

Inculturation of the Word (Gospel): An Indian Tribal (Oraon) perspective

Introduction:

“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn. 1:14)

In the course of its history, the Church has been in dialogue with the cultures of people among whom she carries out her mission. God reveals Himself in history and this revelation is handled by the human beings according to their own strength and limit in the society which comprises of many cultures. In this process, the Gospel gets rooted in the cultures taking their specific features. The Gospel in its turn challenges cultures to transformation. Thus Gospel-Culture encounter leads to the enrichment of cultures and of the Christian community. In the course of history this revealed Word has taken its shape in various cultures or in other words, the Word has been inculturated not only in various cultures but also in the new meaning systems in other religions. So there is an intimate relationship between religion and culture. In multi-religious context like Asia this interrelatedness between religion and culture is very obvious. Both religion and culture are indistinguishable especially in the context of tribals (Oraons). Religion and culture are in dialectical relationship.¹ On one hand, culture provides an overall meaning system, on the other hand, religion is that element in culture which deals with ultimate or limit questions like the significance of birth and death and of the problem of evil. One can say that it is a deepest element in culture.

The religion (faith)-culture encounter or the Gospel-culture encounter is an ongoing process and our way of life as Christians is the outcome of this encounter. The Gospel-culture dialogue is nothing but an ongoing dialogue between God and people. Wherever the gospel is lived, wherever it is preached, we are obliged to search continually for ways in which the good news can be more deeply lived, celebrated and shared². And this is nothing but the process of inculturation. Where does inculturation come into play – only in Asia, Africa or also in Europe, Antarctica, Australia, North and South America? Considering the ever-changing or better said, ever-evolving aspect of culture, one can say that inculturation of the Gospel applies to everybody whether s/he is in Europe or in Asia or in Africa or in America or in other continents of the world. One needs to inculturate the Gospel in one’s life constantly and get transformed by its message. In broad sense,

¹ Amaladoss, M., *Beyond Inculturation*, Vidyajyoti Education and Welfare Society/ISPCK, 2005, p. 62.

² Schineller, P., S.J., *A Handbook on Inculturation*, 1999, p. 3.

the inculturation has to take place constantly in one's own life in order to make Gospel relevant to one's day to day life or to be transformed by the Gospel message. In this article I focus my attention on inculturation in Indian tribal context. In order to speak of inculturation in Indian church, it is important to know about the Indian multi-religious and multi-cultural context.

1. Indian religious and cultural context

India is a land of many religions and various cultures corresponding to their religions. People of different faiths accept the phenomenon of cultural pluralism. However, many refuse to perceive that cultural pluralism results in religious pluralism. In India there are some dominant cultures. For example, Hindu culture is dominant because 80% of the Indian population are the followers of Hindu religion. There are other cultures corresponding to various ethnic groups, Tribals, Dalits, etc. which are not very strong in comparison to Hindu culture but they have their own space in Indian multi-cultural context. So there is no "one Indian culture" as such. Multi-religions and multi-cultures are the facts of the day and they cannot be ignored. In such a diverse context it is a challenging task for the Indian church to spread the Good News effectively in various cultures.

The Indian Church's struggle to discover herself and her mission in the context of plurality of religions, cultures, socio-economic and political ideologies invites her to be self-critical about the way of her being and her mission. While understanding herself, it is imperative for the Indian Church to recognize her vocation to unfold herself in Indian cultures as well as identify herself with the oppressed, the ethnic groups, the marginalized and the victims of globalization.

While unfolding itself in the different cultures of India the Church has to be sensitive towards the cultures of the oppressed groups, Tribals, Dalits, and other marginalized groups. The reception of the Gospel by a culture to a large degree provides broad guidelines; we can expect that there will be a considerable amount of variation in the kind of activities that each community takes according to its socio-cultural background. The Indian Theological Association observes that today, in India, the Gospel-culture encounter seems to be facing various problems. Many people do not perceive the Gospel, in its inherited form, as relevant to their culture and context³. According to the experience it is particularly true of the tribal culture. On the other hand, the transforming impact of the Gospel is not easily recognized in the cultures of India.

³ The Living Word: Journal of Philosophy and Theology, Pontifical Institute, Carmelgiri, Alwaye, September-October 2001, p. 323.

