as an object of worship and adoration, in many cases, for the

personal and at times even selfish benefit of the devotee. We may say that He becomes an idol manipulated by the priest and the people. Christian worship cannot be performed without taking into account the context that needs salvation. Therefore, the first thing to be done is to start from the people. It should take into account their living culture, the context and the need to respond to their needs. If this does not happen, it will begin from the scholars. This is an approach from above. "The danger here is that the process is more of translation than of inculturation and the result of the effort does not bring the ritual closer to the people. Since the agents of such translation are likely to be experts, it is also likely that the symbols and rituals they choose tend to belong to the elite level of culture so that they do not mean much to the people at a popular, folk level."⁸

b) *Dialogue with the Context*

Christian liturgy differs from the rest in this that it is an act by which the divine is discovered within the human relationships. This is clear in the very symbolism of the Eucharist. The starting point of worship is to establish a rapport of involvement into the context of the community. This is what we call dialogue of life. In sociological language they call it insertion or immersion in the milieu. It is necessary that those who worship have an experience of the milieu. The incarnational dimension of the Christian mystery is realized here. If this is not there, worship will become a mere obligation to be fulfilled to satisfy the divinity. The role of the priest becomes that of a representative of God, manifested through symbols of isolation and separation. Instead, when there is involvement the symbols of celebration will emerge from the context as was the case with the symbols of the Eucharistic liturgy in the early Church: the bread and wine was taken from the table of sharing.

c) *Prophetic critique*

Involvement in the context does not imply conformity with the context. Here comes the role of the Word of God. Christian liturgy, we saw, is the proclamation of the Gospel. Every proclamation of the Good News is also the denunciation of the bad news. There are symbols of

⁸ M. Amaladoss, S.J., *op. cit.*, p.93.

bad news in the community; these can be what the Liturgical Constitution calls, superstitious or doctrinally erroneous symbols; these can be also symbols of oppression and exploitation, absence of love and fraternity. The proclamation of the Gospel denounces all these. Paul did this in the early communities when he denounced their Eucharistic assemblies in which inequality and discrimination were practiced (1 Cor. 11:17ff.).

d) *Symbolization of the Mystery*

According to the Liturgical Constitution every liturgical celebration is made up of two elements, the invisible, the unchangeable, and the visible, changeable. The changeable is coming from the culture and context. What is the unchangeable? This is not very clearly spelt out. However from what we have said above, this cannot be anything else but the risen Christ in whom the divine meets the human. It is not simply the divine, but it is the divino-human in Christ. So it is a dynamic reality. It is an event that is taking place. The symbols should express this dynamic character. That is precisely the reason why the symbols cannot simply come from a cultural past, but they have to emerge from a context of today that is culturally rooted.

M. Amaladoss says,

Analyzing the religious ritual we can see a three level structure. We have a ritual level made up of various objects, gestures, prayers, rites like washing with water, anointing, imposition of hands, etc. We have social level where all these elements are integrated into a symbolic action, namely initiation of a new member into a community. At the mysteric level the event is experienced as rebirth, a resurrection, a divine filiation. The fulcrum, so to speak, of the three level ritual structure is the social level: the symbolic action of the community which is the mystical body of Christ.⁹

In Christian liturgy we are on the symbolic level, that is, the formation of the community. The liturgical symbols should be able to build up a community. Now these symbols will have to emerge from the community. This emergence has its source in the culture. But "the ultimate value of the society's cultural tradition lies in the ability to articulate

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

it anew in ways pertinent to new historical realities."¹⁰ This is the meaning of liturgical symbolization in the context. Such a symbolization will have not only a deep meaning system as its basis, but it will also be capable of evoking emotions and consequently it will also *challenge the context with a view to arrive at the fullness of life*. This is the real meaning of symbolization of Mystery.

