

Contextual Theological Reflection on Justice¹

JOSÉ M. DE MESA, Ph.D.

Contextual Theologizing

Theology endeavors to express the Gospel faithfully and yet only does it contextually. All theology is contextual. It is necessarily rooted and conditioned by the context in which it arises and is articulated.² Even doctrinal affirmations of the Church are not exempt from their relation to specific contexts. The all-too-little known document, *Mysterium Ecclesiae* (1973) of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith officially acknowledges that all doctrinal formulations are culturally and historically relative in four specific yet interrelated ways.³ They are conditioned by presuppositions (i.e., “the context of faith and human knowledge”); by concerns (i.e., “the intention of solving certain questions”); by thought categories (i.e., “the changeable conceptions of a given epoch”), and by the available vocabulary (i.e., “the expressive power

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² Stephen B. Bevans, SVD, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 3.

³ Declaration *Mysterium Ecclesiae* of the S. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (11 May 1973) as cited in J. Neuner, S.J. and J. Dupuis, S.J., eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1996), 63-64.

of the language used at a certain point of time") of the culture in which they are composed. In this way it also provides a clear example of the historical and cultural conditioning of any theology. So when the 1971 Synodal document "Justice in the World" declared that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel,"⁴ it was expressing something that belongs to the core of the Christian faith, but it was doing so in our present-day context. This insight regarding the contextuality of faith affirmations extends to our reading of the Bible, of a medieval theology like that of Tommaso d'Aquino or of what we collectively call "the Social Teachings of the Church," as well as to any attempt of articulating a specific cultural understanding of "justice." But how are we to understand "justice" if we are to make sense of it contextually?

Although a number of factors may be mentioned as influencing the kind of theological reflection that is created, the cultural and the historical may be considered as major ones.⁵ This implies that, whether we wish to understand an existing theology or theologize anew in a new context, such factors have to be taken into account. The SVD missionary anthropologist, Louis J. Luzbetak, in his book *Church and Cultures*, tells the story about a group of foreign missionaries listening to a lament of a Christian in Asia regarding the manner by which the Gospel was communicated in his country: "You say that you are bringing Jesus and a new humanity to us. But what is this "new humanity" which you are referring to? We want to see, touch, taste, feel what this is. Jesus cannot just be a name to us; he needs to become real to us. You must be able to describe Jesus as a fellow human being." His comment on this incident is most pertinent, "All human beings are *cultural* beings. Jesus must be culturally

⁴ See "The Third Synod of Bishops in Rome, *De Justitia in Mundo* (1971) in Jacques Dupuis, ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1998), 865-866. Cf. also Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Manila: Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, 2004).

⁵ Since culture is a dynamic tradition of experiences of a particular community of people, it necessarily plays over time and has a historical dimension.

relevant if he is really to be understood and appreciated. This is *a most obvious fact unfortunately only too often ignored.*"⁶

Culture and Inculturation in Communicating the Gospel of Justice

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965)⁷ the importance of culture and of inculturation in communicating the Gospel has been emphasized. Profiting from the major shift in the understanding of culture from "classical" to "empirical,"⁸ the Council indicated a number of significant points regarding culture. Firstly, culture is the way people become authentically and fully human.⁹ Secondly, that God communicates through human culture.¹⁰ And thirdly, inculturation is utilized as constituting a general perspective to summarize the history of evangelization: "Living in various circumstances during the course of time, the Church, too, has used in her preaching the discoveries of different cultures to spread and explain the message of Christ to all nations, to probe it and more deeply understand it, and to give it better expression in liturgical celebrations and in the life of the diversified community of the faithful" (G.S. 58). Picking up from where the Council

⁶ Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), p. 374. See also *Discovering the Face of Jesus in Asia Today* (Manila: FABC, Office of Human Development, 1998) regarding the need to discover the meaningfulness of Jesus in Asia.

⁷ Quotations from Vatican II are taken from Walter M. Abbott, S.J., *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: Guild Press, 1966).

⁸ Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 124, 301, 326-330, 362-363. A classicist, writes Lonergan, "would feel it was perfectly legitimate for him to impose his culture on others. For he conceives culture normatively, and he conceives his own to be the norm. Accordingly, for him to preach both the gospel and his own culture, is for him to confer the double benefit of both true religion and the true culture." See, 363.