2. Concern:

This theme on 'Inculturation' attempts to answer the questions such as - What should the Indian Church do to become immersed in the joys and the hopes, grieves and anxieties of people, particularly the poor and the excluded, irrespective of caste and creed? How can the poor, the marginalized, and the victims of oppression be mediators of the saving presence of God in the Indian soil? How can the Indian Church open itself to the culture of the tribals? The primary focus at this time in the context of the tribals (Oraons) is to build up a truly local church in their midst. So in this context inculturation becomes inevitable if a local church has to be created. When one speaks of inculturation of the Gospel in a particular context, it is pre-requisite that one has a wider knowledge and experience of the culture of that particular context. In the context of the Oraons, it has to start from the actual tribal reality; the living traditions, the cultures, the religions (all the life-realities) of the people in whose midst the local church sunk its roots deeply and whose history and life the local church gladly makes its own⁴. Before we discuss inculturation in any context, it is necessary to have an overview of history concerning inculturation.

3. Brief survey on inculturation

Like liberation theology, Inculturation is another important model of contextualizing theology. Inculturation is one of the patterns in which the pluriform character of contemporary Christianity manifests itself; it is of recent origin, though with precedence in Christian history. Inculturation is rooted in tradition. Indigenisation is very much related to a very ancient and venerable tradition that can be traced back to Jesus Christ, the Word incarnate. So, before coming to the brief survey of the history of inculturation, it is important to know its origin, i.e., Incarnation itself.

3.1. Jesus, the subject matter of inculturation:

The subject matter of inculturation is Jesus himself, the Christ to whom the Gospel testifies. Through his dialogue with culture, Jesus is inculturated in successive traditions. He accepts human cultures and expresses himself through them. He lives their way of life. The analogy indicates Christ's need of cultures in order to spread his Good News of the Kingdom and to share his life with humanity. There could have been no earthly ministry for Jesus if he had not adopted the cultural concepts, symbols and behaviour of his hearers. His cultural solidarity with the Palestinian

⁴ *Vadappuram, J., Towards a local Tribal Church, 2009, p. 149.*

communities of his day was necessary condition for communication with them. The same is true of the Church in every age and place. Inculturation is a necessity for the continuation of Christ's mission⁵. The cultural education of the earthly Jesus, his adoption of a specific human culture, inserted him into the whole historical process of communication between cultures. This is evident from the New Testament itself. By adopting a given cultural identity, Jesus accepted the ways in which that culture influenced, and was influenced by other cultures.⁶ Therefore, it is obvious that Jesus accepted the intercultural process as a consequence of his own inculturation, and that this should be a sufficient precedent for the Church that continues his mission in various cultures.

3.2. Meaning and background of inculturation:

The term 'inculturation' is no more a strange word in the context of Missiology. Many writers and thinkers have published books and articles on this topic. The books or articles on inculturation are mostly related to the context of Africa and also to the context of Asia. The origin of the term 'inculturation' goes back to Herskovits⁷, who coined the sociological term 'enculturation' which refers to the process by which a person adapts to and assimilates the culture in which he lives. This term was later changed into inculturation in the missiological circle which designates the process by which the Gospel takes roots in local values, discovering and using their richness, as well as purifying their deficiencies.

The introduction and popularisation of the term 'inculturation' seems to be largely due to the members of the Society of Jesus. The very first recorded use of the word in a theological sense seems to be in the address of Fr. Joseph Masson SJ, professor at the Gregorian University in Rome, who made it shortly before the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. It goes like this:

Today there is a more urgent need for a Catholicism that is *inculturated* in a variety of forms (*d'une facon polymorphe*).⁸

In the synod on Evangelization in Rome in October 1974, the bishops of Africa and Madagascar spoke largely about the reality of inculturation but they did not use the term as such. The first

⁵ Shorter, A., *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, 1988, p. 80.

⁶ *Ibid* p. 81.

⁷ **Melville Jean Herskovits** (September 10, 1895 in Bellefontaine, Ohio - February 25, 1963 in Evanston, Illinois) was an American anthropologist who firmly established African and African American studies in American academia. He obtained a Bachelor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1920 and obtained his Master's and Ph.D. in Anthropology from Columbia University in New York under the guidance of the German-born American anthropologist Franz Boas, available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/melville_Herskovits, accessed on 18.11.2010.