V. Contextualization of Liturgy in Asia: A New Approach

The present liturgical situation of the Catholic Church fully reflects the ecclesiology and missionary approach that has been followed by the Church up to now. Even the ancient apostolic Churches in the East and South Asia have liturgies that are borrowed. During the evangelization of the colonial period Roman liturgy was faithfully transplanted into this continent. All these clearly show that Christian liturgy is an a state of cultural and contextual alienation.

After having brought to light the Asian context in which the church has to fulfil her mission and become aware of what this specificity of Christian liturgy and its contextualization implies, we can try to see what contextualization of liturgy in Asia means.

We cannot follow inculturation, in the sense in which we have explained it above, in our approach to liturgy in Asia. What we need is contextualization. Inculturation might lead us to another type of ritualization, while Christian liturgy should be the symbolization of the community and its struggles towards the fullness of life guided by the Gospel. It is in the light of these that we propose the following guidelines:

1. The Religious Reality of Asia and Christian Liturgy

Religion permeates the lives of the people in Asia on every level. Religious experience is an integral part of the lives of the people. At the same time religion, to some extent, has remained a vertical reality. Here we need a prophetic critique in the light of the Gospel. Hence our approach should be dialogical and critical.

¹⁰ David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy*. (New York, 1984), p. 7.

a) *Dialogical approach*

It is necessary to take seriously the religious experience of the people. These experiences form an integral part of the culture of which the Christians are also inheritors. These experiences have reached the present through symbols; these must be approached with a positive attitude in as much as they convey the action of the Spirit and the response of our people to the Spirit, even if these responses may have been at times inadequate. It is necessary to take the religious experience of our people in its totality. Their Scriptures, too, must be considered as containing the seeds of the Word of God as the conciliar document on the missions very clearly states (AG., 11). Their poetry, literary forms in the formulation of prayers, their style of entering into God experience through meditation and silence should find place in our liturgy. A sharing in the religious ethos of our Asian people is a necessary condition for meaningful liturgies in Asia. In this context, there arises the very thorny issue of sharing of worship. While being faithful to the Roman directives in this matter in their spirit, we should be able to find a way of entering into dialogue with the praying communities of Asia. Our brothers and sisters of other faiths should be able to enter into their experience without in any way compromising our faith and fidelity.

b) *Critical approach*

Since Christian worship differs from the worship of other religions in its stress on discovering the divine in the human, in the very process of dialoguing with them, we also need to maintain a healthy critical attitude. This can be done only by an effective proclamation of the Gospel because Gospel is nothing else but the translation of divine love into human love. This dimension will demand that we critically examine the symbols that come from our religious culture. One of the objections against the inculturation of liturgy that we attempted in India in the immediate post-Vatican II period was that it was highly brahminical; hence it had religious symbols of the oppressors. It did not take into account the popular religious symbols and the religious symbols of the oppressed and downtrodden. Jesus' attitude to Sabbath can serve as a model in this. If there is no critical attitude to religious symbols, we shall run the risk of religious ritualism that can be oppressive as was the case with some of the religious symbols of the Jewish religion at the time of Jesus.

2. Socio-Economic Reality and Christian Liturgy in Asia

We have been talking about contextualization as the ideal approach to face the challenges that Asia cultures pose for Christian liturgy. The context of Asia offers us a social situation that is laden with poverty, caused by economic injustice and social discrimination. We need to enter into this context fully if we want to have a meaningful liturgy. How shall we proceed in this?

a) *Liturgy in small communities.* The situation that existed in the early Church must somehow come back in our Asia Churches. We need to build up basic Christian communities with its liturgy that emerges from their life situation. This should not be an exception, during weekdays. This should become the normal celebration.

b) *Liturgy of the word in mixed communities.* The social situation is the same for Christians and people of other faiths. According to the Roman regulations we cannot have Eucharistic celebrations in common; but nothing prevents us from having the liturgy of the Word in mixed communities around a theme that is relevant to the context. This would mean the formation of human basic communities. Even this should be a regular practice. The Christian community or the parish should not become a ghetto, but a leaven that permeates the whole community with the Gospel values. It is only through human basic communities that this can become a possibility.

