

INCULTURATION AND POPULAR RELIGIOSITY

Linking Culture and People's Piety

Pope Francis has asserted that there are profound links between people's culture and their religiosity; this interrelationship is uniquely manifested in various forms of popular piety. The Pope treats the importance of this intimate nexus in a lengthy section of his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, entitled "The Evangelizing Power of Popular Piety" (EG 122-126). Pope Francis believes that "we can see that the different peoples among whom the Gospel has been inculturated are active collaborative subjects or agents of evangelization" (EG 122).

This presentation explores both inculturation and popular piety, two key elements contributing to an effective proclamation of the faith today. The theme of "inculturation" is elucidated from the perspective of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), while insights on "popular religiosity" will be drawn from various sources, especially from *Evangelii Gaudium*. Undoubtedly, each topic encompasses a vast area; thus, only pivotal insights can be discussed. In addition, the "mission perspective" of both topics is highlighted.

INCULTURATION. Before addressing the topic of inculturation in Asia and the Philippines, a brief background contextualization on the FABC appears necessary. The FABC is a transnational episcopal structure that brings together fourteen bishops' conferences and eleven associate members, representing a total of twenty-eight Asian countries. The FABC grew out of the historic gathering of 180 Asian Catholic Bishops with Pope Paul VI in Manila during his 1970 Asian visit. Aside from a modest central structure, there are nine FABC offices which carry out many concrete initiatives and projects.

The FABC has been an influential body in the Asian Church following the Second Vatican Council. It has strengthened the bonds of communication among Catholic communities and their bishops and has contributed to the development of a shared vision of the Church and her evangelizing mission in Asia. The FABC asserts that the pathway for the Church in Asia to truly discover its own identity is to continually engage in a three-fold dialogue with ► Asian peoples (especially the poor) [integral development], ► Asian cultures [inculturation], and ► Asian religions [interfaith dialogue]. This programmatic vision of a "triple dialogue" has constructively guided the FABC for five decades. In a word, one can validly assert that the FABC is truly "Asia's Continuing Vatican II."

FABC Perspectives on Inculturation. The Asian local Churches are aware, enthusiastic, and committed to the pivotal challenge of inculturating the Christian faith in the Asian milieu. "Asian" Church workers, both indigenous Asians as well as expatriate missionaries, view the inculturation of the Christian faith as a specific missionary and pastoral commitment. An FABC statement, made over four decades ago, validly expresses their vision: "the decisive new phenomenon for Christianity in Asia will be the emergence of genuine Christian communities in Asia—Asian in their way of thinking, praying, living, communicating their own Christ-experience to others.... If the Asian Churches do not discover their own identity, they will have no future" (*For All the Peoples of Asia I [FAPA]*, 70). This quote succinctly captures the urgent imperative of both building and strengthening each local Church

to be, in the words of the First FABC Plenary Assembly in 1974, “a Church incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated” (*FAPA I*, 14).

A little known fact is that the word *inculturation* was used for the *first* time in Church parlance here in Asia. When the Asian bishops met with Pope Paul VI in 1970, they reflected on “the inculturation of the life and message of the Gospel in Asia” (*FAPA I*, 6). Since that historic meeting from which the FABC eventually emerges, rooting the faith in Asian soil has remained a leitmotif of FABC concerns and reflection. The Christian communities of Asia continue to search for appropriate means to make the Church *truly Catholic and truly Asian*. It is imperative “to deepen the dialogue in Asia between the Gospel and culture, so that faith is inculturated and culture is evangelized” (*FAPA III*, 27). A constant refrain in FABC literature on evangelization is the desire for “intensifying our efforts, especially in the area of inculturation” (*FAPA III*, 215). One must also note that for the FABC the question of the *faith-and-culture integration* is primarily encountered *concretely and pastorally* as the local Churches engage with people and all the life-realities of Asia.