⁸ Masson 1962, p. 1038, cited in *Aylward Shorter, Toward a Theology of Inculturation, 1988*, p. 10.

assembly of FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference) in the same year used the term inculturation in this way:

The local church is a church incarnate in a people, a church indigenous and inculturated. And this means concretely a church in continuous, humble and loving dialogue with the living traditions, the cultures, the religions [of Asia].⁹

The term gained wider acceptance in the 32nd General Congregation of the Society of Jesus which issued a decree "*On promoting the work of inculturation of faith and Christian life*" and on the decree on formation. The term used by the Jesuits was the Spanish *enculturación* which was translated into Latin, the language of all their documents, as *inculturatio*. This was subsequently translated into English as *inculturation*. The term entered into the vocabulary of Pontifical documents when John Paul II used it for the first time in *Catechesi Tradendae* (n.53). He describes the term 'inculturation' in the following words:

Through inculturation the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces people, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within.¹⁰

It can be said that inculturation is the on-going dialogue between faith and culture or cultures. More fully, it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures. Fr. Pedro Arrupe, SJ defines it as:

The inculturation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question (this alone would be no more than a superficial adaptation) but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about a 'new creation'.¹¹

From the above definitions it can be said that we are not only talking about the first insertion of the Christian message into a hitherto non-Christian culture or cultures. Of course, the first

⁹ [http://www.fabc.org/plenaryassembly/Tribute of Fr.James H. Kroeger for FABC Award to Fr. Arevalo](http://www.fabc.org/plenaryassembly/Tribute%20of%20Fr.James%20H.%20Kroeger%20for%20FABC%20Award%20to%20Fr.%20Arevalo), accessed on 19.11.2010.

¹⁰ *John Paul II*, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 52.

¹¹ *Arrupe, P. S.J.*, Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation, 1978, in *Shorter, Aylward*, *Toward a Theology of Incarnation* London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1988, p.11.

insertion of the Faith into a culture is an extremely important and significant moment in the process. It is a stage of inculturation that is unique for each historical instance. The already Christianized culture represented by the messengers of the Gospel and missionaries must without any doubt influence the so called 'new creation' of the culture they evangelize. It certainly affects the response from the evangelized. Further it can be deduced that the Christian Faith cannot exist except in a cultural form. When we speak of Christian life, we are necessarily speaking of a cultural phenomenon. It is a distinctive way of life that can only operate culturally.

For the successful inculturation of the Gospel one needs to consider the various aspects of human society, for instance, their multi-ethnicity, multi-religiosity, multi-cultural context. And if we speak of Indian multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural context, inculturation is not only a challenging task but inevitable and urgent as well.

4. Inculturation and Indian context

The Church in India has a long history. It is speculated that Christianity might have arrived in India before it arrived in Europe. It reached India almost 2000 years ago. In spite of having a long history, the Church in India has not achieved its Indian identity. "The Christians in India are considered a foreign group, not only by the RSS, but also by otherwise sympathetic Indians. Our governance is controlled by foreign centres of power. We are financially dependent on foreign aid. Our thinking (theology), ways of worship (liturgy) and ways of *sadhna* (spirituality) are guided by foreign ideologies. Our works, particularly in the field of education, are seen as purveyors of western culture mingled with modernity"¹². In such given fact, the question arises: how Indian are we? As Christian in India what is our contribution to the transformation of the Indian society and culture? We are so much engrossed in and guided by foreign ideologies that we are blind to see the signs of the time in Indian context and act accordingly. "Even when we are Indian in our social life, we seem to become 'foreign' as we cross the threshold of the Church"¹³. There is obviously a struggle to be Indian Christian. In order to be Indian Christian we need to respond to God's Word in our context and through our culture. The Church in India needs to accept and take up the challenge that India is really a multi-religious and multi-cultural country. As said already, we need to consider religious and cultural plurality as God's purpose. Today the subaltern cultures like

¹² *Amaladoss, M.*, Our Mission in India Today, Vaiharai: A Theological Quarterly, vol. 6, nos. 3&4, September & December, 2001, p. 12.

¹³ *Ibid.* P. 13.

Dalits and tribals are asserting their identity and autonomy in the church. This needs to be respected and promoted. Some very rich cultures like tribal and cultures of other ethnic groups need to be restored, which have been in the past considered as the works of devil and destroyed by the Church. Every cultural group must be recognized, respected and accepted as equal in the church community. The encounter between Gospel and the culture should strive to respond to these challenges. Inculturation of the church in India in its context is the need of the hour.