c) *Celebration of the common human events.* The national events and feasts, common situation of human disaster, all of these form part and parcel of the life of the whole human community of which the Christian community is an integral part. Vatican II says, "The joys and the hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too, are the joys and hopes, the grieves and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts." Therefore the Christians celebrate the human reality. In doing so, they will have to evolve common symbols that are relevant to context and coming from their culture.

d) *Pluralism of cultures, a factor in the Liturgical Expressions of Asia.* The Church in Asia is accustomed to a liturgy that is coming from a monocultural context of the West and therefore is monolithic in its attitude and form. On the part of the Latin Church, there seems to be

a fear that the unity of faith and of the Church will be endangered if there is no ritual unity in worship. It is necessary to get rid of this fear. Given the pluralistic situation of Asia, there will be a pluralism of liturgical expressions. There is no question of an Asia Christian liturgy in the same way as there is a Roman liturgy in the West. Every human community with its culture and context will formulate a liturgy which will be the celebration of the same Mystery. Just as in the early Christianity we have many rites in the Mediterranean world, we will be assured through the same faith in Christ celebrated in a variety of responses. This will, instead of endangering unity, reveal a richer unity than that which will result from uniformity.

VI. Some concrete proposals

In order to implement the guidelines that we have given above, we need to start working out a methodology of action. We shall give some proposals for this:

1) A study of the religio-cultural reality of the major cultural zones of the continent should be undertaken. For this it would be necessary to enlist the cooperation of the existing centres and institutes of religion and anthropology, even those on local levels.

2) Much has been done to study the socio-economic reality of Asia. This awareness must be brought to the Christian community that celebrates the liturgy. People should be trained to formulate liturgies that are creative taking into account such contexts.

3) Liturgical institutes are needed in our countries. Perhaps an Asia Institute of Liturgy could also be thought of

4) Awareness should be created of each parish being a Christian community in dialogue with the rest of the human community and not a ghetto. The pastors should be trained to animate parishes along this line, instead of being mere ministers of the Christian sacraments.

5) Opportunities for dialogue and common prayer sessions with people of other religions should become a normal practice in every parish in Asia.

6) There should be constant and regular exchanges among various Churches and liturgical centres in Asia in order to share the experiences and thus stimulate creativity in liturgy.

7) We need to open experimental centres where contextualized liturgy could be practiced. This should not only be done in centres where the elite gather, but also where the common people participate.

8) Liturgical training in the seminaries should create pastors who can combine well creativity, flexibility and fidelity. They should be men who are prepared to exercise their ministry in a multi-religious and pluralistic society.

9) Certain means for arriving at God-experience, employed by the religious and cultural traditions belong to the common heritage of all the Asians. These are certain methods of silence and meditation, certain forms of singing and praying. Our Christian communities should not feel that by becoming Christians they have to renounce them, rather they should be taught how to insert them into the Christian prayer and worship.

10) Our Christian communities need to understand the real meaning of Christian liturgy. They should be taught the specificity of Christian worship. The liturgical formation of our Christian communities should enable them to grasp the correct link between liturgy and life, worship and salvation, Eucharist and charity.

Conclusion

The creation of Asian liturgies will very much depend on the creation of authentic Asian Churches. We are at the threshold of the new evangelization of Asia. This evangelization needs a new method which will have to emerge from the reflection of the Christians of Asia today. The Asian reality has not yet been touched by the Gospel. Only Asians who have their cultural roots and who are fully immersed in the context of life which they share with their other Asian sisters and brothers can fulfil this mission. In that process of evangelizing Asia by the Asians, Asian liturgies will emerge. It is an on-going process. It cannot come from the study rooms of the experts; however, the experts facilitate this movement. This, I believe, would be the role of an Asian Institute of Liturgy. □