While honestly admitting the enormity of the challenge, Asian Christians do see significant opportunities emerging. “As Asia comes out of the colonial period, its people have become more aware of their national identity. There is a renewed sense of pride in their religious and cultural values.... Reviewing the life of the Church in Asia since Vatican II, we find that the Churches in Asia recognize the indispensable necessity of inculturation as a path of mission. This has been constantly reiterated by the official documents of FABC and the National Episcopal Conferences.... The emergence of indigenous theology, spirituality, religious life, creativity in liturgical celebrations, etc. are clear evidence of the commitment the Churches have made to achieve this goal [inculturated evangelization]” (*FAPA III*, 217). Yet, because culture is dynamic and changing, the urgency of inculturation remains an ongoing challenge.

A Descriptive Definition. In 1970 the Asian bishops committed themselves to “develop an indigenous theology and to do what we can so that the life and meaning of the Gospel may be ever more incarnate in the rich historical cultures of Asia, so that ... Asian Christianity may help promote all that is ‘authentically human in these cultures’” (*FAPA I*, 9). The 1974 FABC plenary assembly states: “Indigenization renders the local church truly present within the life and cultures of our peoples. Through it, all their human reality is assumed into the life of the Body of Christ, so that all of it may be purified and healed, perfected and fulfilled”; the same assembly listed several key tasks in the preaching the Gospel in Asia, one of which is “*inculturation*, which renders the local Church present within the life of our people” (*FAPA I*, 16, 23).

The 1979 mission conference in Manila devoted one workshop precisely to inculturation as an Asian missionary task. Precious insights were forthcoming. “Inculturation is not mere adaptation of a ready-made Christianity into a given situation, but rather a creative embodiment of the Word in the local Church. This is the basic and fundamental process of inculturation.... In this process of inculturation a people receives the Word, makes it the principle of their life, values, attitudes and aspirations. In this way they become the Body of Christ in this particular time and place—a local Church.... The community discovers a new identity, losing nothing of its cultural riches, but integrating them in a new whole and becoming the sacrament of God’s liberating love active among men” (*FAPA I*, 138).

Summary Overview. The FABC journey since 1970 has been perceptively described in the final document of the Seventh FABC Plenary Assembly in 2000. The “call of the Spirit to the local Churches in Asia ... to be truly inculturated local Churches” can be understood as “a concerted series of movements toward a renewed Church,” captured in eight overarching movements. Thus, the FABC sees its growth as: (1) a movement towards a Church of the Poor and a Church of the Young; (2) a movement toward a “truly local Church,” toward a Church “incarnate in a people, a Church indigenous and inculturated”; (3) a movement toward deep interiority and a praying community; (4) a movement toward an authentic community of faith; (5) a movement toward active integral evangelization, toward a new sense of mission; (6) a movement toward empowerment of men and women; (7) a movement toward the service of life in Asia; and, (8) a movement toward the triple dialogue with other faiths, with the poor, and with Asian cultures (cf. *FAPA III*, 2-4).

This eight-fold movement of growth of the local Churches in the FABC region of Asia, particularly in the Vatican II era, is indeed: “Good News from Asia.” It is an inspiring story of faith and service. It is a story of a Church renewed in its evangelizing mission. It is a narrative of God’s love becoming incarnate, a story of inculturation. It is a cause for rejoicing, profoundly grateful for the action of the befriending Spirit in Asia as well as in our own beloved Philippines!

Reflection Questions: How would you describe inculturation? Why is it a path of mission? Explain the Filipino *salubong* (*pagsugat*) Easter ceremony; why is it a fine example of inculturation? Can you mention other Philippine examples of an inculturated faith?

POPULAR RELIGIOSITY. In the contemporary experience of missionaries, catechists, preachers, and liturgists, the task of evangelization is immensely enriched by drawing upon the insights and rituals of popular religiosity. In diverse cultural milieus, pastoral agents are discovering that their task of announcing the Gospel is facilitated and enhanced through the creative use of popular ritual and dramatics. In a word, folk religious practices, diversely termed “popular religiosity,” “popular piety” and “popular spirituality,” are a resource-for-evangelization awaiting full exploration; Pope Francis would wholeheartedly agree!

Often culturally unique, local traditions and pageants can creatively portray core themes of Christianity and biblical faith. Such inculturated proclamation originates in the encounter of life and faith; it is then manifested through the pageantry and festivity of popular religiosity. This approach to liturgy and evangelization enables communities to artistically portray and celebrate their lived Christian identity. Lively expressions of a community’s faith-life need not raise undue anxieties about dogmatic orthodoxy or faithfulness to biblical texts. On the contrary, popular forms of piety should be welcomed as tools of evangelization, because dramatics, pageantry, socio-religious rituals and festivity can often constitute, in themselves, an actual proclamation of biblical faith!