The church in India understands the term “inculturation” not as an instrument for achieving a goal but as an unfolding of its being Church in Indian cultures, and a way of identifying itself with the struggles of all who seek a fuller and dignified human life.¹⁴ As already mentioned, due to the mutual influence of religion and culture, it is difficult to find a culture completely impervious to religion, or to keep a religion unaffected by culture. Indian culture has been formed and influenced by various religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It is Hinduism that has predominantly though not exclusively, influenced and shaped the Indian cultures. Hence, inculturation in India involves incarnation into a largely Hindu culture not excluding the Islamic, Buddhist, Jainist, Tribal religious elements in them. In other words, inculturation includes religious traditions as part of the total reality. Therefore, the Church and all her members should “prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration, acknowledge, preserve and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture”.¹⁵ We are expected “to learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth”.¹⁶ We are supposed to save “whatever truth and grace are to be found among the nation, as a sort of secret presence of God”.¹⁷

The Gospel-culture encounter must be seen as a dimension of God’s ongoing dialogue with God’s people. The Good News of Jesus Christ - the Gospel – calls people to a radical transformation of life in every age and time. It is mediated to the people in terms of their culture. When people are converted to God by the power of the Word and the Spirit, their culture too is transformed. This is an ongoing process. Today, in India, the Gospel-culture encounter seems to be facing various problems. Many people do not perceive the Gospel in its inherited form, as relevant to their culture and context. On the other hand, the transforming impact of the Gospel is not easily

¹⁴ The Living Word: Journal of Philosophy and Theology, Pontifical Institute, Carmelgiri, Alwaye, vol. 107, no. 4 September – October 2001, p. 322.

¹⁵ NA No 2.

¹⁶ AG No. 11d.

¹⁷ AG No. 9.

recognized in the cultures of India. To understand these problems and with a view to solving them, it will help to look at their history. My focus here will be on the history of the church among the Oraon tribe in Chhotanagpur and in particular in Chhattisgarh.

For the successful inculturation of the Gospel one needs to consider the various aspects of human society, for instance, their multi-ethnicity, multi-religiosity, multi-cultural context. When one speaks about the inculturation in Indian context, one has to consider not only its dialogical character, but also must show empathy towards the tribal people. This is because the Dalits, tribals and other marginalized ethnic groups are the oppressed class and in cultural-religious dialogue there is a danger of neglecting them. In the spirit of honesty, one has to admit that church in India has been not open enough in its mission to appreciate the different cultures, particularly of Tribals, Dalits and other ethnic and regional groups and receive the treasures in these cultures.¹⁸

In the context of tribal/Oraon we need to have a deeper understanding of the intimate connection between religion and culture that forms the basis for the inculturation of Christianity. In the following paragraphs we will deal with short history of Christianity among the Oraons and then we will deal with the possible areas for inculturation.

5. Inculturation and Church of Chota Nagpur and Chhattisgarh

The Christianity came among the Tribals of Chota Nagpur with the arrival of Baptist Missionaries from England in 1810, and then it was continued by the Lutheran missionaries of Berlin called Gossner Mission in 1839¹⁹ but their mission was not very successful. Later on with great success it was carried forward by the Belgian Jesuit missionaries in 1868. Father August Stockman was the founder and unwitting hero of the Chota Nagpur Mission.²⁰ Among the Oraons of Chhattisgarh the Christianity came in the year 1889-90.²¹ As traditionally the church has very much emphasized the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ to the people of other religions, the Jesuits preached the Gospel among the tribals, who were the followers of tribal religion (*Sarna*). This religion of the tribals permeated their life and supported it. But because of their being victims of the immense oppression and losing of their land in the hands of non-tribals, their belief system in tribal religion

¹⁸ The Church in Dialogue: Final Statement of 25th General Body Meeting of the CBCI (Jalandhar, March 1-8, 2002) in Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection 2002, vol. 66, p.299.

¹⁹ *Toppo, P.*, Emergence and Challenge of the Church in Chotanagpur, Agrawal Press and Process, Ranchi, 2006, p.17.

²⁰ *Josson, H.*, La Mission du Bengal Occidental, vol. 1, pp. 396ff.

²¹ *Tirkey, B.*, History of Christianity in Jashpur, 2001, p. 1.

was also affected. "Since their religion was closely linked with their socio-economic system, it was natural that a disruption of the tribal way of life should influence their religion also, and weaken its hold on them."²² As a result many began to lose faith in *Sarna* because of its inadequacy to deal with the crisis and found Christianity as liberator from their present crisis. So it was through Christianity that the tribals of Chota Nagpur experienced their human dignity.