⁹ "It is a fact bearing on the very person of [human beings] that [they] can come to an authentic and full humanity only through culture..." *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 53.

¹⁰ "There are many links between the message of salvation and human culture. For God, revealing Himself to people to the extent of a full manifestation of the Himself in His Incarnate Son, has spoken according to the culture proper to different ages." *Gaudium et Spes*, art. 58.

left, as it were, Paul VI, who considers the evangelization of cultures of prime importance, thinks that “evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed, if it does not use their language, their signs and symbols, if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life” (E.N. 63).¹¹ And John Paul II underscores this point by saying that faith must become culture if it is to be real.¹²

Utilizing such a cultural-historical perspective in communication of the Gospel is warranted. People spontaneously express themselves through their culture, a collective tradition of experiences and manner of living which becomes second-nature to them.¹³ Hence, it is through this dynamic and generally integrated system of feeling, thinking and behaving that they instinctively tend to make sense of any given reality. A people’s culture embodies and communicates singular beliefs, values and ways of doing things.¹⁴ That is why it is important to seriously take into account the culture of a people in communicating the realities of faith to them. And this has not escaped the notice of the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*. Without reducing culture to this dimension of it, the decree rightly speaks of the Church utilizing the way of life of people to enhance their faith and their grasp of it: “From the customs and traditions of their people, from their wisdom and their learning, from their arts and sciences, these Churches borrow all those things which can contribute to the glory of their Creator, the revelation of the Savior’s grace, or the proper arrangement of Christian life” (A.G. 22).¹⁵

¹¹ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1976).

¹² Pope John Paul II, Letter to Cardinal Agostino Casaroli, *L'Osservatore Romano* (28 June, 1982), quoted in Aylward Shorter, *Inculturation in Africa: The Way Forward*, The Fourth Annual Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD Lecture on Mission and Culture (Chicago: CCGM Publications, 2005), 1.

¹³ Culture as a common universe of symbols?

¹⁴ See Edward Hall, *The Silent Language* (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett Publications, 1959) where he discusses culture as communication, 93-98.

¹⁵ The same idea is found in *Gaudium et Spes*: “From the beginning of her history, [the Church] has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various peoples...” (G.S. 44).

This insight is not new. The Scholastics already recognized the power and wisdom of such tendency in their dictum "*quidquid recipitur secundum modum recipientis recipitur*," whatever is perceived is perceived by the mode of perception of the perceiver.

Relevance to the Cultural Experience and Fidelity to the Gospel

The expediency of employing the culture and history to interpret the faith relevantly dovetails with what, we think, is the first condition for doing theology that is faithful to the Tradition and expressed relevantly: rootedness in the cultural experience of people. The language of theology, in order to be meaningful, has to have a recognizable reference to their actual way of life. The relevance-seeking character of doing theology has, as it were, chronological priority. Its consideration is prior to the question of its truthfulness. For however "true" or coherent any existing theology is, it is likely to be ignored if it does not make any sense in people's lives. It is not enough that the language utilized purports to relate to the experiences of people; it must be a way of speaking which truly resonates with their experiences and, therefore, experientially recognizable. Theological language only communicates meaning when it expresses experiences shared by the community. Such is culture. It is a people's common language that embody and express their collective experiences.¹⁶

Clearly, the consideration and utilization of culture is vital in theologically understanding any given reality such as justice. But theological reflection requires an attentiveness and fidelity to matters theological too. Otherwise, our theology may only be masquerading as theology, whereas in truth it is but a cultural reflection with some superficial and ambiguous link with the Gospel. Theology does not only have to square with the demands of meaning, but also of truth. Legitimate attention to relevance, after all, does not dispense with fidelity to the Tradition. The Gospel, though only truly comprehensible and expressible through culture, is not a creation of any culture.

¹⁶ Since culture is really a people's distinctive tradition of experiences, I use the terms "culture" and "experience" interchangeably.