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI’s 1975 famous exhortation on evangelization in the modern world, a lengthy section is devoted to the role that popular piety should play in announcing the Good News. While noting its possible limitations, the pope asserted that “if it is well oriented, above all by a pedagogy of evangelization, it is rich in values; ... one must be

sensitive to it, know how to perceive its interior dimensions and undeniable values.... When it is well oriented, this popular religiosity can be more and more for multitudes of our peoples a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ” (48).

Common Understanding of “Popular Piety” or “Popular Religiosity.” Perhaps the most complete and authoritative resource for understanding the many dimensions of this subject is: *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines* (DPPL). This truly helpful document was issued by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in 2001; it reaches to well over 200 pages. Here one reads that “popular piety” designates “those diverse cultic expressions of a private or community nature” which derive “from a particular nation or people or from their culture” (DPPL 9). They are manifested in a wide variety of external practices, such as “prayers, hymns, observances attached to particular times or places, insignia, medals, habits or customs”; they emerge from “an attitude of faith” and manifest a “particular relationship of the faithful with the Divine Persons, or the Blessed Virgin Mary..., or with the Saints” (DPPL 8).

Recent Popes on “Popular Religiosity.” Saint Pope Paul VI devoted an entire section of *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (48), the *magna carta* of contemporary evangelization, to popular piety. He noted that one finds among Catholics “particular expressions of the search for God and for faith.... These expressions were for a long time regarded as less pure and were sometimes despised, but today they are almost everywhere being rediscovered.” As noted earlier, Paul VI saw the value of popular piety and that it “can be more and more for multitudes of our people a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ” (EN 48).

Saint Pope John Paul II has spoken positively about popular religiosity: “Popular piety is an expression of faith which avails of certain cultural elements proper to a specific environment.... Genuine forms of popular piety, expressed in a multitude of different ways, derive from the faith, and therefore, must be valued and promoted. Such authentic expressions of popular piety are not at odds with the centrality of the Sacred Liturgy. Rather, in promoting the faith of the people, who regard popular piety as a natural religious expression, they predispose the people for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries” (September 9, 2001).

Pope Benedict XVI, when he addressed the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean on May 13, 2007 at the shrine of Aparecida, spoke of “the rich and profound popular religiosity, in which we see the soul of the Latin American peoples.” This faith emerges as “a synthesis between their cultures and the Christian faith”; it is marked by “love for the suffering Christ, the God of compassion, pardon and reconciliation..., the God who is close to the poor and to those who suffer.” Here one finds a “profound devotion to the most holy Virgin of Guadalupe, the *Aparecida*, the Virgin invoked under various national and local titles.... This religiosity is also expressed in devotion to the saints with their patronal feasts, in love for the Pope and the other Pastors, and in love for the Universal Church as the great family of God.... All this forms the great mosaic of popular piety which is the precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified.”

Insights from Pope Francis. Jorge Bergoglio as Archbishop of Buenos Aires and now as Pope Francis has spoken and written extensively about popular piety. He asserts in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Popular piety enables us to see how the faith, once received, becomes embodied in a culture and is constantly passed on. Once looked down upon, popular piety came to be appreciated once more in the decades following the Council. In the exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Pope Paul VI gave a decisive impulse in this area. There he stated that popular piety ‘manifests a thirst for God which only the poor and the simple can know’ and that ‘it makes people capable of generosity and sacrifice even to the point of heroism, when it is a question of bearing witness to belief.’ Closer to our own time, Benedict XVI, speaking about Latin America, pointed out that popular piety is ‘a precious treasure of the Catholic Church,’ in which ‘we see the soul of the Latin American peoples’” (EG 123).

Francis asserts: “The Aparecida Document describes the riches which the Holy Spirit pours forth in popular piety by his gratuitous initiative. On that beloved continent, where many Christians express their faith through popular piety, the bishops also refer to it as ‘popular spirituality’ or ‘the people’s mysticism.’ It is truly ‘a spirituality incarnated in the culture of the lowly’.... It is ‘a legitimate way of living the faith, a way of feeling part of the Church and a manner of being missionaries’; it brings with itself the grace of being a missionary, of coming out of oneself and setting out on pilgrimage” (EG 124).