On one hand Christianity provided integral liberation to the tribals involving itself not only in the spiritual dimension but also in the temporal dimension of a person as the *Evangelii Nuntiandi* rightly puts it as the liberation proclaimed by the Church "...cannot be confined to any restricted sphere whether it be economic, political, social or doctrinal. It must rather embrace the whole man in all his aspects and components extending to his relation to the absolute, even to the following Absolute which is God."²³ On the other hand, the missionaries intentionally or unintentionally spread their own western culture through liturgy, spirituality, art, architecture, catechesis, Christology, Sacraments, church organisations and ministries. Christianity has projected a bad image of itself in the course of its missionary enterprise and in its work of evangelization during the last five centuries. The Christianization of a country, the acceptance of the Gospel and the expression of young churches in these countries should also adopt the culture of the missionaries and their sending churches. The Gospel had the trade-mark of western Christianity. Correspondingly it contributed to the elimination or disparaging of the local cultures of the people (Tribals) evangelized. For instance, the tribal musical instruments were forbidden to use during liturgical celebrations. Christianization meant westernization in terms of socio-cultural life. Its consequence was alienation of tribal people from their own culture, social milieus and religious traditions, and evasion from their people's historical adventure. The Christians are considered as aliens or at least as second class citizens and a marginal group living in a ghetto of their own. They are considered introverted or foreign-oriented, with their eyes directed either on themselves or on foreign countries, and not their fellowmen. Now they need to work hard to get themselves accepted first as Indians and then as the members of their particular cultural group. This can be achieved by interaction between church and different tribal religious, cultural, social, economic aspects.

²² *Fedelis, De Sa*, Crisis in Chotanagpur (Bangalore, A Redemptorist Publication),1975 p. 159, in *Aril, James*, S.J. The Missionary Approach of Fr. Lievens, 2001, p. 36.

²³ EN No. 33.

The process of inculturation involves analysis of the cultural situation, examination of the biblical message and church tradition, and reflection on one's own experience.²⁴ Inculturation covers the total reality of the Church. Its expression refers to the formation of the local community of Christians and training of the clergy and the religious, their life-style or sociological adaptation, the incarnation of the gospel in concrete life situations and civic activities, economic and political systems, and the cultures of each country, region and place. It refers to the domains of art, architecture, sculpture, painting, decoration, music, dance and drama. It refers to theology, spirituality, the triple ministries of the word (preaching, evangelization, catechesis) worship (liturgy) and service (formation of faith and organization of Christian community towards Christian maturity, witness in society and humble service in life). There is connection among all of them. As a whole range of areas of church life calls for inculturation, I will comment only on some of the aspects which need much attention in the tribal context like: catechesis, liturgy and sacraments, church art and architecture, church structure, prayer and spirituality, and Christology. These are the areas where the process of inculturation must take place, and where Christian Gospel values influence and mould human behaviour. In the process of commenting on these areas I will raise more questions than I can give answer.

At this juncture it is important to note here, that for the tribals of Chhattisgarh I am not taking the Gospel to where it has never been preached. Rather I am involved in places where Christianity has been established, the missionaries from Europe have planted the faith; we have already celebrated the centenary of its coming. In other words, the gospel has already been brought, the liturgy has been celebrated and catechism has been learnt. Obviously, all these have been done from the perspective of missionaries, whether from Belgium or Germany or England. The present form of Catholicism with its western colour has remained foreign to the tribal culture. Now we need to express our faith in a creative inculturation with tribal values and thought patterns.

5.1. Catechesis

Catechism is the means through which the basic foundation of faith is laid and which further shapes one's Christian faith in a believing community in a particular context. It is interesting to see how young children rush to attend the catechism classes in the mission schools. Much more enthusiasm can be observed when children are catechised for first communion and confirmation. But the question here is – what catechisms are being used and how are they being taught? Do

²⁴ *Schineller, P., S.J., A Handbook on Inculturation, 1990, p. 75.*

they reflect the tribal (Oraon) culture, their ways of thinking and learning or are they simply imported from Europe? Should there be more inclusion of stories, proverbs, songs which are prominent features of tribal cultures? We find in the New Testament that Jesus himself used many stories, parables and allegories in his ministry. The stories, proverbs and songs are deeply rooted in tribal religious tradition and imagery and play a very important role among the tribals in conveying the message. These methods of catechising and preaching should be emphasized. More effort has to be given to adult catechesis, so that adults working in schools, marketplaces, and the business world can inculcate Christian values into those spheres.