Doing Contextual Theology: Principle and Approach

So how does one precisely combine the imperative arising from cultural meaningfulness with the demand coming from fidelity to the Gospel? To pose the question in another way, how can diversity in theology be combined with unity of faith? First, a general consideration about a basic principle in doing theology. There are two poles in doing theology: the Judaeo-Christian Tradition and of human experience. Both poles are essential and constitutive in articulating any understanding of the faith. Together they suggest the need of any given theology to be rooted in culture and history and to be faithful to the Tradition. In this principle the two poles interact mutually with each other: the Tradition throws light on human experience as human experience sheds light on the Tradition. In doing theology we grasp the meaning of the Tradition precisely through the lens of human experience and we comprehend our human experience from the vantage point of view of the Tradition. It is important to insist on the mutual interaction of the two poles in order to avoid the imposition of the Tradition understood in a particular cultural way on the pole of experience, as well as to prevent the pole of cultural experience from merely using the Tradition to legitimate its stance.

Based on the general principle of theologizing discussed above, we now consider a specific approach to it, one which takes into account meaningfulness to the cultural context and faithfulness to the Tradition in a situation of theological pluralism not only in the present-day context, but in the Tradition as well. Pluriformity is so much part of our Tradition that one may even argue for its being characteristic of our theology. Yet for all the differences that are present, there is unanimity in the claim that it is the one and the same faith. The one recognizable Tradition is shown to be dynamic through a diversity of expressions. From this perspective neither mere uniformity nor sheer diversity can be the measure of theological truth. What holds unity and diversity together in relation to truth, we think, are the existence of theological constants in the Tradition, especially those found in scripture.

The approach we are proposing here is the utilization of theological constants in different cultural contexts. These so-called constants are the underlying interrelated theological elements

always found in the differing expressions of the faith because they are deemed essential. They are the common themes present and discerned in different theological expressions. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that these constants are never discovered apart from their cultural-historical expression.¹⁷ They keep recurring in the many different local formulations of faith, whether the recurrence is expressed at different historical periods in one locality or, more or less at the same time, in different contemporaneous communities. As a term, constants suggest both steadiness and adaptability, resoluteness and flexibility, commonality and differentiation as exemplified in the very same faith in Jesus Christ but with truly different historical and cultural expressions. They point to the truth yet allow that truth to be understood and expressed contextually. They assure continuity even in what appears (to some) as “discontinuous” historical and cultural formulations. They make possible a theological unity without rigid theological uniformity. They thus serve as indicators of harmony with the Tradition of particular local theologies, but they do so in a manner suitable to specific cultural contexts.

In contextual theology, the resources of the culture serve as interpretative elements. However, in speaking about the faith, such elements are not totally adequate. There may be a need to qualify or at times even negate them in the light of the faith it speaks about. For example, even if we affirm that God is good, this does not mean that the goodness which we know in our experience can fully express the nature of God. Though we can affirm that God is good, we remain to be aware that such affirmation remains to be an inadequate expression of the goodness of God as such. In our study, though we employ terms that speak of the human understanding of God, we are also mindful of the fact that such terms remain to be insufficient articulations of Him. Thus, in contextual theology, we also need to affirm the necessity of both *kataphatic* as well as *apophatic* dimensions of theological language.

¹⁷ As practitioners of contextual theology are quick to remind us, the core of the Gospel message in relation to its specific cultural formulation is not one of the kernel and its husk. It is much more like the layers of the onion to the onion itself. Peeling away each layer will not bring us to the core of the onion, but to disappearance of the onion itself. Cf. Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 33-36.

Functions of Theological Constants

Constants are discovered as constants *post factum* rather than *a priori*. The category of constants requires the test of time before it can be useful. Constants already presume a *de facto* situation of pluriformity in faith expressions, unlike sameness which presupposes a condition of uniformity. We may even say that the development of contextual theological reflection made the discovery of constants imperative. In this sense, constants have often been associated with the means to gauge the faithfulness of a given theological construct to the Tradition.¹⁸ As we shall see, however, this is not the only role it plays in theological reflection. Constants so discerned appear to have two related functions: (1) They can assist in evaluating the truthfulness of a theology, and (2) they can also serve as guide in articulating a fresh interpretation of the Gospel. Together as interrelated elements, constants will serve as continuing indispensable reference points which we can consult and ground our doing of theology. It can easily happen that as we assess our theology with the use of constants, we are at the same time articulating a new one by structuring it according to them. We shall illustrate these two related functions in this research project when we analyze "justice" in Scripture, in the theology of Tommaso d'Aquino, in the Social Teachings of the Church and when we try to articulate a Filipino theology of "justice."