The Pope continues: “Underlying popular piety, as a fruit of the inculturated Gospel, is an active evangelizing power which we must not underestimate; to do so would be to fail to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit. Instead, we are called to promote and strengthen it, in order to deepen the never-ending process of inculturation. Expressions of popular piety have much to teach us; for those who are capable of reading them, they are a *locus theologicus* [theological starting point] which demands our attention, especially at a time when we are looking to the new evangelization” (EG 126).

Philippine Bishops on Popular Religiosity. The official *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (NCDP), which bears the title *Maturing in Christian Faith*, observes: “With the introduction of ‘Hispanic Christianity’ by the early Spanish missionaries into an already existing indigenous belief system, the beginning of what is called today ‘folk’ or ‘popular Catholicism’ was initiated; ... this popular religiosity still remains strong” among Filipino Catholics (NCDP 36).

“Traces of veneration of dead ancestors—apparently a pre-Christian Filipino practice—can still be found today. Catholic devotion to the souls in purgatory, and the celebration of All Saints and All Souls Days, has tended to reinforce these beliefs at times. Perhaps the most characteristic aspect of Filipino popular religiosity ... is devotion to saints. This fits in well with the Filipino’s natural attraction for the concrete as well as for mediators.... The value of devotion to the saints remains high, but the catechetical effort must lead it to a more direct link with Christ, the source and goal of each saint’s life” (NCDP 40).

The same affirmation of folk religiosity “can be made of the traditional Filipino devotion to Mary, which is grounded in Filipino Catholicism’s Hispanic roots, as well as in Filipino society’s esteem and respect for women, especially mothers—itsself a cultural trait fostered and

deepened by the Christian Faith.” There are many “common titles under which Mary is venerated: Our Lady of the Rosary, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, of Lourdes, of Mount Carmel, of Sorrows, etc. Mary plays an important role in both Christmas and Holy Week festivities” (NCDP 43).

Relationship between Liturgy and Popular Devotions. The liturgy remains the center of the devotional life of the Church; thus, popular devotions should never be portrayed as equal to the liturgy or as a substitute for it. The liturgy-popular piety relationship “must be approached primarily from the perspective of the directives contained in the constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [the Vatican II document on the liturgy], which seeks to establish a harmonious relationship between both of these expressions of piety, in which popular piety is objectively subordinated to, and directed towards, the Liturgy” (DPPL 50).

Succinctly stated, the position of the Church is: “The liturgy and popular piety, while not coterminous, remain two legitimate expressions of Christian worship.” Indeed, “the liturgy and popular piety are two forms of worship which are in mutual and fruitful relationship with each other.” It is also a fact that “popular piety, because of its symbolic and expressive qualities, can often provide the liturgy with important insights for inculturation and stimulate an effective dynamic creativity” (DPPL 58).

Conclusion. Filipino popular religiosity, especially its Marian dimensions, has been recognized for its significant contribution in preserving and promoting the faith-life of local Christians, as this author can verify. In 1985 Pope John Paul II wrote to Filipino Catholics: “One of your best-loved hymns says that you are a *‘pueblo amante de Maria,’* a people with a special love and devotion to Mary. My earnest wish is that you will never cease to be *‘pueblo amante de Maria’*; ... Be confident that your turning to Mary’s intercession ... will not be in vain” (December 8, 1985).

Indeed, popular piety remains a potent resource that necessarily must be at the service of a renewed evangelization for future generations of believers—all across the face of global Catholicism. Folk religiosity should figure prominently in all effective programs of the “new evangelization”—especially for the youth. The challenge of inculturation—integrating faith and life—remains urgent. As fervent Catholics, the popular prayer to Mary remains in our hearts, on our lips, and guides our efforts as missionary disciples: “Mary, show us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus.”

Reflection Questions: What is your experience of popular devotions and pious practices? Who introduced you to popular piety? Describe your own favorite devotion. What insights from various popes are most helpful to you? What are your remaining questions about this topic?

[J. Kroeger]