At this juncture it is good to mention the suggestion of Pope Paul VI about the creation of new official ministries in the church. He suggests the creation of the ministry of Catechist as one of them²⁵. The role of a catechist is very important among the tribals in Chhattisgarh, because some of the parishes extend to remote villages where the Christians are cut off from the parish. In such places the catechist can play a vital role to animate the basic Christian communities. At present insufficient recognition and training is given to the thousands of catechists of Jashpur-Ambikapur-Raigarh dioceses. Should the church, the parish, and the diocese not give more official status to the role of catechist as suggested by Pope Paul VI? The catechists could be given appropriate training according to the need of the hour and they could be installed during a public liturgical celebration.

5.2. Art and architecture

The tribals of Chota Nagpur may not speak concretely of art and architecture (these are too abstract for them), but their daily life is permeated with a certain form of art, which gives them joy and satisfaction and enhances their quality of living. It is expressed in the objects, utensils or instruments for their daily use. For instance, a young man is appreciated and praised if he makes a plough, a yoke or a pair of carrying net. Similarly, a young woman is appreciated if she knows to make a *bindo*²⁶, a mat with the help of palm leaves, leaf-cups and leaf-plates, etc. Man's art can be seen in how he constructs house and woman's art can be seen in how she besmears the floor or wall of the house with the help of diluted cow-dung or with diluted black or white mud. This is, however, the art of doing something in an artistic way rather than the work of art in the common

²⁵ See his "Apostolic Letter on First Tonsure, Minor Orders and the Subdiaconate" (*Ministeria Quaedam*), where he suggests these possibilities. This document can be found in *Vatican II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flanner, vol. 1 (Collegeville, Minn. Liturgical Press, 1984) 427-32.

²⁶ Bindo is a cushion to be used on the head for carrying something on the head.

understanding of people.²⁷ These arts and designs reflect the tribal culture and their thought patterns. With the widespread building of new churches and the expansion of old churches, architecture is basically simple and functional. However, the church building should reflect the above mentioned tribal arts, which make them at home. Yet questions should be raised about the design of the church buildings and how they encourage enriched liturgical celebrations. Is there room for movement, for processions in and around the church? Must the long and narrow church, with those in the back far distant from the altar, be the normal pattern? Are altar rails that falsely separate the sanctuary from the pews necessary? Are pews called for, or perhaps other forms of seating that allow more interaction among the participants? An opportunity is present because there are so many buildings in progress. And yet so much art and architecture seem to be imitative, imported, rather than a creative, indigenous rethinking or what a church building should be and how it should function in the tribal village or city in accord with tribal pattern of meaning and celebration.

5.3. Liturgy

One of the most important areas for inculturation is the liturgy. A truly inculturated, contextualized liturgy can only be developed in a community of faith, in the local situation. Liturgy plays a vital role in a believing community as Pope John Paul II puts it very clearly in his letter to all the Bishops of the Church: "The Church not only acts but also expresses herself in the liturgy, lives by the liturgy and draws from the liturgy the strength for her life."²⁸ In his apostolic letter he describes the attempt to make the liturgy take root in different cultures as an important task for liturgical renewal.²⁹ Keeping this in mind, Fr. Van Nuffel was the first in Chota Nagpur to compose a High Mass in accordance with tribal culture.³⁰ When one speaks of liturgical renewal among the tribals of Chota Nagpur, one has to have the knowledge of tribal melody, songs and dances. For the tribals singing and dancing is part and partial of their lives. They are fond of dance and singing. It is so natural to them that it is said about their singing and dancing: "Talking is singing, walking is dancing." This means that singing is as natural as talking and walking is as natural as dancing.³¹ Fr. John Lakra, S.J. an Indian theologian has contributed a lot to the liturgical inculturation among the tribals of Chota Nagpur. But this is not enough; much more things have to be further developed in

²⁷ Lakra, J., S.J., *Tribal Culture*, 2007, p. 94-95.

²⁸ *Dominicae Canae* (February 24, 1980), 13.

²⁹ *Veceimus Quintus Annus* (December 4, 1988, released in May 13, 1989), 4.

³⁰ Lakra, J., S.J., *Tribal Culture*, 2007, p. 79.