Without minimizing social relevance and cultural meaningfulness of faith expressions, constants may be looked upon as bases of and sign posts for inculturated or contextualized theological reflections which are rooted and faithful to the Judaeo-Christian Tradition. They also enable cross-historical and cross-

¹⁸ This concept of "constants" can be seen, for example, in James D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (2nd ed., London: SCM Press, 1990), 11-32; Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Pasay City: Daughters of St. Paul, 1976), art. 26; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 638-644 and *Interim Report on the Books "Jesus" & "Christ"* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 51-55; and more recently in Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

cultural comparisons thereby serving as reminders as to which aspects of the faith (as represented by particular constants) need to be attended to in a new formulation by a local community. It may well be that a set of constants discovered in one local church may alert other local churches to certain aspects of the faith which they have not quite paid attention to but recognize as essential. After all, every contextualization of the Gospel tends to bring certain aspects of it to the foreground, while others are relegated to the background. This implies that the use of constants in gauging the truthfulness of a given theological reflection requires dialogue with other communities of faith, whether of the past or of the present. Openness and willingness to learn is an imperative within this framework and procedure because constants are precisely discovered in a communally-oriented theologizing.

In the present study about justice, four constants have been discovered in the theologies of the Scriptures, both in the Old and the New Testaments, Tommaso D'Aquino and the Social Teachings of the Church. These four constants are as follows: *norm*, *action involved*, *fidelity to the norm*, and *priority of love*. The *norm* refers to a particular tradition's understanding of God. For example, God can be viewed as a king or a father, and such vision affects the kind of theology that it would have on justice. The second norm refers to the *actions* both of God and human beings in relationship. The study tries to show how God, as the king, manifests his justice to the people on the one hand, and how people manifest justice towards God as king. The third norm refers to the actual practice of justice vis-à-vis the particular understanding of God. For example, the *Social teaching of the Church* tries to draw its grasp of a just society from its concept of the God of Communion, promoting communion and solidarity in the actual context. The fourth norm is *priority of love*. The study observes that all talk of justice in the traditions being examined point toward the source and practice of love. It has been observed that justice originates from love and has to be perfected by love. Hence, that which gains priority in actual social relations is love.

Below one will find a schematic presentation of the constants and how they are contextually interpreted in Scripture, in the

writings of Tommaso d'Aquino, the social teachings of the Church, as well as, their articulation in the Filipino context.¹⁹ □

Schematic Presentations of the Theological Constants of Justice

CONSTANTS	OLD TESTAMENT	NEW TESTAMENT	TOMMASO D'AQUINO	SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH	FILIPINO CONTEXT
THE NORM	GOD IS KING	GOD AS "KING" OR ULTIMATE SOVEREIGNTY	GOD AS THE LORD OF ORDER	FROM THE GOD OF ORDER TO THE GOD OF COMMUNION	ANG MAYLIKHA: PAMANTAYAN NG LAKAS AT KAGANDAHANG-LOOB
ACTION INVOLVED: GOD'S ACT	DIVINE KINGSHIP AS GIFT	KINGDOM AS "GRACE" (GIFT) OF GOD	GOD'S JUSTICE AS PUTTING ORDER IN THE WORLD	GIFT OF SALVATION	ANG DIYOS NA MAKAPANG-YAYARI
ACTION INVOLVED: MAN'S ACT	THE PURSUIT OF THE DIVINE LAW BY LIVING OUT THE TORAH	KINGDOM AS TASK OR OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WILL	CONFORMITY TO THE DIVINE NATURAL ORDER	AGENT OF SALVATION	KILOS NA TAO BILANG TUNGKULIN
FIDELITY TO THE NORM	FROM FAITHFULNESS TO FAITHFULNESS	METANOIA	JUSTICE AS RENDERING THE PERSON'S DUE	DOING SOCIAL JUSTICE	SA KALOOBAN NG DIYOS AT PAGIGING TUNAY NA PAKIKIPAG-KAPWA
PRIORITY OF LOVE	HESED	AGAPE	FROM JUSTICE TO FRIENDSHIP	THE PERFECTION OF THE KINGDOM	KAGANDAHANG-LOOB: ANG PANGINGIBABAW NG KATARUNGANG WALANG KAPANTAY

¹⁹ Because the poor is predominantly featured in discussions of justice as well as the current orientation of the Church for the preferential option for the poor, one can arguably state that "the poor" constitutes a fifth constant. The research team, however deemed that this notion is already included in all the constants.