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 95.

this regard in order to make Christianity truly local. The liturgy remains still to most of the tribal Christians a strange practice. Much more renewal has to be done in order to make the liturgy touch the hearts and minds of the tribals. The local laity has to come forward and contribute to the building up of the local church in accordance with their culture. Church leaders and religious are, of course, there to animate them.

5.4. Christology

If we have a look at the history of the origin of the theology of liberation, we find that in Latin America in the light of the massive presence of poverty and oppression there, Jesus Christ is presented as liberator. He impels the Christian community to work for liberation from sin, injustice, and oppression. This is an example of inculturation in that particular context. The context in Chota Nagpur among the tribals is more or less the same. As they were first introduced to the Christianity, they experienced the liberating aspect of Jesus Christ from the oppression, poverty and injustice. Should Jesus Christ not be preached as the one who liberates or saves from the power of evil, which among the tribals of Chota Nagpur is often felt to be the power of evil spirits? In the Bible we find instances where Jesus drives the evil spirits away from the possessed. This aspect of Jesus could be emphasized in preaching the Gospel among the Oraons, who mostly suffer from the fear of evil spirits.

In a society characterised by strong ties with and respect for ancestors, should we not emphasize with Saint Paul that Jesus Christ was the first to rise from the dead and hence can be considered our proto-ancestor? This understanding of Jesus as *ancestor* makes much sense to the tribal understanding. It means that he is for us an elder in the community, an intercessor or mediator between God and humanity, one who guards and protects the human community. In the same way, there should be more emphasis on Jesus Christ the healer, which we find at the very heart of the New Testament. This message could become a reality through preaching and teaching, through sacraments and sacramentals, through prayer and petition. This way, the tribal culture and their religious elements can contribute a lot to the development of tribal Christology.

5.5. The church as the communion of saints

In the Creed we recite Church as the communion of saints. This aspect fits very well with the tribals among whom exists a strong sense of solidarity between the living and the dead. Parents and grandparents who led good lives and died well are honoured and remembered, their presence

is felt in the family, in the lives of those who remain behind. They protect the living and mediate to them the power and love of God. This is precisely at the heart of Catholic belief in the communion of saints and in the veneration of saints. Should the presence of these ancestors not be recognized on the occasion of baptism as part of the litany of the saints?

There are still other areas of concern with regard to inculturation among the tribals of Chota Nagpur. But considering the scope of this article, I cannot go through all of them in detail. Here it suffices to say that on one hand, Gospel can transform the tribal culture with its teachings and values and on the other hand, tribal culture can also contribute a lot for the development of a truly local church, which is in communion with the universal Church.

Conclusion

Inculturation has no other goal than helping every human person, of different cultures to mature in his faith so as to respond more fully to God's own self-revelation. We can say that our faith is mature if it has taken root in the matrix of our being so that we may truly believe and love as Christians rooted in the authentic values of one's own cultural traditions. But for this to happen, the Gospel must be presented with tools, methods and expressions coming from the cultures themselves. This can be termed as inculturated faith, a faith that is transmitted and expressed through our people's culture or cultures.³²

Inculturation is not a short term program. It will come into reality when all the local church leaders, the ministers, the theologians and the laity are involved in it and commit themselves to the concrete lives of those they serve. At the same time, leaders must be familiar with and immersed in scripture and the Christian tradition. As mentioned earlier, we must see that inculturation is something ongoing and natural, something that is taken for granted in good Christian ministry. It is not something artificial or something done in the classroom, library, or laboratory. Rather, it is the ongoing way of being Christian wherever one finds oneself. What inculturation means, in a word, is being fully and truly Christian in a particular, cultural context or situation. This applies not only to tribals (Oraons) but to all, irrespective of continents, class, caste and creed.

³² Cf. Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (Catholic Bishops Conference, Manila 1991) no.72; *Eccelsia in Africa* n. 78.

The process of inculturation is not the work of the pastoral agent or priest, even if he or she is most significant in inaugurating the process. Here comes the importance of the community itself. It is carried out by the group. In other words, every Christian must be involved in inculturation if it is to be effective; this is so because every Christian is gifted, graced and inspired by the Spirit to be Christian in light of the circumstances of his or her life, in private and in public, in the home and in the community.

We have the basis for the truly catholic church when we have the church from below, a church truly inculturated into the multiform cultures around the world. Remaining at the same time in communion with the universal Church, the local churches will show forth to the larger church their own particular ways of living and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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